EXPERIENTIAL CURRICULA OR INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS

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Abstract

A literature review was conducted regarding the use of various experiential curricula and instructional strategies with students (K-12) who have been identified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder or identified as being at-risk. The review was limited to the publication years of 2002-2012 and only to peer-reviewed articles written in English. The purpose of this literature review was to answer this question: What is the body of research related to experiential learning or curricula and students with emotional or behavioral disorders or those students deemed to be at-risk? The number of articles produced has declined consistently over time and most of the articles pertained to at-risk adolescent students within a public school setting. The majority of the research was descriptive in nature and focused on curricula or strategies to address emotional or behavioral regulation. Only half of the articles specifically identified experiential approaches.

The purpose of this document is to provide a comprehensive review of the research literature associated with the use of specific experiential curricula or instructional strategies with students who have been identified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder or deemed to be at-risk. Children with emotional disorders or disturbances have difficulty learning that cannot be attributed to health or sensory reasons or due to intellectual deficiencies (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Many students have been diagnosed with some form of emotional disturbance (Pierce, Reid & Epstein, 2004) or mental health disorder as documented through the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Diagnoses included in this manual are depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder and intermittent explosive disorder, to name a few. Students with these issues have abundant needs (academic, social, emotional, behavioral) and require strategic interventions to address these concerns. "Research has shown a relationship between academic deficits and emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD)" (Pierce et al., p. 175). These unique students may struggle to learn in a traditional manner and require creative efforts from teachers to provide them with curricula and instruction that will enhance their ability to learn the concepts presented. If these students' needs are left unaddressed at an early age, their concerns will progressively get worse as they enter adolescence and adulthood. Many students eventually drop-out and may remain unemployed if their needs are not addressed adequately (Pierce et al., 2004). It is imperative that researchers study and find strategies that are effective with this increasing population of students. Historically, researchers have studied behavioral strategies as opposed to academic interventions. A scarcity of research has been available on how to best meet the academic needs of these students (Pierce et al., 2004).

Current Practices

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders have unique needs and require instructors who are well informed in order to meet these diverse needs. Teachers are not always prepared to meet the demands of these learners (Lewis, Hudson, Richter & Johnson, 2004). Many educators lack the training, support and background to manage these students in traditional as well as alternative school settings. Additionally, public schools are not always current or well informed on the best practices in the field of emotional and behavioral disorders (Lewis et al, 2004). It is important that educators use research based practices proven to be effective with this population of students, whether they are educated within the mainstream or in a non-traditional setting. In a literature review conducted by Lewis, Hunter, Richter and Johnson (2004), they state that "special education needs to come together, reach consensus, and identify research-proven practices and the structures to place them and support them in the field." It is crucial that identified practices are implemented and done so in the same manner as indicated in the research in order for them to be effective. In their article, D'Angelo and Zemmick (2009) refer to current educational techniques as antiquated and stress the need to update our teaching methods based on the current trends of society and the needs of our present day learners.

Experiential Learning

One predominant theory within the realm of education and experiential learning is that of John Dewey. He created a Model of Experiential Learning (Dewey, 1938) and refers to an experiential continuum; that is experiences fall on a continuum as to whether or not they offer value to one's education. Every experience offered to a student has an impact on them, either positively or negatively. Students learn best when new ideas are connected to prior knowledge. Dewey calls this the continuity of experience. The experiences provided to students will solidify what is already learned and should influence or shape future learning. He stresses the principle of interaction which involves the intertwining of the conditions set forth by the teacher and the internal factors of the students. Teachers should have a good understanding of their students and their personal situations (Dewey, 1938). This is especially important when working with students who have emotional or behavioral issues. Knowing what is driving the current presentation of a student will assist the teacher in understanding what strategy to use. Dewey (1938) also emphasized the use of reflection which allows students a period of time to analyze an experience and derive meaning from it. Many at-risk students have processing deficits or may be pre-occupied with other issues and need time to make sense of what is presented to them.

Proponents of an experiential learning environment believe that students learn better through engaging in an experience (or participating in activities) in conjunction with the subject matter being taught. Zull (2002) states that students should be provided with chances for experiences such as field trips or role-plays. Jensen (2005) points out that these types of experiences, especially ones that involve movement or are physical, are more likely to be remembered because they create increased sensory input to the brain and activate procedural memory.

The Outdoor Classroom

A practice that has been in use for many years, with a variety of students, is instructing children within an outdoor setting. Using the outdoors in conjunction with education serves two purposes (Jelmberg & Goodman, 2008). First, the use of stimulating activities within the natural environment can be highly motivating to students and may enhance their academic achievement. Bonds between teachers and

students, when engaged in experiential or outdoor lessons, are strengthened. Traditional content areas can be integrated into the outdoors and learned experientially. "All students, including those who have experienced repeated failure and who have felt put down in traditional school settings, can see and be viewed as equal participants in a learning and discovery process" (Jelmberg & Goodman, p.10). The use of outdoor settings can be fun and inspiring. The addition of adventure activities can enhance self-esteem, trust, cooperation and social skills amongst the participants as well. A second goal of learning within the outdoors relates to self-efficacy. Jelmberg & Goodman believe that the use of outdoor education enables students to trust in their ability to plan and follow through on actions towards a goal. This is achieved within the outdoor classroom by providing multiple opportunities to succeed and fail. It is important to provide scaffolds experientially for learning and emphasize that failure only occurs when one doesn't try at all.

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders may benefit greatly from experiential interventions in conjunction with academics. This literature review attempts to identify what the research reveals regarding this subject.

Method

Literature Search and Study Selection

This author searched for studies on experiential learning or curriculum with students who have been identified as having emotional or behavioral disorders. Four major databases were searched, namely Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, ERIC and the Teacher Reference Center. The following keywords were combined to try and maximize the number of studies located: Using the connector *and*, the terms *(experiential learning or curricul*)* were combined with *student** and *(emotion* or behavio*)* and *(disorder* or disabilit* or handicap* or at risk)*. The author then added the terms, using the connector *not*, with *(teacher* or pre-service educator*)*, as well as *not* (*universit* or college*)*. The search was limited to the recent publication years of 2002-2012 and to peer-reviewed articles written in English. This attempt generated 234 raw hits. The articles were then manually sorted to specifically focus on students with emotional or behavioral issues or identified as at-risk and curricula or teaching strategies aimed to enhance their success. Any articles solely focused on students with ADHD, Autism, or learning disabled were excluded as were articles only related to measurement tools. After sorting, 33 relevant articles remained. The reference lists of the selected articles were examined but did not provide any additional articles to include in this review. The keywords *(adventure education)* were then used following the same protocol as previously followed. This generated 32 raw hits and after manually sorting, 2 additional articles were included in the literature review. The Journals of Experiential Education (2002-2011) were manually searched for additional pertinent articles and 7 more articles were included. After completing the above searches, a total of 42 articles were included in this literature review. The criteria used for final selection of articles included the following:

1. The article addressed students/participants who were identified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder or were identified as being at-risk.
2. The article addressed the use of a specific curriculum, instructional strategy or technique with the identified population described above.
3. Time range: The articles were published between the years 2002 and 2012, peer-reviewed and written in English.

Results

Descriptive features of the research are summarized in Tables 1-2 and Figures 1-2 at the end of this article. The following types of experiential curricula or instructional strategies are prevalent in the research literature.

This literature review consisted of forty-two articles ranging from the publication dates of 2002 to the present year of 2012. The amount of articles generated on this population has decreased steadily over the last ten years. During the earlier years, approximately five to six articles were written yearly, until 2005. For the period of 2006-2007 the number of articles produced dropped to four. Throughout 2008-2009, only three relevant articles were published and in the subsequent years this author located only two articles per year that related to experiential learning and students with emotional/behavioral disorders or identified as at-risk.

The majority of the articles (45%) included in this review were descriptive or persuasive in nature. Many authors summarized specific curricula or strategies that may be useful when working with students who have emotional or behavioral disorders or at-risk for these problems. Seventeen of the included articles (42%) involved the use of a quantitative study. Researchers conducted experimental, quasi-experimental or single-subject studies to determine the effects of experiential curricula or strategies on students with specific disabilities, primarily at-risk children or students diagnosed with emotional or behavioral problems. A lesser amount of articles utilized mixed methods (2%) or a qualitative approach (12%). The authors whose articles presented a research study utilized a variety of methods to collect data. A large percentage (57%) used field notes, observations, interviews or participant documentation to provide information on outcomes related to interventions. This was of importance to this author as it appeared that most researchers were interested in the experience or perspective of the participants involved in their studies. They wanted to know what worked for these students, how the students changed or thought/learned differently as a result of an intervention or the use of a specific curriculum/instructional strategy. Other sources (30%) of quantitative or qualitative data came from evaluations, tests or scales that measured specific items. A smaller percentage of data was generated from behavioral data (9%) or a combination of interviews and behavioral data (4%).

Articles were included from all geographic regions. Interestingly, the majority of the articles incorporated data or opinions from the United States (83%). A few articles focused on international areas such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Singapore, and the Czech Republic (17%). This may be due to a greater interest in the use of experiential learning within the United States or due to differing views on the identification of students with emotional or behavioral issues in other countries. More research is warranted in this area.

The keywords used for this literature review included the terms emotional or behavioral disorder or at-risk. The articles generated by these keywords involved a blend of these participants. The majority of the articles (52%) discussed the needs of children who were identified as being "at-risk" for problems such as emotional disturbances, behavioral issues, substance abuse, sexually risky activity and others issues. A smaller percentage of the articles reviewed (26%) specified a population of students who were identified with emotional or behavioral disturbances. The remaining articles referred to a mixed population (various disabilities including EBD) or a blend of general education and special education students. These results were intriguing to this author. It may be that researchers are taking a proactive stance and searching for solutions for students prior to being identified. Early intervention with strategies that work could help prevent children from becoming labeled too quickly.

Various ages of participants were referred to in the articles reviewed. Most of the articles referred to an older population of students or those in adolescence (38%). Several of the articles discussed

curricula or strategies related to either an elementary age population (21%) or pertinent to students of all ages or kindergarten through grade twelve (21%). A small percentage of the articles referred to middle school age students (10%) or did not specify an age range (10%). It was of interest to this author that the majority of the articles focused on adolescents. It would seem that the focus should be on early intervention with students at a younger age in order to enhance their ability to be successful later on in life. These results may indicate that as children grow older (and larger), their issues become more difficult to address and therefore gain more attention.

Almost half (48%) of the articles included in this review discussed curricula, strategies, or conducted research with at-risk or EBD students within a public school setting or within specialized classrooms housed in the public school. Nine out of the forty two articles (21%) involved students who were attending an alternative school specializing in children with special needs or specific to emotional and behavioral problems. A small portion of articles (10%) related to a population referred for treatment and who were participating in a therapeutic intervention specific to their needs. Other settings pertinent to this review included camps, outward bound programs, residential care (5% respectively) or were not specified (2%). These results were promising. It makes sense, given state and federal mandates, that efforts should be made to retain students with special needs within the public school setting or least restrictive environment. Researchers need to seek out effective curricula and instructional strategies that can be utilized within public schools and by all teachers.

Although all the articles included in this review were relevant to students with emotional or behavioral problems, many authors had different focuses when presenting their ideas. The targeted outcomes for each article differed and the strategies or curricula focused on specific needs of the students. The emotional and behavioral needs were the predominant focus within the articles reviewed (26%). The second most common focus for these students was the academic needs (21%). Many authors discussed strategies aimed at reducing violence (10%), enhancing social skills (10%), changing students' perceptions (10%) or impacting risky taking (10%). Other goals indicated in the articles included parenting skills (2%), self-esteem (5%), decision making (2%), spirituality (2%) or a blend of various concerns (2%). Although some of the articles addressed the academic needs of these students, this author found it interesting that the academics or learning were not the priority. In their article, Lane, Gresham and O'Shaughnessy (2002) comment "alarmingly few treatment-outcomes studies examining the efficacy of academic interventions with student with E/BD have been conducted leaving practitioners with little guidance on how to best intervene with this population" (p.511). They go on to suggest that if the academic and social emotional needs of this population are not addressed, these students may become increasingly disabled.

The majority of the articles reviewed (95%) came from an educational field of study as opposed to psychology (5%). Within education, most of the articles related to special education (33%). Many of the articles were within general education (21%) or experiential education (21%). Some of the articles, which addressed risk taking behaviors, fell within the area of health education (14%). Finally, a small percentage (5%), were specific to alternative education.

This literature review encompassed articles related to experiential learning or curricula. Interestingly, 26 out of the 42 (62%) articles actually specified the use of experiential techniques. Logically, all of the articles (7, 27%) found within the Journals of Experiential Education as well as those found through the keyword *adventure education* (2, 4%) utilized experiential learning (adventure, rock climbing, backpacking, ropes courses, visual arts, music, drama). Articles outside of that genre (17, 65%) discussed exposing these students to specific experiences to enhance their learning. These articles specified the use of excursions, service learning, videotaping, work experience, role plays, dance, caring

for others, working with elders on a garden project, caring for computerized infants, vocational skills training, involvement in real life scenarios and the use of technology in conjunction with academics. The remaining articles (16, 38%) made no mention of experiential techniques.

Of the 26 articles that discussed experiential techniques, 16 (62%) involved a research study as opposed to being descriptive in nature. Within the group of 16 research studies, 14 (88%) indicated successful outcomes related to the use of curricula or instructional strategies incorporating experiential techniques. There were 2 (13%) outliers, one representing a study related to aspects of a program and the other indicating no difference between the experimental and control groups yet measured some success within the experimental group. These results are hopeful and demonstrate that the use of experiential techniques result in successful outcomes for students with emotional or behavioral disorders or at-risk.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to review the research articles, over the past decade, related to the use of experiential curricula or instructional strategies used with students identified as being at-risk or as having an emotional or behavioral disorder. The results of this review indicate that there has been a consistent decline in the amount of articles produced over the past ten years and, of those that were published, a little over half indicated the use of experiential interventions. Only sixteen research studies were found utilizing experiential techniques with this population. Most of these were conducted within wilderness or outdoor settings. It is important to note that the majority of these studies indicated positive outcomes related to the use of experiential techniques (i.e. enhanced self-esteem, increased connectedness to others, improved social skills). These are promising results indicating that the use of experiential techniques can be effective in treating/teaching students identified with emotional or behavioral disorders.

It is significant to mention that most of articles included in this review addressed the needs of adolescents who have been struggling for a while (as opposed to younger students) indicating reactive interventions. On the other hand, most articles pertained to an at-risk population (as opposed to already identified as having a disorder) indicating a proactive approach.

A considerable number of the articles discussed curricula or strategies to address a specific issue (violence prevention, parenting, and social skills) as well as focusing on the emotional or behavioral needs of these students. To a lesser degree, articles addressed the academic or learning needs of this population. There is a need for further research in the area of experiential interventions and academics.

Implications for Practice

The majority of the articles reviewed indicated the need for further research in the area of emotional and behavioral disorders. It is clear to this author that further research is required in order to identify specific experiential curricula or instructional strategies that are proven effective with this population and can be implemented within the public school setting in a feasible manner. Quality evidence-based research is necessary to inform practitioners of specific curricula and instructional strategies confirmed to be most useful with this population of learners.

Limitations

It is important to note that his paper did not represent an exhaustive review of all the literature related to experiential education. The articles selected were meant to illustrate the nature of experiential practices utilized with students identified as EBD or at-risk over the past ten years. Other pertinent articles and research studies may have been produced prior to 2002. The use of specific keywords and criteria may have led to the exclusion of additional relevant articles. An ancestral search was conducted but may have resulted in some articles or texts being overlooked. It is recommended that an extensive review of all references be conducted in order to include all relevant literature. The methods section was provided to a search partner in order to verify selection process.

Conclusion

Results of this literature review indicated that eighty-eight percent of the research studies utilizing experiential techniques showed positive outcomes. This author believes that using experiential learning can benefit students who have been identified as having an emotional behavioral disorder. Experiential learning facilitates engagement between teachers and learners, fostering relationships and emotional connectedness. Experiential learning provides an active approach to academics and stimulates areas of the brain associated with memory. The use of play and movement associated with academic lessons is a strategy which may be beneficial for younger students (e.g. gardening, role plays, drama, dance, building models, playing with dolls/action figures, cooking). Vocational opportunities, school to work connections, team building activities, adventure activities, creating projects and mentoring younger students are valuable experiences for older students. Field trips are wonderful at any age. Experiential learning builds on prior learning and creates a foundation for future learning.

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Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of Literature Review

Descriptive Features	All Studies- 42 (100%)
Time of Publication	
2002	6 (17%)
2003	5 (12%)
2004	6 (17%)
2005	4 (10%)
2006	4 (10%)
2007	5 (12%)
2008	3 (7%)
2009	3 (7%)
2010	2 (5%)
2011	2 (5%)
2012	2 (5%)
Field of Study	
Education	40 (95%)
Special education	14 (33%)
General education	9 (21%)
Alternative education	2 (5%)
Experiential education	9 (21%)
Health education	6 (14%)
Psychology	2 (5%)
Methodology	
Qualitative	5 (12%)
Quantitative	17 (40%)
Mixed Methods	1 (2%)
Descriptive/Persuasive	19 (45%)
Type of Data	Total research studies- 23
Surveys	1 (4%)
Evaluations, tests, scales	7 (30%)
Behavioral data	2 (9%)
Field notes, interviews, observations, Questionnaires, activity sheets, self-reports	13 (57%)
Combination (interview & behavioral data)	1 (4%)
Geographic Region	
United States	35 (83%)
International	6 (17%)
Both U.S. & international	1 (2%)

Setting

Public school/Special classroom	20 (48%)
Alternative school	9 (21%)
Treatment program	4 (10%)
Residential care	2 (5%)
Camp	2 (5%)
Outward bound	2 (5%)
Charter school	1 (2%)
Not specified	2 (5%)

Focus of curriculum or strategy

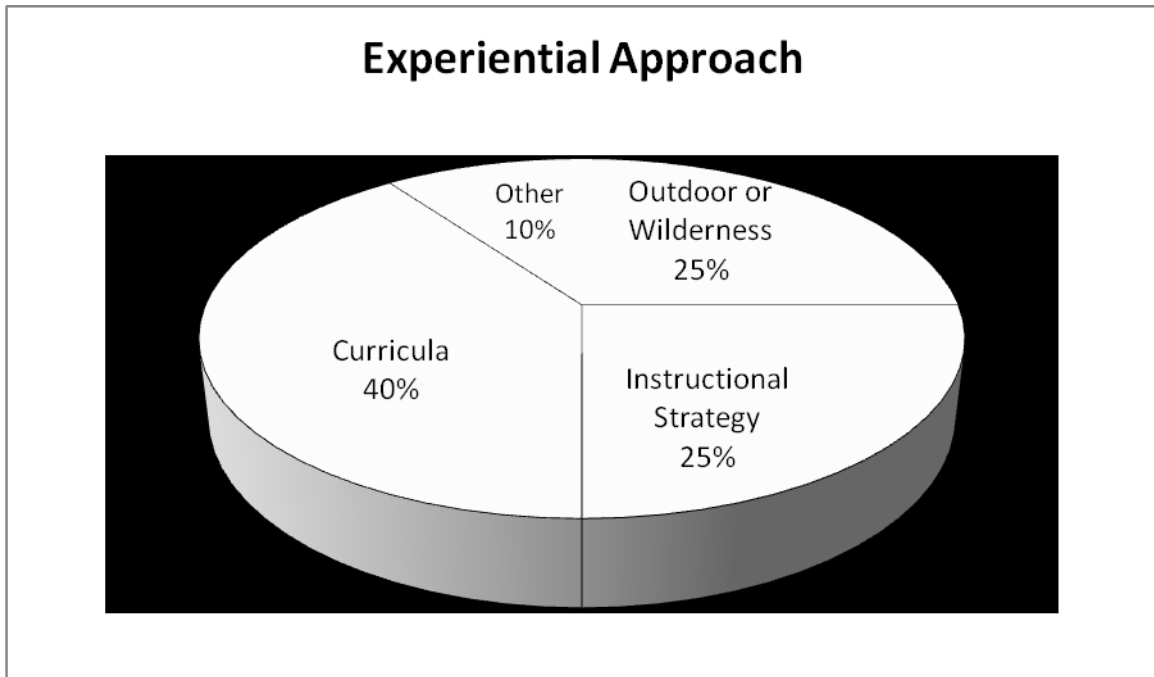|	
Violence prevention	4 (10%)
Social skills	4 (10%)
Perception	4 (10%)
Academics	9 (21%)
Parenting skills	1 (2%)
Emotional or behavioral regulation	11 (26%)
Self-concept	2 (5%)
Decision making	1 (2%)
Risk taking (substance, sex)	4 (10%)
Spirituality	1 (2%)
Mixed	1 (2%)

Table 2: Experiential Techniques and Research Study Outcomes

Descriptive Feature	All Studies- 42 (100%)
Experiential technique used	26 (62%)
	All Studies- 26 (100%)
Research study conducted	16 (62%)
Positive outcomes related to experiential techniques	14 (88%)

Note: Experiential techniques are described in the text and include but are not limited to the use of ropes courses, dance, drama, and wilderness activities.

Student Disabilities

EBD
12%

General & Special
Education
58%

At-Risk
25%

Multiple
disabilities
5%
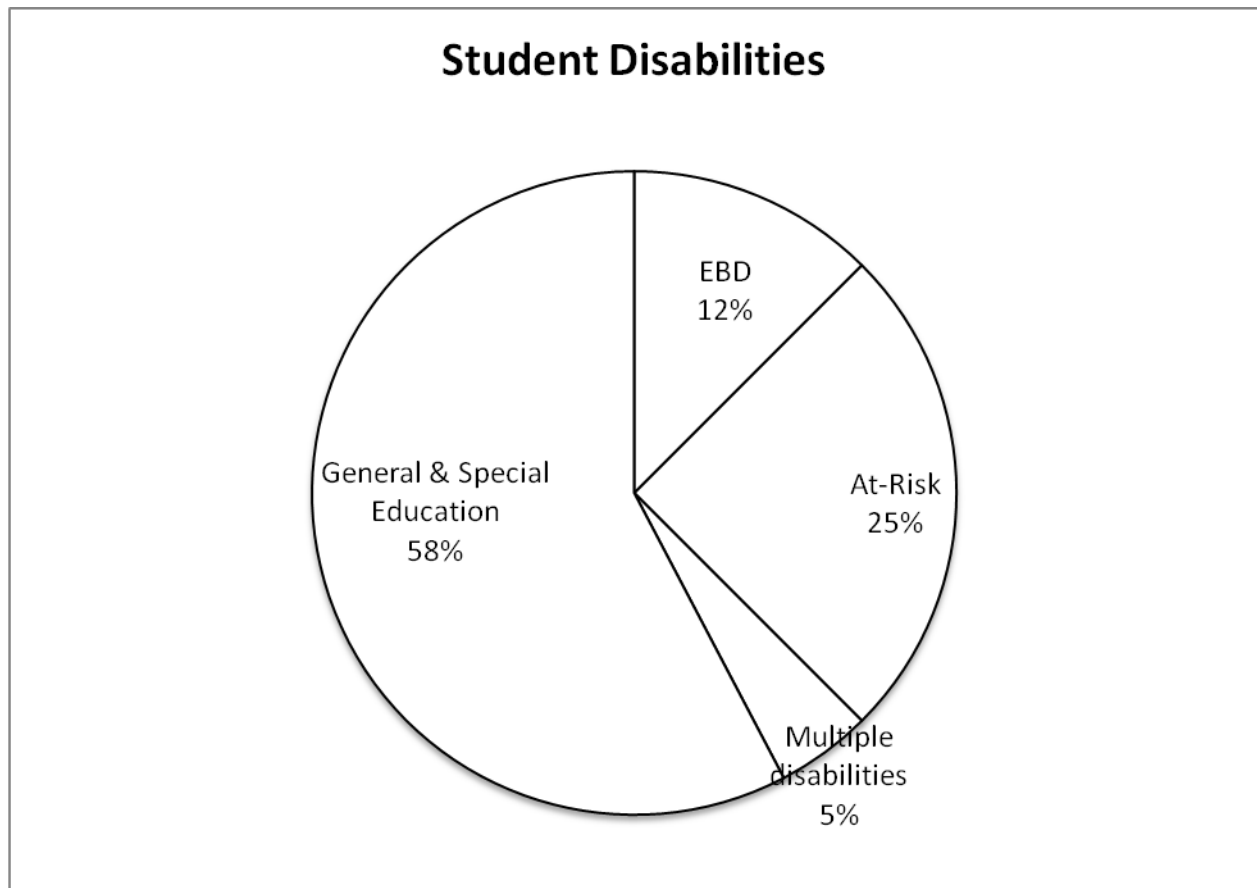
Figure 1: Proportion of disabilities represented in articles reviewed.

Experiential Approach

Figure 2: Type of experiential approach indicated in articles reviewed.

Outdoor/Wilderness– ropes courses, rock climbing, backpacking, gardening;
Instructional Strategies– modifications on work, breaking down tasks, allowing for movement breaks;
Curricula– specific programming/curriculum utilized for particular purpose;
Other– use of drama, arts, music and dance.
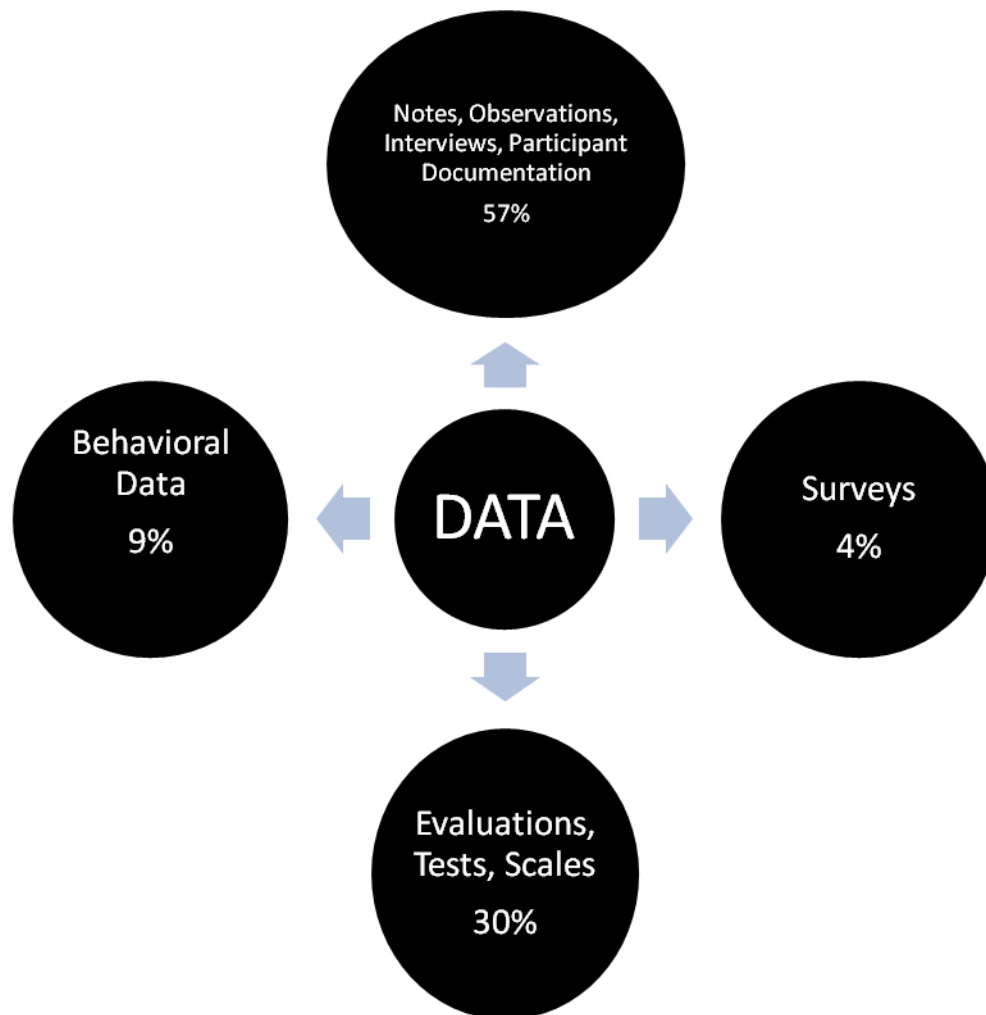
Figure 3: Data sources used in research studies included in literature review.

* **JOAN BREAULT** is a Doctoral student at Rivier University. She is employed as a supervisor at a private school in Massachusetts servicing students with disabilities. She is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and Certified School Adjustment Counselor in Massachusetts as well as a Certified School Guidance Counselor in New Hampshire. Joan has over 26 years working with children and adolescents who have emotional and behavioral challenges. She has a passion for this population and enjoys utilizing experiential methods to engage these learners. Joan is married and has twin boys.