

Social Validity Assessment of Job Satisfaction, Resources, and Support Among Educational Service Practitioners for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Alexis Pittenger · Carolyn Barahona ·
Rachel N. S. Cavalari · Veronique Parent ·
James K. Luiselli · Melanie DuBard

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Abstract We conducted social validity assessment with educational service practitioners ($N=46$) to document their satisfaction and acceptance of resources, supports, roles, and responsibilities at a specialized school for children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The findings revealed several positive ratings as well as other endorsements of programmatic needs. These assessment results informed recommendations for performance improvement and positive staff perceptions. The study illustrates application of social validity assessment to systems issues affecting practitioner training, attitudes, and professional development within human services and behavioral healthcare organizations.

Keywords Social validity assessment · Satisfaction · Organizational support · Intellectual and developmental disabilities

A. Pittenger
The Kennedy Krieger Institute, 1750 East Fairmount Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21231, USA

C. Barahona
Butterfly Effects, LLC, 500 Fairway Dr, Ste, 102, Deerfield Beach, FL 33441, USA

R. N. S. Cavalari
Binghamton University, State University of New York,
PO Box 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902-6000, USA

V. Parent
Lynch School of Education, Boston College, Campion Hall,
140 Commonwealth Avenue, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA

J. K. Luiselli (✉) · M. DuBard
May Institute, 41 Pacella Park Drive, Randolph, MA 02368, USA
e-mail: jluiselli@mayinstitute.org

Many direct-service practitioners for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) report high levels of stress and burnout (Gray-Stanley et al. 2010; Hastings et al. 2004; Mutkins et al. 2011). Addressing the needs of individuals who have significant learning and behavior challenges is one source of occupational distress. As well, research suggests that practitioner stress and burnout are impacted by factors such as (a) role conflict, ambiguity, and overload, (b) limited involvement in decision making, (c) lack of knowledge, and (d) inadequate resources (Buckhalt et al. 1990; Donat 2001; Dyer and Quine 1998; Fimian 1984; Hatton 1993; Rose et al. 2010). Notably, dissatisfaction among employees contributes to poor performance on the job, including high rates of absenteeism, poor procedural fidelity, and conflicts with peers (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber 2011). As such, human services and behavioral healthcare organizations must be keenly aware of staff attitudes about and perceptions of their work experiences.

Social validity assessment is one approach for measuring satisfaction and acceptability by IDD practitioners (Kazdin 1977; Wolf 1978). Typically, assessment focuses on the procedures that constitute instructional and behavior support plans. For example, teachers in a classroom or staff in a residential home might be asked to rate their satisfaction with procedures that were intended to teach a student new skills or reduce problem behaviors. Social validity assessment is usually conducted by having practitioners complete a questionnaire or survey which poses statements such as, "The prompting procedure was easy to implement." For each statement, a respondent endorses one choice option according to a Likert-type scale (e.g., 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree or disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree). The resulting social validity data allows administrators and supervisors to revise procedures so that they are more "user friendly" and better take into account the strengths and weaknesses of those responsible for implementation.

Social validity assessment has also been applied to systems evaluations within IDD service settings. For example, Luiselli et al. (2010) described a multicomponent training program for teaching applied behavior analysis knowledge competencies to 35 direct-care staff at a community-based habilitation setting serving adults with IDD. Social validity assessment in this study had participants rate their satisfaction with the goals, content, methods, and outcome of training. Similarly, Strohmeier et al. (2014) administered a social validity assessment questionnaire to 44 special education practitioners at a school for children with autism and related developmental disabilities to solicit their opinions about training and supervisory methods for improving intervention integrity (DiGennaro Reed and Coddling 2011; Minor et al. 2014). The results suggested several staff-endorsed implementation strategies that could be adopted at the school.

In line with prior research, the present study involved social validity assessment of job satisfaction, resources, and supports by educational service practitioners for students with IDD. We first describe construction of a questionnaire that targeted four domains integral to staff performance at a specialized school. Next, we present the practitioner ratings of satisfaction and acceptability relative to specific items within each domain. Finally, the findings are summarized by discussing implications for training, supervision, and added resources at the school. This study illustrates systems-level application of social validity assessment for identifying and improving service components within human services and behavioral healthcare organizations.

Method

Participants and Setting

The participants were classroom staff ($N=55$) at a day and residential school serving children and youth with autism spectrum disorder and related developmental disabilities. The staff was composed of primary teachers and teacher-assistants within 13 classrooms at the school. Among the participant sample, 70 % were female and 30 % were male between 18 and 45 years old. Approximately 82 % of participants had a college undergraduate degree, 50 % had worked in the field of developmental disabilities from 3 to 5 years, and 65 % had been employed at the school between 0 and 2 years.

The school provided a full-year specialized program for approximately 120 students from 6 to 22 years old. Students attended classrooms 6 h each weekday and many of them lived in community-based group homes. The school followed an applied behavior analysis service model that addressed academic, daily living, self-care, communication, recreational, and vocational skills. Students also received comprehensive behavior support through individualized and group intervention plans. All staff at the school, including the participants in this study, completed pre-employment orientation training in the areas of basic health care, physical management, mandated reporting, cultural diversity, and principles of applied behavior analysis. Most of this training was repeated during annual recertification sessions.

The organizational structure of the residential school had a program director, several operational administrators, a family services department, a senior clinical director, and three clinical supervisors. The clinicians were responsible for overseeing educational and behavior support services including preparation of written plans, coordinating review meetings, evaluating outcome, and supervising classroom and group home staff among other activities.

Questionnaire Construction

We constructed the participant questionnaire by first reviewing the extant literature concerning assessment of staff satisfaction and acceptability (e.g., Buckhalt et al. 1990; Dyer and Quine 1998; Hatton 1993). Based on this review, the questionnaire was divided into four categories to reflect major themes in the literature. These categories were labelled *Resources*, *Roles and Responsibilities*, *Sense of Support*, and *Overall Satisfaction*. In total, the questionnaire had 40 positively and negatively worded statements that the participants endorsed according to a 4-point Likert-type scale (1: strongly agree, 2: agree, 3: disagree, 4: strongly disagree). We included negative wording in the questionnaire to balance the distribution of statements and avoid creating a bias toward positive ratings. The questionnaire was limited to 40 statements to facilitate participation and timely completion. Four open-ended questions were also added at the end of the questionnaire for participants to provide additional feedback and suggestions about their job, work environment, and desired performance incentives.

The *Resources* category of the questionnaire included 11 statements such as, “My classroom is organized with easy access to teaching materials” (positive) and “Most classroom materials are broken, old, or damaged” (negative). There were ten statements in the *Roles and Responsibilities* category, for example, “I am aware of and understand how my work performance is assessed” (positive) and “There is not enough time in the

regular workday to do everything that is expected of me” (negative). The *Sense of Support* category contained 12 statements such as “I received sufficient training to perform my job safely” (positive) and “I do not feel respected by my supervisors” (negative). Finally, some of the seven statements in the *Overall Satisfaction* category were “My school provides several staff incentives” (positive) and “The incentives and rewards provided by my school do not change how I feel about my job” (negative).

Questionnaire Distribution and Data Computation

We explained the purpose of the questionnaire to the participants during a group meeting. They were informed that completing the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. Following the meeting, questionnaires were distributed to the classrooms, requesting that the participants return them to a central location in the school one day later. After distribution, 46 of 55 participants returned completed questionnaires (response rate=83.6 %).

Data computation entailed deriving the average numerical rating for each statement within the four domains comprising the social validity assessment questionnaire by summing the numerical ratings per statement and dividing by the number of respondents. For consistent data analysis, the negatively worded statements in the questionnaire were reverse-coded into their positively worded opposite form in order to have higher scores represent higher levels of satisfaction.

With the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, two coders organized the responses into three categories: positive elements on-the-job, challenging-dissatisfying elements on-the job, and desired performance incentives. Common topics were extracted from the most to the least frequently written responses among these three categories. Only topics that both coders identified were included.

Results

Figure 1 shows that the highest satisfaction rating was for *Resources* ($M=2.1$), followed by *Sense of Support* ($M=2.2$), *Roles and Responsibilities* ($M=2.4$), and *Overall*

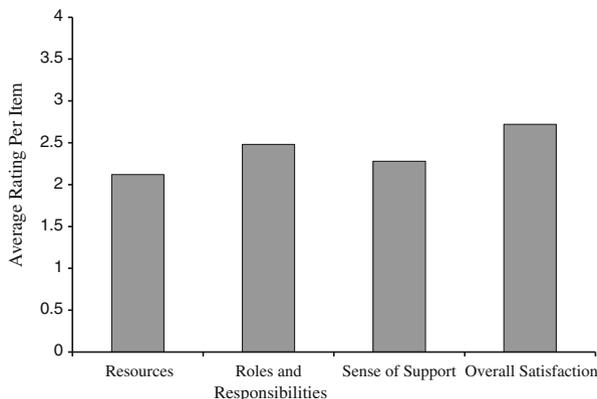


Fig. 1 Average Participant rating per category [1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly disagree]

Table 1 Average ratings for *resources* category [1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree]

Statement	Average rating
Required forms are located and organized in a central area of the classroom ^a	1.73
My classroom is organized with easy access to teaching materials	1.82
My school provides a variety of toys, games, and related supplies	2.01
The inventory and ordering lists contain adequate amounts of food and objects	2.02
My classroom work areas are designed to minimize student problem behaviors	2.05
The information about my students' educational programs is easy to understand ^a	2.08
My school provides the resources I need to support the educational needs of students	2.16
I am able to find what I need for my classroom on the inventory and ordering lists ^a	2.16
My school provides sufficient resources to maintain a clean classroom environment	2.24
My classroom teaching materials are new or intact ^a	2.39
I have time to prepare and organize my materials before students arrive	2.67

^a Designates initially negatively worded item on the survey

Satisfaction ($M=2.7$). More specifically, Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 present the average participant rating for each domain statement. In the *Resources* category (Table 1), the participants rated most positively their access to teaching materials and required forms. They rated less favorably the condition of teaching materials and the time available for preparing their classrooms before students arrived. The *Roles and Responsibilities* category (Table 2) indicated that the participants were most satisfied with the behavioral approach at the school and knowing their job-related roles and responsibilities. They were relatively less satisfied with being able to fulfill job expectations, stability of staff roles, and being recognized for work efforts. In the domain of *Sensor of Support* (Table 3) the participants had the most positive ratings for knowing what to do when staff or students were injured and feeling safe in their classrooms. The less satisfied

Table 2 Average ratings for *roles and responsibilities* category [1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Disagree, 4=Strongly Disagree]

Statement	Average rating
I believe that a behavioral approach to instruction is necessary for my students	1.58
I know what my role is and the responsibilities related to my job	1.70
I rarely call out sick or leave early due to the stress of my job ^a	1.71
I am aware of and understand how my work performance is assessed	2.40
I receive consistent information from two or more people about my job ^a	2.64
My views are considered when making educational decisions for my classroom	2.69
I have sufficient opportunities to learn professional skills from my colleagues	2.78
I am usually recognized for the effort I put forth in my work	3.05
There is enough time in a regular workday to do everything that is expected of me ^a	3.13
The roles and staff rarely change ^a	3.26

^a Designates initially negatively worded item on the survey

Table 3 Average ratings for *sense of support* category [1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree]

Statement	Average rating
I know what to do when a staff person or student is injured	0.67
I feel safe around the students in my classroom ^a	2.0
I received sufficient training to perform my job safely	2.04
I think physical management techniques are safe for staff and students**	2.12
My supervisor frequently observes my classroom ^a	2.24
I know that school administrators care about my safety	2.26
My supervisor follows up with me in a timely manner	2.32
I feel physically safe in my work environment	2.33
I feel comfortable discussing school-wide issues with my supervisor	2.45
I feel respected by my supervisors ^a	2.50
I receive helpful and constructive feedback from my supervisors	2.64
I feel that the administration at my school is approachable and helpful	2.66

^a Designates initially negatively worded item on the survey

ratings were being respected by supervisors and believing that school administrators were approachable and helpful. As for *Overall Satisfaction* (Table 4), the most positive ratings were for job satisfaction affecting performance and less satisfied ratings for incentives provided throughout the school year and achieving professional goals.

Overall, responses to the open-ended questions (Table 5) tended to support the quantified ratings on the questionnaire. For example, the participants reported the most positive elements of their job to be caring for the educational and behavioral needs of children with disabilities and the support they received from co-workers. The most challenging elements of their job were occasional difficult relationships with supervisors, inconsistent communication and information-sharing within the organization, and limited employment benefits. The most desired performance incentives that the participants reported were social activities, staff recognition events, and special “treats” such as free lunch on particularly difficult days.

Table 4 Average ratings for *overall satisfaction* category [1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree]

Statement	Average rating
I believe that my level of job satisfaction affects my performance	1.84
I enjoy the incentives offered by my school	2.34
Overall, I am satisfied with my job	2.50
The incentives and rewards provided by my school improve staff morale	2.89
The incentives and rewards provided by my school affect how I feel about my job ^a	2.93
My school provides several staff incentives throughout the year	3.14
My school provides sufficient rewards for achieving professional goals ^a	3.40

^a Designates initially negatively worded item on the survey

Table 5 Common topics identified through open-ended questions

Categories and topics
Positive elements on-the-job
Educating students with intellectual and developmental disabilities
Support of co-workers
Work flexibility
Staff-to-student ratios in classrooms
Access to consultation for behavioral intervention
Applied behavior analysis orientation
Challenging-dissatisfying elements on-the-job
Salary
Being able to approach supervisors
Limited communication within the organization
Staffing shortages and high attrition
Desired performance incentives
Special parties with food
Social events
Raffles and gift cards
Staff recognition
Opportunities for professional growth
Salary increases

Discussion

We conducted social validity assessment with direct-care practitioners to identify their satisfaction with and acceptance of resources, roles, responsibilities, and support at a specialized school. Our findings revealed that the participants consistently endorsed several positive service components as well as some areas with less favorable ratings. In summary, the participants were most satisfied with the behavioral orientation of educational services, generalized classroom organization, access to materials, role responsibilities, and working in a safe environment. They reported less satisfaction with the time available for student preparation, quality of materials, performance incentives, opportunity for professional growth, and supervisor-staff relationships. As discussed below, these results pointed to several areas that could be addressed through strategic performance improvement projects (Luiselli 2013). Also, our findings were consistent with previous staff satisfaction research (Donat 2001; Dyer and Quine 1998; Fimian 1984; Hatton 1993; Rose et al. 2010).

Upon completing the social validity assessment, we presented several programmatic recommendations to school administrators and clinicians. Concerning classroom materials, we suggested that inventory order lists be created and checked regularly to replace instructional objects, toys, and food items that were either damaged, obsolete, or depleted. Another recommendation was to establish a centralized location in the school for sharing materials and supplies among classrooms. Routine supervisory observations and checks could also be scheduled to improve several facets of classroom organization (Schmidt et al. 2013).

Another set of program recommendations had to do with staff roles, professional development, and recognition, three areas that emerged with high priority from the social validity assessment. We advised that school administrators meet with and notify staff about proposed and confirmed changes in school personnel, including new positions and pending revisions to the population. In effect, there needed to be greater school-wide communication about staff positions and assignments. For supervision and support, some of the less satisfactory ratings from the questionnaire could be addressed by (a) conducting meetings to discuss professional growth opportunities, (b) implementing supervision training workshops that teach critical skills (e.g., observing, communicating, and delivering performance feedback to staff), (c) evaluating achievement of personal performance objectives, and (d) having staff attend team-building seminars, receive appreciation notices, and offer input through a “comments-suggestions box.”

The results of the social validity assessment also indicated that the participants were not uniformly satisfied with existing incentives at the school. On this matter we recommended to administrators that staff help create a “reward” program that reinforces target goals such as exemplary attendance and exceeding classroom expectations related to student learning and department. Furthermore, assessment findings suggested that staff identify the types of rewards to be included in such a program, for example, gift cards, social events, monetary bonuses, flex-scheduling, and the like. Finally, we proposed that professional growth among staff could be achieved by having them organize and lead special training sessions with peers on a variety of valued professional topics.

The combination of quantified measures and open-ended questions is frequently used in clinical, educational, and program evaluation research (Cooper et al. 2007; Kazdin 2003; Seigler 2000). Such qualitative information can enhance social validity assessment by providing an opportunity to compare response patterns with rating metrics. Common topics identified in open-ended questions may also elicit complementary and more specific information about the variables being studied (e.g., which resources are most helpful or which incentives would staff prefer?) (Kazdin 2003). Additionally, allowing respondents input beyond the statements within a formal questionnaire may garner useful information that otherwise would not be documented.

The study was limited by a relatively small sample size at a single educational services setting. Also, the results were highly dependent on the resources, supports, and professional development options at this site—hence, our findings may not generalize to other schools. Perhaps the chief weakness was that we were unable to implement some of the programmatic recommendations that emerged from assessment. It would have been informative, for example, to determine whether the participants changed their views about resources, supports, and satisfaction following revised and newly implemented practices by school administrators.

Finally, the process of conducting social validity assessment, independent of results, is a positive step towards supporting direct-service practitioners. That is, by routinely asking staff about their attitudes and perceptions, organizational leaders acknowledge the value of input from employees. The greatest effect occurs when all facets of the organization are able to respond to this input by working collaboratively to improve conditions, service delivery, performance, and overall satisfaction.

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