Ontosystemic and Microsystemic Conditions toward Inclusive Education of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in Quebec Primary School

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ABSTRACT:

Using the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979), the purpose of this study was to document the perceptions of primary school stakeholders concerning the favorable and unfavorable conditions that support inclusive education with student presenting emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), more specifically about the characteristics of the students (onto) and the school environment (micro). Based on a qualitative interpretative approach, interviews were conducted with 58 school stakeholders at five Quebec primary schools. The results of content analysis for ontosystem showed that school stakeholders perceived the characteristics of students with EBD from a deficit perspective, which relied on perceptions that students do not have sufficient skills for inclusive education to be considered. From the microsystemic perspective, participants reported that inclusive education is fostered by the quality of relationships between students and school stakeholders, the educational practices, and the needs of support from paraprofessionals. The results underline the complexity surrounding key conditions to successfully realizing the project of inclusive education for students having EBD.

Keywords: mainstreaming; inclusive education; behavioural difficulties; ecosystemic model

INTRODUCTION

Although the Quebec school system is gradually making progress toward inclusion (MEES, 2017; MELS, 2008, 2011, 2015), most of the province's schools can be situated within an integration paradigm. As reported in the international literature those with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) remain the least welcomed (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018) and issues are expressed regarding their schooling in regular classrooms (Rousseau et al., 2015). Indeed, students with EBD are schooled in a regular class, but often isolated of some academic or recreational activities. Moreover, several students with EBD remain schooled in special classes (Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse, 2018).

A study from Bernier et al. (2021) carried out in Quebec with students having EBD schooled in a special high school class, shows that students who felt capable of returning to the regular class did not wish to, while those who wish to, did not report to be capable of it. According to these students, the practices used by teachers in regular settings were perceived as unsuited to their needs. Consequently, these students did not return to the regular class, illustrating a double failure for inclusive education. In the same perspective, it seems that teachers' beliefs are equivocal about inclusion of students with EBD: they are willing to adapt their teaching, but many teachers still not use evidence-based practices to support students having EBD (Massé et al., 2018).

Indeed, many teachers entertain more negative perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with EBD compared to other students having special needs (Cook et al., 2007).

A review of literature (Rousseau et al., 2015) underlined the positive role of teachers in the inclusive process, specifically if their representation is aligned with the perspective of students' abilities in opposition to their limitations. The cooperation among students, the collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as the support of parents, also stand out as favorable conditions for inclusion.

In contrast, a lack of flexibility, a traditional approach of program-centered teaching and the unawareness of specific students' problems are unfavorable conditions related to the teachers (Rousseau et al., 2015). Unfavorable conditions can also stem from the school organization when specialized services to students are provided outside regular classrooms or when the school relied on a competitive climate characterized by a culture of assessment to the detriment of planning for a diversity of students. Pillay, Dunbar-Krige and Mostert (2013) point out that inclusive education requires a decision-making process, informed by an analysis of all factors susceptible to help along the student's development. Following these recommendations, it seems important to document the point of view of school stakeholders regarding the respective and mutual influences of the individual characteristics of students with EBD and those of the school environment in the context of their inclusive education.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study adopts Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979, 1986) to documents the perceptions of primary school stakeholders regarding the favorable and unfavorable conditions related to the individual characteristics of students with EBD (ontosystem) and to the school environment (microsystem) that support their inclusion.

METHODS

The interpretive qualitative study was conducted with 58 staff members at five Quebec primary schools from four different regions of the province. Table 1 show the char-

Table 1 **Participant Characteristics**

Characteristics	Properties	Frequency	(%)
Sex	Female Male	50 8	(86.2%) (13.8%)
Age	20–29 years old 30–39 years old 40–49 years old 50 and above	11 12 21 13	(18.9%) (20.7%) (36.2%) (22.4%)
Position at the school	Professional and support staff Teacher Administrator	11 40 7	(18.9%) (68.9%) (12.2%)

acteristics of the participants, who had between 4 months and 32 years of experience for an average of 13 years. All participants signed the consent form. The research was approved by the ethical committee from the University of research members.

Instrument

At each school, 45–60 minutes semi-structured individual interviews with volunteers of the school administration were held by one member of the research team, having more than 20 years of experience in qualitative interviews, as well as 2-hour group interviews, one with teachers and the other with special education technicians or psychologist. An interview guide was written in accordance with the research objective, i.e., to document favorable and unfavorable conditions for the inclusive education of students with EBD in inclusive regular classes based on the ecological model.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed respecting data anonymity and confidentiality. Content analysis was performed using the anonymized verbatim transcriptions with the help of NVivo11 software, based on categories previously established according to the ecosystemic model. This process took place consistent with the four broad stages of L'Écuyer's model (1988): preliminary reading interviews in order to get a general overview; assembly and definition of classification units based on the categories predetermined by the theoretical model; categorization and classification of statements according to their degree of belonging to one or another of the pre-existing categories; and validation of coding by consensus among researchers.

Written reports of each category were produced to select the quotations that best represented participants' perceptions. The quotations were assigned codes to identify certain participant characteristics. The first letter identifies the position at the school: T = teacher; P = professional and support staff; A = administration. The second letter identifies the gender: F = female and M = male. The next two digits identify the age group: 00 = unknown; 01 = 20–29 years old; 02 = 30–39 years old; 03 = 40–49 years old; and 04 = 50 and above. Finally, the last four digits indicate the school, followed by the number of the participant at the school.

RESULTS

The holistic analysis of the conditions surrounding inclusive education for students with EBD in primary school was conducted on 938 statements, categorized according to the components of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1986). Given the size of the analyzed corpus, this article only presents the results associated with the ontosystemic and microsystemic conditions related to the school, representing an estimated 44% of the statements analyzed.

Ontosystemic Conditions

The ontosystem refers to an individual's characteristics, states, skills, and vulnerabilities (11.1% of the analyzed corpus). Following the results, the conditions were grouped into four underlying categories: students' behavioral manifestations, motivation at school, attitudes toward difficulties, and social competence.

The nature and intensity of the behavioral manifestations of students with EBD significantly influence their education in regular classrooms. According to most of the participants, externalized behavioral problems are the most difficult to manage in class and significantly undermine learning and education success. Aggressive conduct and opposition behaviors were identified as major obstacles to inclusive education.

For students with violence issues, it's very hard [to include the child] because the teacher is alone with the student in class, they're not going to have any support (PF030203).

I find that oppositional behaviors are extremely difficult because they can be unpleasant or hurtful, but also, the students do nothing. They refuse to do any work… (TF040305).

On the opposite, finding sources of motivation at school constitutes a favorable condition.

I would say motivation at school. I think if they have a goal, I think it makes all the difference. The students we have the most trouble with are those who have already dropped out in their minds. They have no rope to keep them hanging on (AF030101).

In the same way, students' attitudes toward their difficulties, including understanding and acceptance, are prerequisites for inclusive education.

When you're able to talk about it, when the students are able to name things or also participate in the improvement process, things are better (TF020105);

Finally, having positive social skills constitutes another favorable condition.

It helps when the child has a minimum of social skills and some degree of cooperation with the school's functioning (AM040201);

In sum, the ontosystemic conditions deemed to be favorable, lie in the students' motivation to school, social skills, and a degree of awareness of one's own difficulties. Conversely, the ignorance of these difficulties, the absence of motivation, and the externalized behavioral problems characterized by aggressiveness or oppositional conduct appear to be unfavorable conditions.

Microsystemic Conditions

The microsystem refers to the settings where an individual has direct participation. In this study, the school microsystem conditions refer to the relationships between students with EBD and school staff, as well as the roles and responsibilities expected of these students. The microsystem accounts for 32.5% of the corpus. The results uncover three categories of microsystemic conditions connected to the well-being and success of students with EBD: 1) teaching practices; 2) behavior management practices; 3) paraprofessional support for students; and 3) human, physical and material resources.

Teaching Practices

The quality of the relationship between students and teachers appears to be a key factor for successful inclusion.

With a well-established emotional bond, things rarely get off track.

The challenges are still there, (…) but the real issues get discussed and it's in a climate of openness instead of confrontation. You really need engagement, an emotional bond. It makes a huge difference (AM0402).

To achieve this, some suggest investing time in welcoming students and taking the time to know the students.

Teachers must stay connected to their students, they need to be able to welcome them and not just in September. They must be in their doorway to greet students each morning, to welcome students after recess, it's important. (AF0402).

Another microsystemic condition is the establishment of clear and consistently applied expectations.

I think you need to be consistent with classroom expectations. Displaying the rules in class, naming your goals. It must be clear what you're working on. When young people know where they're going, and there's a clear routine, when it's consistent, when there are no surprises. It's really a matter of constancy and consistency. Those are the winning practices with those kids (AF0401).

Implementing differentiated instruction practices and planning physical organization of the classroom represents both a favorable condition and a challenge for the inclusion.

Managing group composition, the difficulty of seating students according to their needs. There's one who can't be too close to the door, then half the students that you can't put facing the window because they must be back to the window, so now they're facing the door. Where am I going to put them? In the broom closet? (TF0304).

In the same perspective, several school professionals underscore the importance of the teacher practices and attitudes in the inclusive education success.

Of course, with students who move around a lot, you have to keep in mind that after half an hour, you need to change things up. I noticed this year that doing lectures in the afternoon didn't work. If I'm up in front of the class teaching, it's a nightmare. They're bouncing around, they're talking. But knowing this, I do my lectures in the morning and in the afternoon, they must be kept busy (TF0302).

Behavior Management Practices

Several participants report that social skill development programs and calming tools help students with EBD.

The teacher aid comes to lead workshops on social skills. Taking my cue from those activities, I created my own quiet corner. I put together a small basket of things they can use. For example, if a student needs to calm down, he can come make a drawing (TF0301).

The diversity of calming strategies and tools help students to regulate their emotions and behavior or to spend their energy. The multiple choices allow choice and enabled students to readjust one's interventions.

You must try a few different things to find what works best with the student. There are many different options. Sometimes it'll work once, then they need another solution, an alternative (TF0201).

However, some participants mentioned their difficulties in managing the multitude of tools available.

One-on-one, yes, they help, but when you're with a class of 21 students, I can't make it work, even when I had a teacher's aide: one student has these little sticks, I must remember to give him those little sticks. There's another student I must send out into the hallway, he must walk it off if I feel the pressure is building … but then sometimes you have many [students] (TF0303).

Several participants underline the importance of reinforcement to motivate students to adopt appropriate behaviors.

Valuing positive behaviors instead of scolding the unacceptable ones. It creates less tension… You finish the day feeling better instead of saying, I spent the day complaining (TF0201).

For some teachers, managing a reward system requires a great deal of time and organization. In this context, the support of the other school professionals is essential.

There's always a privilege connected to something. By myself, I wouldn't be able to manage it because I can't keep an eye on the schoolyard and supervise a privilege. So, you can set up systems when you have support, and when you have some assistance (TF0403).

Professional Support

Analysis of the results shows that support offered to students and to teachers are an important condition in favor of the inclusion success of students with EBD in regular classrooms. Firstly, the presence of professional resources for students with EBD enables them to receive help at critical moments.

When someone is there to support the child, she can prevent a crisis. When she feels the pressure starting to rise, she can decide to go take a walk with the child, to get some water… So, there's no crisis, it can be prevented (TF0104).

This professional support also helps all school stakeholders to better target their interventions.

Here at the school, we have a psychologist who does evaluations. We have a psychoeducator who handles a pool of students. I call on the psychoeducator because I, too, eventually get to the end of my rope. I don't have the answer to everything, so the psychoeducator comes to help me (PF0101).

Although several participants attest that those professional resources are appreciated, the results also underline the paucity of such resources in school settings.

With more specialized services such as the speech therapist or psychologist, there's only screening, there's no follow-up, no support. We can't hope for them to give us tools as teachers because they don't have the time. Professionals would need more possibilities and we would need shorter waiting times if we require a consultation or screening because sometimes it takes a long time to get an evaluation and to know what to do with it (TF0101).

An obstacle factor that raises it is the instability of the professionals in primary schools.

We don't make such fast progress because we see students in June and then we start over the following year. Often, the special-education technicians change schools. This is not helpful for students. Not only are they already facing all sorts of difficulties, but they also need to adapt to a new aide, to rebuild everything (PF0101).

Specialized services for students with EBD, held outside the regular classrooms, for a specified period or for more targeted needs, were also mentioned.

The services, whether it's "Répit" (a special service where students go during a short period for crisis management) or something else—they're good. The students are checked on, they are taken out of their classrooms and followed up by the professionals. Then they come back to their class after a while (three or four months), they are monitored when they return, to see how things are going (PF0101).

Finally, a few participants stated that the school's extracurricular activities motivate students with EBD to come to school and to adopt proper behavior.

In terms of sports teams… It really helps their image and in terms of the youths' belonging to the school (TF0104).

Human Resources, Physical and Material Environment

It appears that the classroom layout, the organization of break times (recess), and group composition all influence inclusive education. First, the participants appreciated being able to organize their classrooms to better meet the needs of students with EBD, especially when they express the need to withdraw.

I think that the physical layout, the seating arrangement, the furniture, and classroom size can also help. Being able to isolate a desk when a student needs it. When you can have small divider screens, it can also help, but you need the space for them. Sometimes, the room is too small (TF0201).

For some participants, having a flexible layout as opposed to the standard rows of desks helps differentiate instructions and foster student collaboration and autonomy.

For sure, the spatial arrangement is important. When I think of differentiated education, I don't think only in terms of the content. The idea is to try to associate students with classmates who won't make them "flip out," we arrange the setup accordingly, and we'll arrange the classroom, so things are easily accessible, so the students don't always need to ask questions to be able to do their classwork (AF0402).

It seems equally important to plan the use of open spaces at school, especially the schoolyard, to facilitate supervision, keep students busy and engaged and prevent violence.

We have a huge, but also very open, schoolyard. There are no nooks or wooded areas, and we have several supervisors. The children are never left on their own off in a corner, although they have plenty of room. Often, we have problems with violence because they lack their own space (PF0302).

In the classroom, the heterogeneity of students' needs or difficulties in addition to the number of students with special needs represent significant challenges to inclusive education.

The diversity of issues and the number of students. Let's take for example one student with ASD and another with ADHD. One needs to be in a calm space, in his own little bubble, and the other is overexcited and needs to move around. Sometimes it seems like there are issues that don't really mix well. This escalates and amplifies everything (PF0101).

Because of these difficulties, the participants mentioned that they give considerable importance to planning groups' composition to foster an optimal climate between students, and that they prioritize the teacher-student relationship.

We try to think about our groups' formation. I try to avoid putting students with behaviour problems in the same group. Of course, they'll find other kids that they won't necessarily get along with, but sometimes there are strong dislikes. You must be careful (AF0401).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to document the perceptions of primary school stakeholders concerning the favorable and unfavorable conditions that support inclusive education with student presenting EBD, more specifically about the characteristics of the student and the school environment. The qualitative content analyses, based on an ecological categorization, uncovered several categories of ontosystemic and microsystemic conditions closely associated with this inclusive education. From an ontosystemic standpoint, these categories come down to students' behavioral manifestations, attitudes toward their difficulties, and social adaptation. The categories associated with the microsystem of the school are related to teaching practices, assistance or services provided to students, as well as the human, physical and material environment.

In this study, ontosystemic conditions were identified both as a lever and an obstacle for inclusion success. Indeed, it appears that school stakeholders consider that individual student characteristics play a significant role in successful inclusive education. Consistent with previous research, the results confirm that school stakeholders perceive teaching to students with oppositional, aggressive or impulsive conduct as more difficult (Gaudreau & Frenette 2014). Indeed, the severity of behavioral manifestations and the negative attitudes of students with EBD toward school involvement appear as an important obstacle for their inclusion. However, when the school stakeholders consider that the student has social skills, that the latter recognizes his behavioral difficulties and shows a certain motivation toward the school, inclusive education becomes possible. These results effectively illustrate the "integrative" posture of the Quebec school system, which places students in the role of having to adapt to their schools' requirements and functioning. This reflects a deficit perspective that emphasizes students' challenges rather than their strengths (Rousseau et al., 2015).

Moreover, according to the biopsychosocial approach, the difficulties of the students occur in the individual-environment interaction (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). In this perspective, the inclusive education implies that the school stakeholders also adapt their practices to the diversity of students' needs, regardless of the nature and severity of their difficulties (Fortier et al. 2018). In this regard, the participants underlined the major role of microsystemic conditions in students with EBD successful inclusive education, especially the quality of the relationship between students and their teachers. On this subject, it is stipulated that when students perceive this relationship positively, they tend to be more engaged (Roorda et al., 2011), which is conducive to their academics' success (Hughes et al., 2012). According to Brophy-Herb et al. (2007), teachers who perceive students negatively adopt more repressive practices, thus hindering the establishment of a classroom climate that nurtures learning. Investing in the development of positive relationships between students with EBD and their teachers would therefore help diminish the intensity and frequency of inappropriate behavioral manifestations while also preventing teachers' adoption of coercive disciplinary practices (Mainhard et al., 2011). In fact, the quality of student-teacher relation is recognized as an essential condition in the perceived effectiveness of disciplinary interventions (Hajdukova et al., 2014).

Results underline that teaching practices also constitute key factors of inclusive education. They show that es-

tablishing clear expectations is essential to meet the needs of students with EBD. Moreover, according to some participants in this study, it is imperative for teachers to demonstrate flexibility and differentiated instructions to support the motivation and respect the abilities and the needs of students.

The participants also denounced the inefficiency of punitive or coercive practices and placed value on pro-active measures, such as cooperation between students. These results are consistent with Kern et al., (2016), suggesting that all educational intervention should be aimed at helping students, by using educational practices that make them clearly aware of what is expected, and that assist and guide them in their learning progress. However, for several years, various researchers have mentioned the gap between the evidenced-based practices and those really implemented to prevent and manage student with behavior problems (Maggin et al., 2011; Massé et al., 2018).

The present results consolidate the importance of professional support for both students and teachers in implementing educational practices adapted to the needs of students with EBD. However, according to Fortier (2015), the greater the intensity of the behavioral difficulties, the more teachers require the support of professional members of their educational team (e.g., paraeducator, psychologist, etc.). In the absence of this support, the implementation of inclusive education would then be deemed impossible.

A varied offer of extracurricular activities is also important to support the motivation and social inclusive education of students with EBD at school. In line with the constructivist principle of the ecological approach, students' zone of proximal development can be leveraged by providing each student, as often as possible, with learning situations and tasks that are optimal for their needs (Perrenoud, 1992). In this regard, Prud'homme et al. (2017) recall that there is no one developmental path, and that it is legitimate to devote time and effort to supporting students' development of autonomy by helping them set goals for themselves and by giving them the tools to achieve them.

As the principles of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979, 1986) suggest, the behavioral engagement of students with EBD is partly a result of interactions between environmental components. Indeed, the results point to the positive influence of a human environment that provides such students with models of success and self-control. This converges with a premise of inclusive education, namely that, by promoting diversity, heterogeneous classrooms constitute a source of enrichment

for the entire community (AuCoin & Vienneau, 2011). These results also contrast with preconceived notions surrounding segregated classes, including that individuals learn better with people who resemble them (Caron, 2003). Group composition is in fact a preparatory step for successfully realizing the project of inclusion. These steps also include taking students' needs into account and reflecting on the structure and organization of the school, classrooms and student rights (Rousseau et al., 2014).

Complementarily, the results underscore the importance of providing students with EBD with various self-regulation strategies, especially by giving them access to calming resources that help them quickly return to their groups. This can mean assigning a student a strategic spot in the classroom or providing a range of calming tools. These strategies directly connect with proactive interventions that have demonstrated their effectiveness with students with EBD (Fournier et al., 2018).

The present research project had certain limitations. First, it was impossible to present all the results from an ecological perspective, considering the influence of all systems on the inclusive education of students with EBD into regular classrooms in one same article. Nevertheless, the ontosystemic and microsystemic conditions presented do suggest several avenues of reflection and intervention for practitioners. The second limitation concerned the sample, which was made up solely of school staff. In accordance with the theoretical approach, it would have been suggested to also take the views of students with EBD into account (Ainscow et al., 1999; Fortier & Prochnow, 2018). Finally, the schools targeted in this study are not representative of all regions and socioeconomic levels of Quebec, thus limiting the transferability of the presented results.

According to the ecological approach, students with EBD have their own distinct personal characteristics and are situated within interacting microsystems that are subject to outside influences which can shape the nature and quality of these interactions. Hence, the school experience for students with EBD is in large part shaped by their image of these microsystems including the quality of their relationships with educational staff, the support and assistance measures provided, and their physical and material environment. Although complex and context-dependent, their inclusion is thus impacted by the various players responsible for supporting them in their development.

Inclusive education comes with challenges and obstacles on both relational and organizational levels. Consis-

tent with the phenomenological principle of Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (1979, 1986), the endeavor of inclusive education can be approached as an instance of complex problem-softening that brings into play the perceptions of individuals and of those in their environment. In this context, the inclusive success of students with EBD becomes possible when they live in balance with their environment, i.e., when they have positive interactions with stakeholders and peers, when their needs are met, and they can use their strengths and skills. The education of students with EBD in an inclusive context requires a change for stakeholders, from a biomedical conception of the difficulties toward a biopsychosocial approach. This could be done by moving from a perspective of individual integration to a universal conception of learning and by establishing educational communities engaged in a reflective and transformational process (Fortier et al., 2018).

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