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Elementary Teacher Levels of Empathy and Responses to Boys Exhibiting ODD-Like Behaviors

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MA, Walden University, 2017

BS, Bethune-Cookman University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

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Abstract

The problem that was the focus of this study is that disruptive classroom behavior has increased. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the consulting firm Education Advisory Board, teachers have reported a spike in disruptive classroom behaviors. Attitudes towards school expressed by students who exhibit behavior that characterizes oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) are influenced by teacher interactions and support, but no recent study had determined levels of empathy used by elementary school teachers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how elementary school general education teachers describe the level of empathy they apply in reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. The theory of mind, as described by Gweon and Saxe, was the conceptual framework that guided this study. Research questions involved teachers' description of levels of empathy they apply in reacting to and supporting male students who exhibit ODD-like behavior. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews of 10 K-3 female teachers in one state in the southeastern United States and analyzed using thematic coding. Results from this study suggested teachers apply cognitive and affective empathy in reaction to ODD-like behavior and apply cognitive empathy to a greater extent than affective empathy when supporting students who display ODD-like behavior; teachers also described intentionally applying no empathy. Positive social change may result when teachers increase use of empathy in their reactions to and support for children who display ODD-like behaviors and may consequently contribute to improvements in student attitudes and achievement of school success.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Jonathan, Juliana and all the students I have taught and will teach. Julie and Jay, though still young, you were beyond supportive and made sure that I made it to be "Dr. Mom." My kids (Jay, Julie, and students from the past and present), you all served as the motivating force as to why I reached for the stars! I hope you all achieve your dreams the same way I did in completing this dissertation!

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I cannot think my whole support team enough for the encouragement and faith that they have blessed me with! I love, appreciate and are beyond thankful for all that you have done! # PRICEISGOING UP!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The topic of this study was use of empathy as indicated by elementary school general education teachers when describing their responses to and support for boys who exhibit behaviors associated with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). A survey of over 1700 teachers and school officials reported that 70% of teachers have seen an increase in disruptive classroom behaviors (Educational Advisory Board, 2019). This study has shown that disruptive behaviors are present in the classroom and can arise from a number of antecedents. Attitudes towards school expressed by students who exhibit challenging behavior can be influenced by teacher interactions and expressions of support (De Laet et al., 2015), but no recent study has explored teachers' use of empathy to reduce ODD-like behaviors. This study may inspire positive social change by providing insights regarding teachers' level of empathy in their response to and support for boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors, and may lead to improvements in teacher response and support for these children. In this chapter, I present background information about this study, as well as the problem statement, purpose and nature of this study, research questions, framework of the study, study scope, delimitations, assumptions, and significance.

Background

According to Chan (2016), there are setting events that are antecedents for any behavior. Chan explained these events, such as teacher responses to a particular situation, influence student behaviors, which can in turn determine the student's success. Teacher response can decrease but also increase the number of challenging behaviors that disrupt

the classroom (Chan, 2016). Teacher response, whether verbal, physical, or emotional, can influence the student's reaction to the learning environment (Downs et al., 2019).

Teacher responses can also be used as a classroom management strategy. Using classroom management strategies, particularly teacher response, entails implementing different strategies as an evidence-based tool that requires active instruction, supervision of students (i.e., teaching), opportunities for students to respond, and feedback to students, which can result in either reduction or increases in disruptive behaviors (Gage et al., 2018.). Francis et al. (2019) found that positive teacher responses can support strong teacher-student relationships that promote higher academic achievement and behavioral adjustment in students. Furthermore, teacher-student responses are affected by student reactions, and can create a feeling of defeat in teachers when they are met with behavioral problems (Chan, 2016). As teachers respond, they should consider setting events that contribute to the behavior being displayed. Only then can they begin to respond to any issue in a proactive way that helps prevent the challenging behavior from occurring in the future (Chan, 2016).

Several elements of a teacher's possible response to ODD-like behavior make the response effective. One vital element is empathy (Swit et al., 2018). Meyers et al. (2019) suggested empathy is a mechanism by which teachers can signal positive support for students with challenging behaviors and create a positive teacher-student relationship. According to Meyers et al. (2019), teacher empathy is established when the teacher focuses and responds using their own emotions or experiences to gain understanding of how the student feels, or how the student is reacting to a certain situation. Teacher

empathy is communicated to students through academic and social interactions (Meyers et al., 2019). It is unclear however how empathy is communicated from teachers to students in response to students with ODD-like behaviors, creating a gap in the literature. Meyers et al. (2019) called for more research to operationalize empathy as a tool for building positive teacher-student relationships. Teacher responses have been shown to affect student success (Evans et al., 2019), but no study of elementary teachers' responses to student behavior had explored their perspectives of empathy as an effective response.

Problem Statement

The problem that was the focus of this study is that challenging behaviors in elementary grade classrooms have increased (Education Advisory Board, 2019). Challenging behavior can constitute the diagnosed mental health condition of ODD but may exist in children not diagnosed with ODD (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). As the label suggests, children who exhibit ODD-like behaviors argue with authority figures and often lose their tempers (APA, 2013). Vanzin and Mauri (2019) stated ODD differs by gender. Boys may be more physically aggressive, whereas girls may be more verbally aggressive (Vanzin & Mauri, 2019). Teachers often react to these students in ways that cause them to become unresponsive to their educational environment or escalate their aggressive behavior (Minahan, 2019). According to Evans et al. (2019), student problematic behavior and teachers' affective responses can form either a vicious or virtuous cycle. Students' negative behaviors and reactions are exacerbated by relational conflict but reduced by relational closeness (Evans et al., 2019). In the school district that was the focus of this study, each elementary grade classroom of

about 25 students includes, on average, three students (most often boys) who exhibit a pattern of disruptive behavior but are not labeled as having a diagnosed special need, according to internal reports. According to Kauffman et al. (2018), this incidence of challenging behavior is typical in elementary classrooms in the US.

De Laet et al. (2015) found that attitudes towards school expressed by students who exhibited challenging behavior were influenced by teacher interaction style, but no study has explored general education teachers' interactions and experiences as they use empathy in terms of reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. Since 2016. there have been only nine relevant research studies that can be located using the search term *teacher empathy in the classroom*. Of these nine studies, three studies focused on special education students, one focused on helping African American males, another focused on student writers with behavioral disorders, and the remaining five studies focused on the teachers who interact with challenging students. There were no studies published since 2016 addressing general education teacher application of empathy for and responses to elementary aged boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors, indicating a gap in the literature. Teacher empathy and response may affect teacher and student success in these classrooms (Evans et al., 2019). In this study, I contributed to the literature by filling the gap that existed regarding general education teacher interactions and experiences as they use empathy in terms of reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD behaviors.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how elementary school general education teachers describe their interactions and experiences as they use empathy when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. I used the interpretivist paradigm. This involved learning the thoughts of individuals participating in the study in order to comprehend and interpret what they were thinking or interpretations of a phenomenon in context (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The main goal of the interpretivist paradigm is for the researcher to address points of view of subjects being studied, rather than researchers, and gain an understanding of their perceptions of the topic. In this study, the phenomenon of interest was elementary school general education teachers' descriptions of their interactions and experiences as they use empathy when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors.

Research Questions

Two research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: How do elementary school general education teachers describe levels of empathy they apply in reacting to boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors?

RQ2: How do elementary school general education teachers describe their levels of empathy in supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors?

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The framework supporting this study was the theory of mind (ToM) developed by Premack and Woodruff (1978), which refers to empathetic perspective gained from social interactions that govern reactions to those situations (Kloo et al., 2010). ToM involves

beliefs, desires, and intentions used to understand why one acts in a certain way or predict how one will act (Kloo et al., 2010). Wellman et al. (2011) found five ToM abilities that form a sequential order: (a) understanding that reasons why people might want something (i.e. desires) may differ from one person to the next, an element of cognitive empathy, (b) understanding that people can have different beliefs about the situation, an element of cognitive empathy, (c) understanding that people may not comprehend or have the knowledge that something is true, an element of cognitive empathy, (d) understanding that people can hold false beliefs about the world, which combines cognitive and affective empathy; and (e) understanding that people can have hidden emotions, or they may act one way while feeling another way, an element of affective empathy (Wellman et al., 2011). Individuals who exhibit ODD-like behavior may have significant differences compared to other students in terms of their emotional knowledge and levels of empathy (Ekerim-Akbulut et al., 2019). These differences may require teachers to apply cognitive or affective empathy when framing student behavior and reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. I used ToM to describe behavioral responses resulting from mental representations, which reflect application of cognitive or affective levels of empathy. ToM informed my study in terms of how teachers describe levels of empathy they apply when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. Data analysis was guided by levels of empathy (affective, cognitive, mixed, or no empathy) via ToM.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative design with interviews. That specific phenomenon under study was elementary grade teachers' description of their interactions and experiences as they use empathy to react to and support boys who exhibit ODD-like behavior. The qualitative design was the most feasible method to address my research questions because this study involved personal experiences (see Haradhan, 2018).

I used interviews as the primary source of data. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), interviews are an effective method for gathering data regarding participant perspectives. I conducted interviews with 10 teachers of children in grades 1 through 3 who teach in general education classrooms in public schools located in one state in the southeastern US. Data were analyzed using hand-coding and thematic analysis.

Definitions

Empathy: The ability to understand experiences and perspectives of others and appropriately communicate that understanding (Whitford & Emerson, 2019).

Externalizing behavior: disinhibited or externally focused behavioral actions that involve aggression, conduct problems, delinquent behavior, oppositionality, hyperactivity, and attention problems (Willner et al., 2016).

Internalizing behavior: Overinhibited or internally focused actions that involve anxiety, fear, sadness/depression, social withdrawal, and somatic complaints (Willner et al., 2016).

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD): ODD is a childhood disorder that is defined by a pattern of hostile, disobedient, and defiant behaviors directed at adults or

other authority figures. ODD is also characterized by displaying angry and irritable moods, as well as argumentative and vindictive behaviors (APA, 2013).

Theory of mind (ToM): An internal appraisal of the beliefs, desires, and intentions of another person used in making assumptions regarding why that person acts as they do or to predict how that person will act (Kloo et al., 2010).

Assumptions

One assumption I made as I conducted this study was that teachers I interviewed were truthful in terms of what they reported. I also assumed they had dealt with ODD-like behaviors and were able to recall their experiences with children who exhibit these behaviors. These assumptions are typical in an interview-based study, in which accurately reported lived experiences of informants form the data set.

Scope and Delimitations

This study involved elementary school general education teachers' descriptions of levels of empathy they apply when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. I focused on teachers' perspectives of ODD-like behavior and how they described using empathy in an effort to decrease challenging behavior and support boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. This specific focus was chosen based on research that indicates challenging behavior in elementary school classrooms is increasing.

This study included perspectives of 10 general education teachers who work in one of five purposefully selected public schools in one state in the southeastern US and teach children in kindergarten through third grade. I excluded special needs teachers, teachers of special area subjects (like physical education and art), behavioral therapists,

and paraprofessionals. These specific practitioners were excluded because they are not charged with managing children in a classroom setting for an entire day. Transferability of results of this study to other schools, grades, and teacher populations may be affected by delimitations of this study.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was my own biases in regard to ODD-like behavior and opinions regarding use of empathy to react to ODD-like behaviors or support boys who exhibit these behaviors. I addressed this limitation by listening without contradicting participants' impressions, showing them unconditional positive regard. I also asked general questions before specific questions, incorporating more positive questions before negative questions, and asking questions that participants can truly answer and attest to. I also kept a journal of my own thoughts.

Another limitation was reliance in this study on teachers' own interpretations of what constitutes ODD-like behaviors. Tolerance of ODD-like behaviors may vary among teachers, which means severity of behaviors considered to be ODD-like may vary. This was necessary to address since teacher response to misbehavior is also individual and dependent on assessment of the seriousness of what they see. I addressed this limitation by describing in the first interview question the sort of behaviors I wished participants to consider when framing their answers.

Finally, this study was limited by the fact that it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools were disrupted during the year just prior to data collection, which may have affected teachers' recall of their levels of in-person empathy.

Teachers' ability to apply empathy may have been limited in cases where school was conducted online during the pandemic, and boys' exhibition of ODD-like behaviors may also have been limited, increased, or altered by disruptions to traditional school operations. Results from this study were viewed in terms of these special circumstances.

Significance

This study may be significant because it may provide scholars and practitioners with information regarding how elementary school teachers use empathy to react to and support boys who display ODD-like behaviors. This study advanced knowledge in terms of techniques teachers use to decrease challenging behaviors and use of ToM to support boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. Teachers' management skills and strategies have an impact on behavioral, academic, and social climates within the classroom (Garwood et al., 2017). These skills may be dependent on teacher attitudes and perspectives and so may be supported by teacher expressions of empathy (De Laet et al., 2015; Kivumbi et al., 2019). This study may contribute to positive social change by providing insights regarding teachers' empathetic reactions to and support for boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors, and may result in reflection, reassessment, and modification regarding instructional and ethical practices when supporting these boys and their teachers. Results of this study may positively affect children's lives by providing information that may lead to greater student success for diverse populations in today's classrooms.

Summary

The problem that was the focus of this basic qualitative study is that challenging behavior has increased in elementary grade classrooms. The purpose of this study was to

explore how elementary school general education teachers describe their interactions and experiences as they use different levels of empathy when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. This chapter contained background information that explained how challenging behaviors in the classroom can stem from specific events, as well as the importance of positive teacher responses when decreasing challenging behaviors. In Chapter 1, I also included the purpose and nature of the study, conceptual framework, significance, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and definitions of key terms, along with the study's guiding research questions. In Chapter 2, I present current literature that supports the need for this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that was the focus of this study is that challenging behaviors in elementary grade classrooms have increased. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how elementary school general education teachers describe their interactions and experiences as they use empathy when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. I focused on how teacher responses can be a setting event or antecedent for challenging behaviors, or they can serve as ways to eliminate these behaviors. Chapter 2 includes research involving challenging behaviors, how those behaviors can affect classrooms, teachers' perspectives regarding how to interact and support students with challenging behaviors, and how empathy has been used by teachers as they diffuse challenging behaviors. This chapter begins with a review of the research strategy I used to gain an understanding of my topic, followed by a description of the study's conceptual framework. This is then followed by a detailed review of what empathy is, how it is measured, and how teacher empathy could affect ODD-like behaviors in children. In this chapter, I also define challenging behavior, ODD and ODD-like behaviors, their similarities and differences, other behaviors teachers may find challenging, and how elementary grade students use externalizing behaviors in terms of ODD and ODD-like conduct.

Literature Search Strategy

In order to find information about the topic, I used the following search databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, EBSCOHost, ProQUEST, and SAGE Journals. Via these search engines, I used the following search terms: *antecedents of challenging behaviors*,

differentiated instruction, *challenging behavior, empathy*, *learning environments*, *instructional strategies, noncompliance, off task behavior*, *Oppositional Defiant Disorder*, *teacher-student relationship*, *teacher training on Oppositional Defiant disorders, teacher classroom management training, teacher training,* and *student success*.

After researching what causes challenging ODD-like behaviors, I wanted to understand how these behaviors affect learning environments for teachers and students, including students with challenging behaviors as well as those who do not exhibit challenging behaviors. Teachers are the guiding factor in learning environments. Teachers use these relationships to support all students to become successful learners. I searched for tools to help build strong teacher-student relationships. Results of my literature search supported teacher perspectives and experiences which can create positive and encouraging environments for students who exhibit ODD-like behaviors.

Conceptual Framework

Qureshi et al. (2019) defined ToM as the assumptions or mental theory a person holds in an effort to understand or predict the actions of other individuals; central to ToM is the realization that the beliefs, desires, and knowledge of others may differ from one's own. ToM requires a person to deal with interference between their self-perspective and other perspectives and apply executive functioning skills, particularly inhibitory control, when choosing a course of action (Qureshi et al., 2019). ToM is crucial in terms of everyday human social interactions and is used when analyzing, judging, and inferring behaviors (Gweon & Saxe, 2013). Wellman (2018) said an individual who possesses

strong and well- developed ToM skills should be able to think or assess a person or situation, make intelligent inferences, and accurately infer another person's mindset and emotions to solve or help that person or situation. Being able to observe and understand what another person might be thinking along with being aware of other people's thoughts, feelings, and potential motives all are indicators of an individual using and possessing ToM.

Buttelmann et al. (2009) found individuals develop ToM as young as 18 months of age. Though ToM develops over time, it is naturally embedded in humans (Demetriou et al., 2016). Levels of ToM can be displayed based on individual age and developmental levels (Weimer et al., 2021). To test the development of ToM, researchers and doctors use false belief tests or tasks. One way this is done is by using location change false belief tasks. During this test, a child is told a story in which the protagonist hides a toy in one location and then leaves the scene. In the protagonist's absence, a second character moves the toy to a new hiding place. The child who has achieved ToM should be able to identify that the protagonist believes the object is where they left it, but also realize that the toy is somewhere else. Another test is the contents change task. During this test, a child is shown a box that is known to have familiar contents, like candy, but instead holds unexpected items, like stickers. The child is asked, "If your mom (or other familiar person) saw this box, what do you think they would believe is in it?" The child who has developed ToM is expected to know that the named person will expect the box contains candy, even though they know the box contains stickers.

Both of these tests to determine the development of ToM in children typically are conducted within doctor's offices or testing sites (Liu & Chen, 2020). ToM studies conducted in schools can be more beneficial than those conducted in doctors' offices or laboratory settings because schools are where students socially interact or speak with peers and adults, which is the main component of ToM development (Liu & Chen, 2020). While students are at school, most of their day is full of social interactions (Andrés-Roqueta et al., 2016). Smogorzewska et al. (2020) compared a non-inclusive classroom of regular education students only to an inclusive classroom of regular education and special needs children and found that students in the inclusive class developed stronger ToM skills, such as being cognizant of peers' attitudes and surroundings and showing respect and understanding for peers, compared to students in the traditional class. Bianco et al. (2016) said Italian primary grade students who were in second and third grade developed and displayed more ToM skills than those students in lower grades. Wang et al. (2016) said measuring ToM in educational environments provides insight into teachers' and students' use of ToM concepts such as empathy and understanding of social relationships. However, as I described previously, no recent study has explored teachers' use of empathy to react to and support boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors.

ToM was an appropriate framework for my study because components of ToM such as empathy and having an understanding of why people behave a certain way, may be helpful in terms of supporting and reacting to students who exhibit challenging behaviors. Individuals who exhibit ODD-like behaviors may have significant differences compared to other students in terms of their emotional knowledge and levels of empathy

(Ekerim-Akbulut et al., 2019). ToM was a suitable framework for my study regarding teacher use of empathy because teachers who apply ToM are necessarily engaging in empathy. The focus of my study included examining how elementary school general education teachers described levels of empathy they applied when reacting to and supporting elementary school boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. Teachers described levels of empathy they applied when reacting to and supporting students who display challenging or ODD like behaviors. In Chapter 2, I present examples of current literature that is relevant to my study.

Review of Current Literature

In this section, I presented a review of current literature pertinent to my study problem and purpose. I also described literature related to topics of the definition of challenging behavior, ODD and ODD-like behavior, teacher strategies for managing ODD-like behaviors, definitions of empathy, and teacher empathy as a strategy in managing ODD-like behaviors. Lastly, this section ends with a summary.

Challenging Behavior

Bornman and Rose (2017) defined challenging behavior as culturally abnormal behaviors of such intensity, frequency, or duration that they interfere with a child's optimal learning. According to Bornman and Rose, a child's challenging behavior also limits their participation with peers or adults and places the physical safety of the person, or others, in serious jeopardy. These behaviors are prevalent and can be displayed in any environment (Bornman & Rose, 2017). Behaviors considered challenging can be either internalizing or externalizing behaviors. Children who exhibit internalizing behaviors

may be withdrawn, appear depressed, fail to engage in class activities, and harm themselves (Bevilacqua et al., 2021). A teacher may be challenged to engage this child in their education, but the child is unlikely to pose a danger to other children in the class or to be disruptive. Externalizing behaviors are described as any behavior that is considered antisocial or harmful to others, and include aggression, yelling at others, screaming, and non-compliance (Bevilacqua et al., 2021). This behavior may endanger others in the class and disrupt learning, so the teacher usually is actively engaged in controlling or remediating such behavior (Jones, 2018). In this study, I focused on teachers who seek to manage children's externalizing behavior. In this study, the term *challenging behavior* will refer to externalizing behavior that causes disruption and may present physical danger.

The U.S. Department of Education showed that challenging behaviors are present in 12% to 20% of students in general education classrooms nationwide (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Challenging behavior in a general education classroom includes calling out, not following directions, refusing to work, throwing objects, physical and verbal aggression, destruction of property, yelling, teasing or bullying peers, wandering, and stealing (McKenna et al., 2017). All these behaviors cause a disruption to the learning environment and can also limit the student's academic success (Tolan et al., 2020). All of these behaviors can be mistaken for behaviors that are associated with ODD (Abramovitch, 2016), which is a specific disorder of mental health (Brulinda, 2020).

ODD and ODD-Like Behavior

ODD was first introduced in 1980 as a diagnosable condition in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders VL. III* (APA, 2013). ODD is determined by a person displaying furious, resentful, and disrespectful behavior when interacting with authoritative figures (APA, 2013). These behaviors must be observed for at least six consecutive months for one to be diagnosed with ODD (APA, 2013). In older elementary school-aged children, ODD behaviors must be displayed at least once per week for a child to be diagnosed with ODD (APA, 2013). The functions, intensity, and purpose of ODD behaviors might differ depending on the setting. For example, the display of ODD in a classroom setting might include the student engaging in arguing with the teacher or peers, aggression towards teacher or peers, or intentionally disturbing the class by calling out, being disruptive, or displaying behaviors that can distract others from learning (Jones, 2018). Prevalence of ODD is greater in boys than in girls before adolescence, but ODD in girls tends to increase after puberty (Noordermeer et al., 2017).

As these behaviors are observed in the classroom, it can be difficult for a teacher to determine if a student is displaying symptoms of ODD or if they are simply engaging in challenging, ODD-like behaviors. The symptoms that characterize ODD and that characterize everyday challenging behaviors are similar, which makes it difficult for the teacher to analyze and determine how to respond to the behaviors displayed (Abramovitch, 2016). A student who habitually exhibits disruptive and disrespectful behaviors, such as loud outbursts, defiance, or non-compliance to tasks and directions (APA, 2013), may be present in the general education classroom with or without an ODD

diagnosis (US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1978). If a teacher is having difficulty with a student, labeling that child as ODD gives the teacher two things that do not benefit the student: an excuse for not doing a better job of guiding the student's behavior, and an opportunity for the student to be removed from class (Downs et al., 2019). Teachers may feel that labeling all challenging behavior "ODD" works to their advantage more than does reacting to the behavior, which suggests that teachers' classroom management strategies should be examined (Jones, et al., 2018). Because a teacher may not know whether a child has as-yet undiagnosed ODD, and because a teacher may assume ODD affects any child who engages in especially challenging behavior, in this study I also focused on ODD-like behaviors, regardless of the presence or absence of an ODD diagnosis in a child.

Teacher Strategies for Managing ODD-Like Behaviors

Teachers have reported that interacting with student misbehavior is one of the most challenging issues they face daily (Chang, 2016). Working with students who have ODD-like behaviors can be challenging and intimidating for educators (Allday, 2018). Challenging behaviors not only interrupt instruction for all students in a class, but also decrease the probability for academic success for the disruptive student (Cooper & Scott, 2017). According to Cooper and Scott (2017), lack of academic success in a disruptive student can lead to frustration and continued decline of prosocial behavior.

When students engage in challenging behaviors in the classroom, teachers are directly responsible for providing appropriate interventions and responses (Montuoro & Lewis, 2018). For the teacher to be able to react appropriately to any behavior, the

teacher must possess effective classroom management skills (Owens et al., 2018).

Despite use of classroom management skills, teachers often feel unprepared to handle

challenging behaviors, even though classroom management skills are meant to produce

and support behavioral compliance (Flower et al., 2017). Larson et al. (2020) found a

high percentage of new teachers struggle with classroom management. According to

Larson et al., teachers lack preservice training focused on helping them develop their

skills in managing challenging student behaviors. According to Chaney et al. (2020),

most pre-service training for teachers focuses on academic development and logistics

instead of focusing on how to manage different behaviors in the classroom. Existing

training in classroom management is often limited in its effectiveness because such

training does not offer exposure to specific student behaviors and situations and does not

provide guided support for implementation (Klopfer et al., 2019). When challenging or

ODD-like behaviors occur and teachers have not been taught how to extinguish these

behaviors, they are left not knowing what to do and must use their own opinion of what

should happen next (Allday, 2018).

The effectiveness of a classroom management strategy or tool is largely

dependent on the skill and comfort level of the teacher (Cooper & Scott, 2017). The

quality of the teacher interaction, relationships, and presentation all impact how effective

teachers are in managing their classroom. Effective classroom management includes a

variety of factors, including the physical layout of the classroom, clear and concise rules

and expectations for students, and engaging instruction matched to students' ability levels

(Gage et al., 2018). According to Gage et al. (2018), how the classroom is arranged helps

students stay focused on their work, and, in addition, providing students with clear and concise rules and expectations helps ensure that everyone understands the behavior and work quality expected. Engaging instruction matched to students' ability levels creates interest and investment in the subject matter and helps reduce frustration and boredom that can lead to behavior problems (Gage et al., 2018). In addition, management of students' behavior depends on the attitude and persona of the teacher, because these are communicated through words and actions (Gage et al., 2018). Communication of interest and concern are key aspects of empathy (Whitford & Emerson, 2019).

Brock and Beaman-Diglia (2018) found a variety of effective classroom management strategies teachers can use to target supporting and reacting to challenging behaviors. These behavior management strategies included providing students with visuals to explain the teacher's expectations of their students, along with positive reinforcement and praise when positive behaviors were displayed. Sobeck and Reister (2021) identified effective behavior management strategies for managing elementary school students' challenging behaviors that included incorporating student choice and engagement, using positive and negative reinforcement, and incorporating peer and adult motivators. Owens et al. (2018) explored classroom management strategies for elementary school students that teachers can used to identify and eliminate challenging behaviors. Similar to the strategies identified by Sobeck and Reister (2021), these strategies included incorporating and providing all students with continuous praise when they are engaging in appropriate behaviors, giving clear and concise commands or directions, and taking into account the academic level of their students. Although Owens

et.al found all these strategies to be effective as they observed different classrooms, they found that the most effective strategy was teacher creation of positive relationships with students. Cultivating positive teacher-student relationships is a classroom management skill that aids in the development of positive student behaviors (Valente et al., 2019).

Positive teacher-student relationships are developed when the teacher demonstrates care for students by acknowledging their feelings and needs and by recognizing how their actions influence student outcomes (Cornelius-White et al., 2020). Positive teacher-student interactions boost the morale in the classroom and create an opportunity for the students with challenging behaviors to confide in or trust their teachers, resulting in, a decrease in inappropriate behaviors, and an increase in prosocial behaviors (Koenen, Vervoort et al., 2019). For these positive social interactions and skills to be prevalent and effective, the teacher must have an understanding of how to build a positive relationship, even with students who exhibit ODD-like behavior, including having a sense of empathy (Postolache, 2020).

Definitions of Empathy

According to Whitford and Emerson (2019), empathy is defined as the ability to understand the experiences and perspectives of others and appropriately communicate that understanding. Empathy can also be defined as the capacity to share the feelings and emotions of others (Keena & Krieger-Sample, 2018). Hall et al. (2021) suggested that empathy is a term that has not been truly solidified. Yet, the literature I reviewed identified two specific types of empathy: cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Clark et al., 2019; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Powell & Roberts, 2017). Cognitive empathy

involves one's ability to creatively take on the role of another and to understand it as closely as though they were able to foretell that person's thoughts and feelings (Zurek & Scheithauer, 2017). Affective or emotional empathy is based on the emotional components of empathy (Zurek & Scheithauer, 2017), and is not dependent on a cognitive understanding of the person's suffering to guide one's emotional understanding and supportive action (Fernandez & Zahavi, 2020). Affective empathy includes the ability to understand another individual by experiencing thoughts and emotions similar to, if not exactly like, those of that individual (Baldner & McGingley, 2020). Cognitive empathy is the ability to recognize and understand another person's mental state, which is a component of ToM, whereas affective empathy is the ability to share the feelings of others without receiving direct emotional stimulation. Cognitive empathy includes personality characteristics of agreeableness and openness (Kerr-Gaffney et al., 2019) and affective empathy includes personality characteristics of implementing personal perspectives and having concern for others (Kerr-Gaffney et al., 2019). Measures of affective and cognitive empathy can be used as the basis for determining how empathic a person is.

Jolliffe and Farrington's (2006) Basic Empathy Scale (BES) is a 40-item questionnaire, geared towards adolescents, that includes questions such as, "I usually feel calm when other people are scared," or, "It's hard for me to understand when my friends are sad." Participants indicate their agreement to these statements using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1, representing 'strongly disagree,' to 5, representing 'strongly agree'). This assessment has been used to determine the extent to which a participant uses affective or

cognitive empathy during interpersonal situations. The focus of the BES is on defining

and designing affective empathy prompts that measure emotional congruence with an

emphasis on understanding another's feelings (affective empathy), rather than responding

with intellectual understanding another's point of view (cognitive empathy). BES focuses

on qualities that are associated with being empathetic, such as agreeableness, openness,

concern for others, and implementing personal perspectives, and are used in individual

engagement in both affective and cognitive empathy. According to Jolliffe and

Farrington, affective empathy is considered more empathetic than cognitive empathy

because emotions are included in affective empathy. A simplified version of the BES,

created by D'Ambrosio et al. (2009), confirms this ranking, because it measures empathy

using a 3-point scale including 1 (no empathy), 2 (cognitive empathy), and 3 (affective

empathy).

Empathy can be measured by these surveys, but empathy is a characteristic that

mainly is displayed during social interaction (Berkovich, 2020). Empathy is visible and

can be appraised by individuals based on interactions and communication with another

(Jaber et al., 2018). Such interactions include talk, touch, eye contact, and other body

language cues, in response to hints or outright expressions of emotion on the part of

conversational partners (Frankel, 2017). As an individual engages in using empathy, the

levels of empathy can be gauged and observed based on eye contact, body language, type

of responses, and vocal tone of those involved in social interactions (Coll et al., 2017).

Empathy, which is visible in social interactions, can be expressed by teachers as they

interact with students.

Teacher Empathy as a Strategy in Managing ODD-like Behaviors

Teachers may use a variety of strategies in interacting with challenging behaviors, but in doing so, they must be able to use a sense of empathy to support or extinguish these behaviors (Jaber et al., 2018). Because teachers' main actions in teaching involve interacting with students, incorporating empathy as a strategy to support or extinguish a behavior can be helpful to the student by creating feelings of safety for the student (Jaber et al., 2018). Furthermore, as a teacher builds a relationship with students, empathy and communication are needed, especially for challenging students, to maximize the effect of a teacher's response in supporting and providing help to students (Bullough, 2019). According to Cook et al. (2018), as a teacher reacts to or supports students who exhibit challenging behaviors, the interactions between teacher and student can serve as a successful behavioral intervention. Cook et al. (2018) prompted teachers to begin their interaction with challenging students by using an empathetic statement to discover why a behavior is happening, followed by labeling the behavior as inappropriate. Cook et al. (2018) further explained that this student-teacher interaction should include the teacher's use of body language and vocal tone congruent with the empathetic message. Postolache (2020) indicated that the success of teacher-student interactions that involve extinguishing challenging behavior is contingent upon the teacher expressing empathy. However, instead of using empathetic strategies, teachers traditionally rely on other strategies such as using extrinsic rewards and punishments, reprimanding, disciplining students, changing their instructional approach, or changing the tone or wording as they communicate with the students (Aksoy, 2020). Yet even these strategies are more

effective when they are communicated with empathy, so that empathy is the basis for all interactions in the classroom (Warren, 2018).

Rogers (1969) was the first to define "teacher empathy" (p. 157) and identify it as a "secret to managing behaviors in the classroom" (p. 158). Rogers stated teacher effectiveness requires high levels of empathy because empathy is the principal factor in ensuring the effectiveness of students' efforts to learn and of teachers' effort to teach. Furthermore, Rogers explained once the teacher has gained an understanding of a student's behaviors, and is empathetic to what the student needs, the learning process for the student becomes easier because the teacher now understands what causes challenging behaviors and how to fade or extinguish these behaviors in an emotionally supportive framework. Warren (2018) described teacher empathy as including getting to know the students as individuals and helping them reach their true potential, so students can succeed beyond what they believe possible. In this way, teacher empathy supports students' academic success, and feelings of academic success increase students' positive behaviors (Evans et al., 2019).

Teachers demonstrate empathy when they take into consideration students' perspectives and try to understand students' personal and social situations, including their feelings about the course and any learning or emotional disabilities students may have (Meyers et al., 2019). As teachers examine the antecedents of students' behaviors, they gain the ability to understand the experiences and perspectives of others, thus resulting in appropriately communicating that understanding (Whitford & Emerson, 2019). Teachers can communicate care and concern in response to students' negative emotions and

respond empathetically without losing the focus on student learning (Meyers et al., 2019). Teachers can use their own personal experiences to connect with students and help them succeed in the classroom on multiple levels (Meyers et al., 2019). As Meyers et al. (2019) stated, teachers can use their own personal experiences to connect with students and help them succeed. In this study I had the opportunity to explore how elementary general education teachers describe the level of empathy they apply in reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I presented the current literature that supports the current gap in the field of research regarding how elementary school general education teachers could use different levels of empathy they apply in reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. I highlighted the study's conceptual framework of theory of mind (ToM), which includes empathy as a main component. I explained what empathy is, how it is measured, and how teacher empathy could be a potential strategy to manage ODD-like behaviors. In this chapter I also defined challenging behavior, ODD and ODD-like behaviors, and how elementary grade students externalize behaviors in ODD and ODD-like conduct. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology by which my study was conducted.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how elementary school general education teachers described their interactions and experiences as they used empathy when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. This study was needed because teachers' level of empathetic response affects student success. Du Plessis (2019) said teachers are proficient in classroom management but do not always consider using appropriate strategies as they interact with students who may have distinctive emotional needs. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, trustworthiness, and ethical practices I used in this study.

Research Design and Rationale

Two research questions guided this study. These research questions were derived from ToM, which suggests levels of empathy shapes responses individuals have toward others.

RQ1: How do elementary school general education teachers describe levels of empathy they apply when reacting to boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors?

RQ2: How do elementary school general education teachers describe levels of empathy when supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors?

The central concept I explored is how elementary school general education teachers describe levels of empathy they apply when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. I used a basic qualitative study design.

Role of the Researcher

I have taught in K-5 public general education classrooms for 4 years, and I am currently in my seventh year as a teacher or administrator in an applied behavior analysis educational setting. These settings include students who have learning, health, or behavioral disabilities, and are staffed with teams of behavior analysts and teachers who work together to help students (Rubow et al., 2018). I have had the opportunity to observe, react to, and support boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors and those who have been diagnosed with ODD. I do not work at any school where teachers who participated in this study worked.

My role in this study was to be a participant-observer, in accordance with the basic qualitative study design. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), an observer in a qualitative study collects data involving focus groups or individuals along with making participants aware of what the end goal is of their study. Furthermore, the participant-observer focuses on becoming acquainted with a certain group of people and their activities via extensive interactions with participants within an environment that is natural for both observers and participants (Roulet et al., 2017). Being the observer also requires participating actively in conversations but without influencing or inhibiting participants' expressions of ideas (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018). Because I have had experiences with observing and reacting to boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors, I came to this study with my own personal assumptions, experiences, and viewpoints. It was important that I recognized and controlled the influence of my experiences and personal biases. I managed this by using a reflective journal to record my thoughts during interviews as I

transcribed them and analyzed data. The problem of reporting bias can lead to loss of validity and dependability (Borowska-Beszta, 2017). As I conducted my research, I made sure to be accessible, credible, and truthful about my research participants' experiences, as well as committed in order to accurately and adequately describing their experiences.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The population under focus in this study was primary grade teachers who work in general education classrooms in public schools in the southeastern US. Teachers in primary grade general education classrooms report problems when dealing with children's challenging behavior (Bethune, 2017). Boys engage in challenging behavior more frequently than girls (Dean et al., 2017). I focused on teachers who work in a single region of the US to limit variations in educational practices that result from differences in terms of local school practices and state regulations.

I located a sample of 10 teachers using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are particularly informed about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). I invited participants who worked as a classroom teacher for at least 2 years in a regular education primary grade classroom in one public charter school in the target region. Classroom teachers typically are responsible for handling behavior issues and implementing strategies to reduce incidence and severity of challenging behaviors in the classroom. Teachers who work in regular education classrooms manage behaviors of all students, including those who do and do not exhibit ODD-like behaviors. Teachers who

had at least 2 years of experience in the role are likely to have encountered boys who

exhibit ODD-like behaviors and used various methods to manage these behaviors.

Teachers with less experience who teach in special needs classrooms or therapeutic

settings, as well as teachers who teach only subjects like art, music, or physical education

were excluded from participation in my study because they were unlikely to be able to

provide valuable information for study. Also excluded were teachers with whom I had a

current or previous relationship.

To recruit volunteers for my study, I only used schools that were located in the

target state. I identified districts and affiliated elementary schools that had a high

population of male students who display challenging behaviors, as indicated by reports

that were publicly available on the website of the department of education in the target

state. From that initial sample, I chose five schools from this group, excluding schools

with which I had a current or prior connection. I then used staff email addresses that were

publicly available on each school's web site to invite K-3 teachers who appear to meet

participant criteria. From this pool of about 100 teachers, I invited the first 10 teachers

who volunteered to participate in interviews. When I did not at first reach my target

minimum of 10 volunteers, I resent my email. I only used the first 10 participants who

volunteered and kept the rest in reserve in case a participant withdrew from the study. No

participant withdrew.

Having a sample size of at least 10 participants provides an opportunity for

saturation within a study that is based on individual perspectives. Guest et al. (2006) said

a sample size of six to 12 participants is typically needed for saturation in a study that is

based on individual perspectives. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended that in qualitative research, there should be at least eight to 15 participants in order to provide different points of view that are sufficient to portray diverse perspectives. Creswell (2014) said as the researcher minimizes the number of participants, they gain an opportunity to explore and probe more, which results in more in-depth data compared to if they used a larger sample.

Instrumentation

In this study, I used semi-structured interviews as the data collection instrument. To conduct these interviews, I created an interview protocol with 10 main questions and nine follow-up questions to help probe for detail (see Appendix A). Interview questions were reviewed by two professionals who each held a doctorate in elementary education. These professionals independently confirmed the validity of questions and their belief that they betrayed no bias that might affect validity of my study results. I did add one follow-up question based on their recommendation to ensure full responses from participants.

To answer RQ1, I used results from interview questions (IQs) 1, 2, 7, and 9. These questions ask for an example of an episode of ODD-like behavior, then continue with inquiry about the child's feelings, the teacher's feelings, and the sharing of care. The results from IQs 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10 helped me answer RQ2, about how elementary school general education teachers describe their levels of empathy in supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. These questions inquired about actions teachers take to guide the child's behavior, and to help the child feel better. My interview questions

allowed me to explore how elementary school general education teachers describe the level of empathy they apply in reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The procedure for gaining access to the participants began with Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (10-04-21-0660139). Once I received approval from IRB to conduct the study, I identified elementary schools in the target region that had a high population of male students who display challenging behaviors, as indicated by reports publicly available on the website of the department of education in the target state. From this initial sample, I chose five schools at random, and used staff email addresses publicly available on each school's website to invite K-3 teachers who appeared to meet the participant criteria. This email described the study and included an attached consent form. It also requested that teachers respond using a personal email address instead of their school email address, to protect their confidentiality. As teachers agreed to be part of the study, they replied to my email with the words, 'I consent." As teachers responded with "I consent," I contacted them to schedule an interview.

Due to lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the year prior to this study, five interviews were conducted via Zoom teleconferencing, one via telephone, and four in person, and each at a time that was convenient for each study participant. Each interview took place in a single session. I audio-recorded each interview using Zoom technology or the recording function on my telephone, after receiving each participant's

consent to be recorded. Although Zoom technology creates video recordings, I did not

retrieve video, but only retrieved audio of Zoom sessions. Each interview took up to 50

minutes. At the end of each interview session, I provided participants with an opportunity

to ask any questions they have about the study or add additional information. I then

thanked them and told them to expect to receive an emailed transcription of the

conversation in the next few days following the interview. Following each interview, I

transcribed the audio recording into a Word document with the use of Otter.ai. I then

emailed each transcript to each participant, requesting that the participants review the

transcription and report to me any changes they wish me to make.

Data Analysis Plan

My plan to analyze the data I received began with transcribing my interviews,

first using the transcription tools provided by Otter.ai. I then reviewed each transcribed

file while listening to the interview audio file, making corrections to the transcript so it

accurately reflects what each participant said. I then emailed each transcript to

participants, so they may review the transcription for accuracy and make any changes or

additions they wish. I waited up to one week for each transcript to be returned to me,

after which I assumed the transcripts were complete and accurate.

Once I received corrections from participants, I inserted the transcripts, one after

the other, in the middle column of a three-column Word table. I entered any notes that I

took during each interview in the left-hand column of this coding table. This process of

reading the Otter.ai transcripts, listening to audio files while reviewing and correcting

transcripts, and inputting transcripts and my notes into the Word table provided me with

opportunities to begin noticing patterns in the data and key ideas that seemed relevant to my study purpose. I saved this document, along with the original transcript files as Word documents to my computer and to a USB drive as a back-up, along with printed copies of the interviews.

I began hand-coding of the transcript files to identify the ideas and concepts related to the research questions. I highlighted words and phrases on the transcripts, then will extract these to the right-hand column of the coding table, creating a list of words and phrases. This process provided the next step in data analysis by identifying ideas, patterns, and similarities among the interviews (Saldana, 2016). When the coding of transcripts was complete, I copied the codes from the right-hand column of the Word table to a single column of an Excel spreadsheet, using one row per coded item. I then used the Excel sort function to group similar codes together.

The next step in the process of coding resulted in condensing, merging and collapsing the codes to create categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Working from the grouped codes on the spreadsheet, I created a new column in which to label the code groups, moving codes around in the spreadsheet as necessary to create coherent categories of data. Once I identified the categories, I rearranged them and their associated codes so that similar or related categories were arranged one after the other on the spreadsheet. In yet another column, I inserted theme labels, to identify these groups of related categories. The process of coding, categorizing, and creating themes created a funnel in which numerous codes were grouped into fewer categories, and categories were further grouped into just a handful of over-arching themes.

Trustworthiness

As I began my data collection process, I ensured trustworthiness was established. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), when a study is conducted, the researcher must have credibility, transferability, dependability, and most of confirmability for the study to be trustworthy.

In qualitative research, using informants or participants that are knowledgeable of the specific topic can contribute to the credibility of the researcher's study (Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility also depends on the accuracy of the researcher's depiction of a participant's perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I ensured my study was credible by inviting primary grade teachers whom I could expect to have experience with boys who exhibit ODD-like behavior and who may have used empathy to support these children and manage their behavior. I also transcribed interviews verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Keeping a detailed description my research process and reporting my findings accurately also contributed to ensuring my study has transferability. Transferability refers to having clear descriptions of the data and thorough explanations that allow study readers, other researchers, and other audiences to make comparisons to other contexts using the study's data (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I have provided step by step explanations of the study procedures and my analysis and results, which support transferability.

The interview process described above contributes to the dependability of my study. Dependability can be defined as the evidence of consistency in data collection,

analysis, and reporting (Burkholder et al., 2016). I supported study dependability by choosing to ask all participants the same interview questions and reporting evidence offered in interviews consistently across all participants.

I ensured confirmability by providing a description of my processes and the study results clearly and complete. Confirmability can be defined as the ability of other researchers to replicate my study, and to analyze the perspectives of the participants, rather than relying solely on the researcher's interpretation (Stahl & King, 2020). Confirmability is supported when data and interpretations of the findings are not "made-up" by the researcher, but derived from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To provide confirmability in my study, I included detailed descriptions of the research process from data collection to reporting findings, ensured that the data reported reflect participant responses, and guarded against letting the research process or data analysis be influenced by my own bias. This was done by making sure I documented my coding process, which included my rationale for determining themes and patterns. I also audio taped each interview and invited participants to confirm the accuracy of my transcriptions, to support confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

I ensured the ethical soundness of my study by seeking IRB approval (10-04-21-0660139) before beginning my research; only after I received that approval, did I begin recruiting participants. I requested participants' consent to participant in my study, and their consent to record their interview. I also asked participants to use a personal email address to protect their privacy, even though my initial contact with them was through

their school email address. As I analyzed my data, I used code names to identify each participant, and these code names were kept on a password-protected file separate from data files. All of my paper files are kept in locked drawer in my home office, and all digital files, including audio files, are kept on a password-protected computer or cloud storage. I will keep all files for five years. My recording and interview tools, Otter.ai, Zoom, and my telephone carrier did not retain any files once I moved files off their platforms.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the study design, discussed the role of the researcher, research questions and participant selection and instrumentation. I also described my data analysis plan, which included my coding process, my procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection procedures, how I ensured trustworthiness, and my ethical procedures for conducting the study. In Chapter 4, I present my data collection, processing, and analyzing process, and study findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how elementary school general education teachers describe their interactions and experiences as they use empathy when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. This study involved use of semi-structured interviews with 10 general education teachers regarding how they support and respond to male students who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. Research was guided by these two research questions:

RQ1: How do elementary school general education teachers describe levels of empathy they apply when reacting to boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors?

RQ2: How do elementary school general education teachers describe levels of empathy when supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors?
In this chapter, I present my data analysis. This includes a description of the study setting, demographics, the data collection process, and evidence of trustworthiness. I then describe results of the study in terms of emergent themes and close the chapter with a summary.

Setting

Participants were asked to participate in interviews via Zoom in quiet areas with no interruptions. However, four of the 10 participants preferred meeting in person instead of on Zoom due to scheduling conflicts. Because of this, I conducted those four interviews at the local library in a private meeting room where we practiced social distancing. During an interview with one participant, we encountered connectivity and sound issues, which added time to the interview process. Another teacher's Zoom

interview was interrupted twice by her newborn baby awaking from his nap. Despite

these issues, all 10 interviews were completed and recorded as expected.

Demographics

The study sample consisted of 10 participants, all of whom were, coincidentally,

female. All participants met the criteria of teaching in a general education classroom and

had taught and interacted with male students who displayed challenging behaviors in the

classroom. Each participant was given a pseudonym according to the order in which they

were interviewed, resulting in participant identifiers of T1 through T10. T1 taught third

grade and said she had been teaching challenging students for 18 years. T2, T6, T8, and

T9 all were currently teaching kindergarten, but had taught different grades in their

careers from kindergarten through third grade. T3 and T4 were currently teaching second

grade, while T5 and T7 taught first grade. Homogeneity of participant demographics

made it possible to attain data saturation with 10 participants, who provided a range of

experiences across grade levels.

Data Collection

I began data collection by reviewing the target state's annual School

Environmental Safety Incident Report provided to the public online by the target state's

department of education. These data included reports of 26 different types of crime,

violence, and disruptive behaviors that occur on school grounds within a school year. I

searched all elementary schools to identify those with the highest percentage of student

referrals due to aggravated battery, major school property damage, fighting, physical

attack, and threats or intimidation. I then identified how many of these referrals were for

male students. Once this was done, I selected the five schools with the highest percentage of male students who received referrals in terms of those categories.

After I received approval from the IRB to conduct my study, I viewed public web sites of each of the five schools and found email addresses of all K-3 teachers. I then proceeded to email those teachers to ask for their participation and consent to be part of the study. As teachers responded, I followed up with those who consented to be part of my study and arranged times and places for interviews. Though 15 participants consented, three decided to not participate due to scheduling conflicts and two decided not to participate due to job changes. The remaining 10 volunteers proceeded with interviews. Interviews were held in October and November 2021, at a rate of one or two interviews each week. At the request of four participants, all were given the option to complete their interviews in person or via Zoom. In-person interviews were held at a public library in a closed meeting room, and Zoom interviews were conducted from my home as well as participants' homes. All interviews were conducted after school hours or on weekends. The interview protocol provided in Chapter 3 was followed for each interview, and interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. I recorded and transcribed interviews using Zoom and the Otter.ai application on both my phone and computer. All audio data and Otter transcriptions were electronically stored in a password-protected computer and portable jump drive. Transcriptions were then sent to each participant with a request that they review them for accuracy and contact me with any corrections. No changes were requested by any participant. The only or unusual circumstance were due to

COVID-19 when providing participants with the option to participate face to face for interviews, as some requested.

Data Analysis

To analyze data, I used the hand-coding method. First, I transcribed all interview audio files using Otter.ai, then provided transcripts to participants to review. As I reviewed transcripts, I also wrote down terms and concepts relating to the study purpose and questions within the margins. Once I received confirmed transcripts from participants, I created a three-column table. In this table, the column to the left contained teacher pseudonyms. The middle column included exact words from transcripts, leaving the third column for preliminary codes and categories. The last column then included my central themes. This procedure allowed me to identify central themes from each interview. I transferred this Word table to an Excel spreadsheet. I refined my coding by moving rows of data in Excel so similar items followed one another. This process resulted in 227 codes.

I then grouped rows into categories so that similar coded items followed one another. I labeled these categories in a further Excel column. This process yielded seven categories. Category labels were: attribution of child's emotion, outcome of teachers' use of empathy, teacher strategies for supporting challenging behaviors, teacher specific reasons for responses to challenging behaviors, teacher feelings towards challenging behaviors, teacher use of empathy, and no teacher use of empathy. I then grouped similar categories to determine themes. I identified three central themes derived from data. These themes were challenging behaviors prior to teacher approach, level of empathy used to

react to or support challenging behavior, and results of teacher strategies. Categories and

themes, as well as RQs associated with them, are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Themes with Associated Categories and RQs
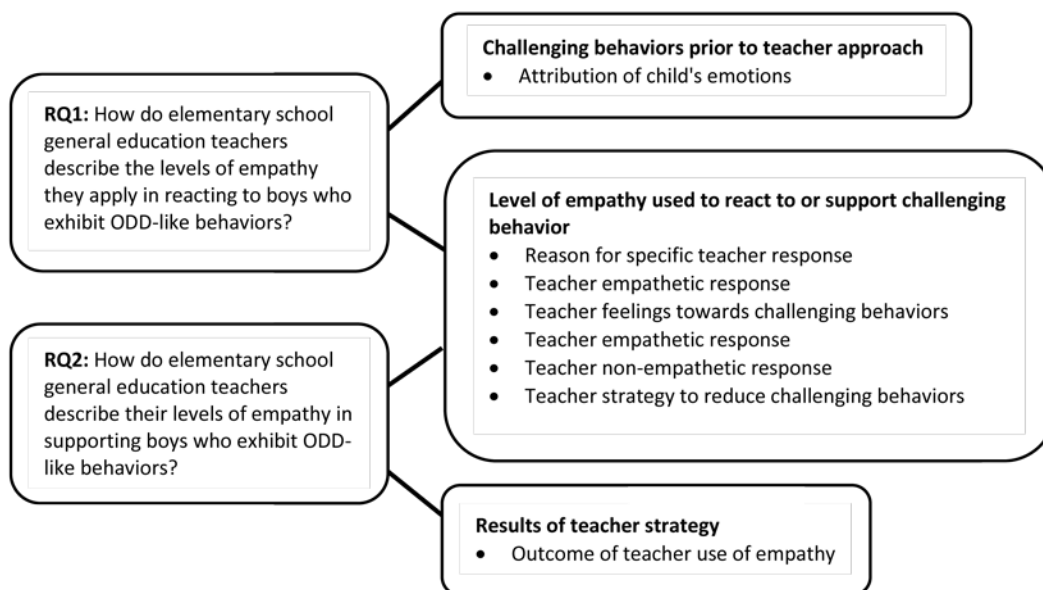
As I analyzed data, I was alert regarding the possibility of discrepant cases, yet

there were none. Discrepant cases typically include data that contradicts emerging

explanations or themes, or data that are unexpected or nonconforming (Creswell, 2014).

All data I gathered seemed internally consistent and aligned with emerging themes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure my study was credible, I used participants who were primary grade

teachers who were likely to have had experience with boys who exhibit ODD-like

behavior. I transcribed audio files verbatim, and also asked each participant to confirm

the accuracy of their transcribed interview. I supported transferability of the study's

results by providing a detailed description of my research process, my analysis, and

results. Doing this allows researchers and other audiences information by which to make

determinations of the usefulness of my results to other contexts (see Ravitch & Carl,

2016). The dependability of study results was demonstrated by consistency in data

collection, by asking all participants the same interview questions, and by reporting

evidence offered in interviews consistently across all participants. I demonstrated

confirmability of study results by providing sufficient information that other researchers

may replicate my study and confirm my analysis of the data.

Results

Two research questions guided this study and results are presented by research

question, with reference to associated themes. Results are derived from verbatim

evidence from the transcripts. The 10 teacher participants are represented by a code name

comprised of the letter T and a number.

Results for RQ1

RQ1 was: How do elementary school general education teachers describe levels

of empathy they apply when reacting to boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors? Themes

associated with this RQ were challenging behaviors teachers witnessed prior to their

approach and teachers' level of empathy used to react to or support challenging behavior.

During my interviews, all 10 participants confirmed they had experienced boys who

exhibited ODD-like behaviors. T2 said:

I had a class of 16 boys whose behaviors ranged from behaviors like mild ADD,

ADHD, not following directions all the way to extreme behaviors like physical

harm to all and everyone in the class, disrespect to peers and authoritative figures

and lots of inappropriate language that would happen constantly.

T4 recalled a specific student she taught and said "I had a child in my care who would

use wooden building blocks as a weapon. And whenever he was frustrated, he would toss

them up at the ceiling." T10 described witnessing "chairs get[ting] thrown, loping

through the hallways, aggressing on teachers and themselves." Along with these

behaviors, T5 stated they observed "silent behaviors or outbursts you will say, of kind of

just yelling out and being disrespectful, kind of just not wanting to listen and being

disruptive to the class." Furthermore, T9 mentioned "I've dealt with challenging

behaviors like screaming, disruption, throwing objects, defiance, talking back."

According to teachers in this study, another frequent behavior was not following

directions and or transitioning from one activity to another. Teachers noted disrespect,

defiance, and other challenging behaviors that prompted them to make a response to these

behaviors. Teachers in this study described the empathy they applied in reacting to such

behavior in cognitive and affective levels, and also without much empathy at all.

Cognitive Empathy in Reaction to ODD-Like Behavior

Some teachers described reacting to students with cognitive empathy, in that they

described their thinking or how they think the student is thinking or feeling. For instance,

T7 mentioned "I've gotten very good at putting myself into their shoes, thinking why they

must be doing this or why they're feeling this way." T2 said, "Once I know the why, I

feel like then I can react and support those students appropriately because I know why they are acting that way and I know the best way to teach and help them." T1 put it this way: "I mean, I really think that most of the children that act out - there's a reason."

For two participants, a key response was to give students language by which to express their needs. T8 remarked, "I spoke with the student to understand and try give him the proper words, things to say, when he needs help or wants to do something else. I think this works pretty well, in reducing these kids' behaviors." T10 agreed, saying, "I give them the vocabulary to use. I think it's very effective."

Several teachers used past experience in shaping their response to ODD-like behavior. T9 stated "I'm understanding to these behaviors because I grew up engaging in these behaviors, and had friends who engaged in these behaviors, so I always can relate to them."

T7 added,

> As a person who suffers from anxiety, sometimes it can get the best of me when behaviors are occurring. But I tried to put myself in that child's position and just think about what they're going through, and their needs are greater than mine.

T2 said,

> Typically, I think about them rather than my own emotions. So, I think of how they're feeling, the reason why they're doing it so I can kind of get an understanding of why they're acting out in a certain way, instead of letting it affect me and my emotions." Teachers who reacted with cognitive empathy used

prior experience as a framing device for response to what is going on with their

students.

T8 was more explicit in applying strategy in their thinking in response to

children's behavior. T8 said,

I think when you show your emotions, then that's its Game Over, they have won,

like, it's your Achilles heel, they found the weakness, you know, and then you're

not, you're not in charge anymore if you respond in an emotional way. So, I

really, really, really try not to even if you know, my blood pressure might be up or

whatever about something. I try not to react in that way.

T10 imagined children thinking, "She is not giving me a different reaction, She's still

calm. So let me calm down." T8 added, "I also try and think of ways I can manipulate the

situation if it's a frequent thing happening in the classroom, so I can prevent it from

happening.

Affective Empathy in Reaction to ODD-like Behavior

Many teachers based their response to ODD-like behavior in affective empathy, in

that they described consideration for the child's emotional state and their own. T6 stated

"when behaviors happen, your heart is in it, and you do have to have that little sense of

empathy." T7 mentioned "It hurts my heart, every time I see a behavior, no matter how

violent or disruptive they are, I know that something deeper is going on inside their

head." T4 also said, "I come from the standpoint of my, my own emotions and intuition

when helping students who show challenging behaviors."

Teachers described physical responses, like hugging, as a way of demonstrating affective empathy. For example, T7 said, "one of my kids loves to be squeezed. So, every time I see him, like I'll just give him the biggest hug in the world, and make sure that he knows he's loved and having that bond with." Similarly, T5 noted, "a lot of our kids are very highly motivated by hugs and tickles and wanting to have that connection with somebody else." T1 remarked,

> You know, if it's little things like it could just be you know, rubbing their back when you stand next to them, just calling them like a sweet little nickname, like good morning, perfect angel or whatever, like just some crazy nickname.

T8 said, "At times, I even give snacks, a cookie, a little piece of Skittle, anything like that just trying to keep everything positive and happy and loving in the classroom." T7 added, "we can, like hug the child, we can nurture them, we can say I can see that you're really upset."

Teachers described calming the aggressive child and helping them to deal with their feelings. T4 said, "I have a calming corner, or I may talk about it if we need to, we have sensory toys." T10 reported,

> Especially given that there's support materials, like the calming corner, or when we have those times where we can get a one on one on one on one in, I think those are times that I can show support for those particular kids.

T1 mentioned teaching self-calming skills, saying, "we do guided meditations and like, like go to that place and your mind, you know, find that way of breathing peacefully, teaching them to be really strong for themselves in the world." T4 suggested,

They may have nobody in their life that's gonna be like, hey, let's sit down and

meditate. You know what I mean? Like it's probably not gonna, it might happen

with them, but I'm like, just teaching them like on their own internally, age seven

to age 70 What can you do when you feel angry? and telling them it's normal to

feel angry? It's normal to feel sad, to feel scared. Everyone has this, but what can

you do as a solitary [person] to survive and to get through things?

T3 said,

I give them a minute to calm down and then I turn to them and ask what they

need. I give them more time to calm down. And then I ask them a question. 'Are

you okay? What do you need from me?' So, I'm just giving them my attention

and reading their body language.

T10 described it this way: "You have to find those opportunities, when you can listen to

the little story, they want to tell you or show them something that you know that some

kind of affection, right some moment where they feel special."

Lack of Empathy in Reaction to ODD-Like Behavior

In contrast, there were some teachers whose response to challenging behaviors

included little empathy. For example, T3 said, "I wait it out. I give the kids some time.

And then because I have another teacher here, she sees it, so she can help too." T10 also

described the wait it out strategy by saying,

I wait it out before I respond, like I said before, the first thing I think of is the

safety like, is this something that I can deescalate in a safe way? Or do I need

someone else to jump in? If I feel like it can be handled, if it can be deescalated in

a safe way, then I'll wait them out.

Other teachers described using behavior modification techniques in reacting to ODD-like

behavior. T1 said,

We have like a plus-minus system, and they get [to participate in high-interest]

classes if they get 100 so not just because the classes because I think they would

do it even went out that some of them that might feel like they're so close to their

goal and that you know that extra three seconds they would have been able to

click that answer and get that star.

T10 suggested,

Praise as in like, 'Oh, good job. Excellent!' may help, A high five. Oh, you want

hand clap. We want drum rolls are said a favorite saying and I repeat it for them.

All this helps them from thinking of the bad behaviors when they get things

wrong or when they react properly instead of inappropriately.

T1 again suggested:

Ours is literally just a piece of notebook paper every day with a plus or minus like

it's quick. And then I do everything based on pluses and minuses. So, it can be

participation, it can be you know, the first one getting ready, the first one lining

up [to go to recess or lunch]. And then, no matter what, like, the pluses decide

who lines up first, for lunch, they decide if I have five treats who get them, you

know, so the [pluses and minuses] are tied to everything.

T6 suggested consequences for behavior without taking into account the child's thinking or feelings, saying, "[The consequence] kind of just depends on the severity of the behavior."

T8 described feeling personally endangered by ODD-like behavior. She said, "It makes you feel unsafe." T8 also said, "I felt [the aggressive child] had no feeling whatsoever," which suggests an attribution of sociopathy that might have contributed to the teacher's feeling of being unsafe. As noted previously, T10 also was concerned for safety, but when she said, "the first thing I think of is the safety like, is this something that I can de-escalate in a safe way?" she may have been thinking of the safety of the child or their classmates, instead of or in addition to herself. T4 said, "My first response [to challenging behaviors] is how to create a safe space for the child and the children around." T1 included the aggressive child in her safety concerns, saying, "It's a safe space for them to do with us in the classroom." However, T3 worried that, "I wasn't sure what behaviors he was capable of, if he was capable of hurting somebody." T4 imagined that the aggressive child may also feel threatened, noting, "I often think that in most cases, when I do react, they're not necessarily sure if you're a threat, or if you're there to help."

Summary of RQ1 Results

To answer RQ1, regarding how elementary school general education teachers describe the levels of empathy they apply in reacting to boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors, I found that participants explained how the specific behavior displayed determined how they reacted to the students' behaviors. All participants described witnessing challenging behaviors from boys in their classrooms, such as violence,

disrespect towards authoritative figures and peers, and non-compliance. Their described reactions to this behavior ranged from affective to cognitive to no empathy at all. The data from RQ1 indicated that teachers had more to say about their application of affective empathy more often than cognitive empathy as they reacted to boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors, saying things like, "when behaviors happen, your heart is in it, and you do have to have that little sense of empathy" and "It hurts my heart, every time I see a behavior, no matter how violent or disruptive they are, I know that something deeper is going on inside their head." However, four participants described using behavior modification techniques that were devoid of empathy. This RQ was linked to the themes of challenging behaviors prior to teacher approach and level of empathy used to react to or support challenging behavior.

Results for RQ2

RQ 2 asked "How do elementary school general education teachers describe their levels of empathy in supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors?" Similar to RQ1, RQ2 focuses on the levels of empathy, but how they are used when teachers support these students, instead of in reaction to student behavior. I continued to use the three levels of empathy (cognitive, affective, and none) to identify which level of empathy was present when teachers described their support for their male students who exhibited ODD-like behavior. Themes associated with this RQ were level of empathy used to react to or support challenging behavior and results of teacher strategy.

Cognitive Empathy in Support of Students with ODD-Like Behaviors

As participants were asked questions that pertained to how they supported their students who exhibited ODD-like behaviors, several participants described how they stopped to think about how to support their student before implementing their chosen support strategy. This included them thinking about the student's behavior and feelings. For example, T6 stated "So I think of how they're feeling, the reason why they're doing it so I can kind of get an understanding of why they're acting out in a certain way, instead of letting it affect me and my emotions." T7 also reported "I try to understand how I can be a better teacher for this child and understand why he's thinking this way." T7 continued by stating, "You have to use your teacher thoughts, and think like hey, can I help out with this kid?" T8 explained, "When I try to understand them better it definitely reduces their behaviors." Teachers in this study were aware of using cognitive empathy in considering both the reasons behind the child's behavior and their need to support their male students who are engaging in challenging behaviors. T3 included empathy in her classroom management skill set, saying,

I feel like empathy is definitely a part of my everyday teaching and managing skills of challenging behaviors. I use it to support these guys by really putting myself in their shoes, asking questions and just trying to figure out their why.

Teachers described deliberately putting the needs of the child ahead of their own needs. T2 said,

Typically, I think about them rather than my own emotions. So, I think of how they're feeling, the reason why they're doing it so I can kind of get an

understanding of why they're acting out in a certain way, instead of letting it

affect me and my emotions.

T3 explained

And I think that sometimes when you're like, What is wrong with this child, you

know, this terribly behaved, horribly behaved child, that sometimes you have to

like, and as an adult, I mean, you have to be able to pull back and say, This child

is seven, they've been on earth seven years, you know, like what in the world has

happened? What have they been exposed to and gone through there has led them

to these behaviors?

Teachers described their responsibility, as a teacher, to support their students. Teachers in

this study described thinking about what type of support the student needed to succeed.

Participants described thinking about what the student might want to achieve

instead of engaging in challenging behaviors. T8 stated,

I think every child, I think 99% of children want the teacher to like them, and they

want to do well in school, they want to behave, they want to be Student of the

Month, they want to have friends, no matter what their actions are showing. I

really do believe that they want that.

Similarly, T1 stated, "I would say 99% [believes I care about them, and] I say this to say

that I think you can have none of this [support for students] work if you don't show love

to the kids." T6 also mentioned the importance of being intentional about communicating

care:

I think definitely having the boy believe you care about them strengthens the

relationship that you have. And then the bond that you to have will then help, you

know, deescalate or help with behaviors.

A few teachers tapped into the parental feeling of care in reacting to a child. T5

stated, "when I help them, I think about my own son and how I help him when he is upset

or misbehaving." T1 mentioned, "I always think about, you know, how I want someone

to care for my child, and how I want them to be understood. And that's kind of my basis

for how to communicate with them." T7 agreed, saying, "as a mother, I would want

someone to take the time to try to understand my child and allow my child to understand

himself, so that we can take the steps that we need to move forward to help him to be

successful."

Participants described their thinking of the students' needs and giving this

priority over their own needs and trying to provide what they assume the student believes

is the best way for them to be supported. They described trying to imagine these students

as their own sons and doing for them that they would wish for a child of their own.

Affective Empathy in Support of Students with ODD-Like Behaviors

Affective empathy in support of students with ODD-like behaviors was described

by only four of the 10 teachers in this study. Teachers described their innate feelings of

care for their students, separate from imagining this as a method or strategy. T4 reported,

"I think it really is important for someone [a student] to be able to connect with you in

order for them to be able to learn from you or have some type of bond." "T1 stated "I

have obviously bonded with some of them more than others, but I care about each of

them so deeply."

Participants also described their personal feelings as they support these students.

T3 stated,

> It makes me feel sad. And I say sad, because it's like, they didn't have the
>
> communication or skills to talk to me. So, the behavior happens. And that's the
>
> whole process of calming them back down. So, I feel sad in a moment, because I
>
> can't give them what they need it.

T1 reported:

> This [behavior] made me feel like I wanted to understand why they acted this
>
> way and how could I help them. I've always been very patient and wanted to
>
> ensure all of my students knew I care.

In this study, teachers described limited affective empathy in support of students who

exhibit ODD-like behaviors but did describe feelings of sadness for these students.

Lack of Empathy in Supporting Students with ODD-Like Behaviors

Three participants mentioned they did not know how to support these students, so

using empathy was not considered. For instance, T1 also described feeling that empathy

might be out of place, when the student seems comfortable with their behavior:

> Because there's so much feeling behind their behavior at times, when they do act
>
> out, it is hard to discriminate if [I] should help them when [I] see they don't have a
>
> feeling or care in the world.

T4 suggested that confusion about a student's feelings may match students' confusion about teachers' feelings, saying "I often think that in most cases… they're not necessarily sure if you're a threat, or if you're there to help."

Several participants reported they did not support students because they did not know what to do that would have a positive effect. T7 stated "There's only so much that a teacher can do, you know." Similarly, T10 mentioned I think there's only so much I can do." Teachers described feeling frustrated. T6 said, "I don't know if I'm supposed to feel this way, but it makes me feel a little frustrated."

Summary of RQ2 Results

To answer RQ2's question of how elementary school general education teachers describe their levels of empathy in supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors, I examined how teachers described their support in each of three empathy levels. Participants spoke at length about their use of cognitive empathy, employing critical thinking and tactical skills, to support male students with challenging behaviors. Participants said things such as, "So I think of how they're feeling, the reason why they're doing it so I can kind of get an understanding of why they're acting out in a certain way," and, "You have to use your teacher thoughts, and think … can I help out with this kid? A small number of teachers described affective levels of empathy, in saying things like, "I feel sad in a moment, because I can't give them what they need." Many teachers struggled to feel empathy for challenging boys because they did not know what to do, they felt frustrated, and because if the student did not seem to care about their behavior, the teacher found it hard to care about the student. This RQ was associated with the themes

of level of empathy used to react to or support challenging behavior and the results of teacher strategy.

Summary of Results

The data revealed that teachers described applying elements of affective empathy to a slightly greater extent than they described using cognitive empathy in reacting to ODD-like behavior in their male students. Teachers also described using no empathy in their use of behavior modification techniques in reaction to this behavior. However, teachers described applying cognitive empathy in their support of these students to a much greater extent than they described applying affective empathy or no empathy in support of students. No discrepant data were identified.

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Summary

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how elementary school general education teachers describe their interactions and experiences as they use empathy in reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. During interviews, all participants described experiences with male students who exhibited ODD-like behaviors in their classroom. The results of this study suggested that teachers apply cognitive and affective empathy in reaction to challenging behaviors and that they tend to apply cognitive empathy to a greater extent in supporting students who display ODD-like behavior. Teachers described using no empathy both in reaction to and in efforts to support these students. In Chapter 5, I present an interpretation of my findings, and discuss the limitations of the study, and recommendations and implications derived from the results.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how elementary school general education teachers describe their interactions and experiences as they use empathy when reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. This study was implemented using semi-structured interviews with 10 general education teachers in the southeastern US. This study was conducted to fill a gap in research involving teachers' perspectives regarding using empathy when managing challenging behaviors within the classroom. I found that teachers apply cognitive and affective empathy in reaction to challenging behaviors and tend to apply cognitive empathy to a greater extent than affective empathy when supporting students who display ODD-like behaviors. In addition, teachers described using no empathy as they reacted to and supported these students. In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of findings. I also explain limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and implications of findings.

Interpretation of Findings

A key finding of this study was that as students engage in challenging behaviors, teachers tend to struggle with managing these behaviors. Data from this study highlighted how these behaviors can create a sense of fear for teachers, and even force teachers to not want to react to or support students when these behaviors arise. Chang (2016) said teachers find interacting with student misbehavior one of the most challenging issues they face daily. Allday (2018) found working with students who have ODD-like behaviors can be challenging and intimidating for educators, as was reported by teachers in this study.

Teachers in this study described being worried for their own safety, safety of children in their classes, and safety of aggressive children.

Another key finding was that teachers use cognitive empathy when reacting to and supporting their male students with challenging behaviors. Participants described reacting to ODD-like behaviors by thinking through how they believe the student was thinking or feeling. Meyers et al. (2019) suggested teachers take into consideration students' point of view as well as their personal and social situations when reacting to challenging behaviors. Teachers in this study described giving students different phrases, cues, and methods to use to express their feelings verbally and through other communication tools such as an emotions chart. Bullough (2019) said improved communication is needed for challenging students to maximize the effect of a teacher's response when providing help to students. Several participants mentioned their use of personal past experience when shaping their reactions to ODD-like behavior. Meyers et al. (2019) said teachers should use their own personal experiences to connect with students and help them succeed in the classroom.

Teachers also described using cognitive empathy to support students engaged in ODD-like behaviors. They said they stopped to think about how to support their students before implementing their chosen support strategy. This included thinking about students' behavior and feelings. Participants also described considering both reasons behind the child's behavior and support needs. Whitford and Emerson (2019) said when teachers examine antecedents of student behaviors, they gain the ability to understand those students' experiences and perspectives, thus resulting in appropriately

communicating that understanding. Furthermore, participants mentioned thinking about students' emotions, feelings, and needs rather than their own emotions. Postolache (2020) said teachers must have an understanding of how to build positive relationships, even with students who exhibit ODD-like behavior, and this includes applying a sense of empathy.

A third key finding was that teachers used affective empathy, but used this less frequently compared to cognitive empathy. Teachers within my study described using physical expressions of affective empathy, such as hugging and tickling, in reaction to challenging behavior. Cornelius-White et al. (2020) said creation of positive teacher-student relationships occurs via teacher demonstration of care for students, which can be achieved through physical touch and also by acknowledging feelings. A few participants mentioned how they used their innate feelings of care for their students as expressions of affective empathy. However few participants used affective empathy as they supported students who displayed ODD-like behaviors; some participants believed students could not be reached by affective empathy when they are consumed by negative emotions.

A final key finding in this study was that participants described reacting to and supporting students with ODD-like behaviors with no empathy. In reaction to challenging behaviors, teachers recounted waiting out or ignoring them. According to Owens et al. (2018), teachers must possess effective classroom management skills, so to the extent that ignoring challenging behavior or simply waiting for it to extinguish itself is effective in the classroom, a no-empathy response may be useful. Participants described use of behavior modification systems like the plus-minus system where students earn a special

treat after they have a certain number of plusses for good behavior, but can lose points for unruly behavior. Behavioristic systems of rewards and punishments are intentionally free of emotion, including empathy in terms of others' emotions (Skinner, 1988; Sobeck & Reister, 2021). However, Spinrad and Gal (2018) said expressions of empathy from authority figures promote children's prosocial behavior, and this behavior is supported by encouragement but not extrinsic rewards. Therefore, the tendency of participants in this study to rely on behavior modification systems demonstrates lack of empathy in reaction to and support for students. Participants said lacked knowledge or training sufficient to deal with ODD-like behaviors, so using empathy was not considered. Allday (2018) said when challenging or ODD-like behaviors occur and teachers have not been taught how to ameliorate these behaviors, they are left not knowing what to do and must use their own ideas.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of my study was lack of gender diversity in the study sample. There were no male participants, which may have affected the results. Male teachers may have different perspectives regarding challenging behaviors and apply empathy differently compared to female teachers, especially in response to male students. There is a lack of male teachers in elementary education (Davis & Hay, 2018).

Another limitation of this study was scheduling and location due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was difficult to coordinate participant interview times due to participants' personal lives and work schedules. Four of the 10 participants preferred meeting in person instead of on Zoom due to scheduling conflicts. To accommodate these

participants, I conducted those interviews at the local library in a private meeting room where we practiced social distancing. Other participants engaged in interviews from their own homes via Zoom, which frequently were interrupted by family members and other distractions, which caused participants to have to stop in the middle of answering questions. Interruptions caused participants to answer questions more quickly so that interviews could finish and they could attend to their families.

Recommendations

Based on this study, I have several recommendations for future research. The first recommendation is to expand the participant criteria. This study only included teachers who taught kindergarten through third grade, for at least two years and within a specific region. Further research and replication of this study could include teachers in grades K-8 with more or less experience with students who exhibit ODD-like behaviors, include male teachers, and include a wider geographic region in the United States than I did in this study. Information from a broader participant base could provide more insight on teachers' perspectives, create more literature on this specific phenomenon, and possibly provide results that align with or challenge the findings of this study.

Another recommendation is to critically examine the preservice or professional development opportunities offered to teachers in management of ODD-like behavior and in use of empathy in the classroom, and particularly the extent to which empathy is communicated to teachers as a valued quality. This could determine if teachers are provided with training that includes how to manage challenging students in an empathetic way, and if such training is effective in helping teachers react to and support children

who exhibit ODD-like behavior. As this study and previous research has shown, teachers lack training that prepares them with strategies on how to react to, help, and support students who exhibit challenging behaviors. Future research could identify effective programs of professional development that supports empathetic interactions in the classroom.

Another recommendation for further research is a focus on both male and female students. Challenging behaviors in female students is under-studied and may require different skills of teachers than do challenging behaviors in male students. Future research could be beneficial in providing perspective on behavior differences by gender. Future research can also include investigating the possibility of gender bias in teachers' reaction to and support of students who exhibit challenging behavior.

Implications

One implication for practice derived from this study is a need for continued professional development of classroom management strategies for teachers and administrators. These professional development sessions should provide teachers with more strategies and tools on how to deal with challenging behaviors, and focus on the role of empathy in creating positive teacher-student relationships. According to my study, teachers implemented different strategies that did not include empathy; however, most pre-service training discourages the use of techniques like behavior modification systems that are devoid of empathy (Chaney et al., 2020). The data from this study showed how when teachers implemented the strategy of using cognitive and affective empathy as they responded to and supported male students who exhibited ODD-like behaviors, they tend

to gain a clear understanding of what the student needed or wanted and were able to help their students. Continuous professional development is imperative for teachers to maintain knowledge and skills to grow their practice (Valente et al., 2019). Providing teachers and school administrators with professional development that focuses on application of empathy could help reduce the incidence of challenging behaviors in the classroom.

Study findings support positive social change if they inspire efforts to promote application of empathy to create a positive and caring learning environment for students, particularly for students who exhibit ODD-like behavior. The findings of this study support positive social change by demonstrating how teachers can use empathy to create positive teacher-student relationships. As Meyers et al. (2019) suggested, empathy is a mechanism by which teachers can signal positive support for students with challenging behaviors and create a positive teacher-student relationship. This study also may inspire positive social change by providing students who engage in challenging behaviors an opportunity to receive the support to modify their behavior, so they might be more successful in school and in their lives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how elementary school general education teachers describe their interactions and experiences as they use empathy in reacting to and supporting boys who exhibit ODD-like behaviors. The problem that was the focus of this study is that challenging behaviors in elementary grade classrooms have increased (Educational Advisory Board, 2019). Limited literature

existed that focused on applying empathy as a strategy to reduce children's challenging behaviors. I interviewed 10 participants and investigated their perspectives on how they applied empathy as they responded to and supported their male students who engaged in challenging behaviors. Participants experiences showed that they implemented cognitive empathy more often than affective empathy, and that they sometimes deliberately used no empathy as a behavior management strategy. This study addressed a gap in the literature by increasing understanding of teachers' perspectives of their use of empathy in reaction to or support for K-3 male students who exhibit ODD-like behavior.

As teachers are tasked with managing their classrooms, and creating a safe, engaging, positive and nurturing learning environment where students are encouraged to behave appropriately; however, participants in this study reported they struggle with lack of tools or knowledge to help reduce challenging behavior. The results from this study give insight into the power of applying different levels of empathy to reduce challenging behaviors while creating positive-student teacher relationships. The findings from this study provide teachers, administrators, and families of male students who exhibit ODD-like behaviors with empathy as a powerful strategy to apply as they react to and support these students.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Introduction — Thank you for agreeing to share your experiences with me. Today we're

going to talk about boys, in particular, who display behaviors a teacher might find

violent, disruptive, disrespectful , or challenging to authority. If you do not have any

questions, let's begin.

1.) Tell me about a time when a boy in your class displayed the sorts of behaviors we're

talking about - violent, disruptive, disrespectful, or challenging.

a. What do you think caused them to act out in that way?

2.) What do you think the child was feeling when that happened?

a. How did this behavior make *you* feel?

3.) When a boy acts out like that, how much do you react from your own emotional

intuition and how much from thinking about what's going on?

4.) Can you describe your usual response to this sort of behavior?

a. What happens first, usually?

b. And then what…?

5.) What sorts of things do you do to help the child behave better?

a. How effective does your approach seem, usually, in reducing the boy's behavior?

b. How typical is it that you have to escalate your response or get someone else to

help you?

6.) What sorts of things do you do to help the child *feel* better?

a. How effective does that seem, usually, in helping the child?

b. How typical is it, when you address feelings, that you have to escalate your response or get someone else to help you?

7.) How much do you think the boy who is acting out believes you care about him personally?

a. Can you think of a boy that you really didn't care about much? Tell me about that…

8.) How much do you think it matters that a boy believes you care about them?

9.) What we've been talking about is sometimes called empathy, to share the feelings and emotions of others. How much do you think you react to boys who act out *with empathy* - with an understanding of how they feel?

10.)   How much do you think you support boys who act out with empathy - with an understanding of how they feel?

Thanks so much for talking with me. Are there any other experiences or information you think I should know? I will email you a copy of the transcript of this conversation, so you can review it and add anything you might have forgotten to say.