

EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS

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ABSTRACT

Because of the large number of students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) being mainstreamed into general education classrooms, it is important and essential for teachers to learn effective practices to educate this group of students. Some methods that have proven to be effective are increasing praise and student opportunities to respond to academic requests. Additional procedures include setting up the classroom in an organized manner and improving the education preservice teachers receive. While research has identified these as helpful practices, few teachers actually employ these strategies in the classroom, which has led to high burnout rates among teachers of students with EBD. Preparing teachers on how to educate students with EBD will lead to less teacher stress and increased opportunities for students with EBD to be successful.

With the rise of the inclusion movement, more and more students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) are being placed in general education classrooms where they are taught primarily by general educators. While research has proven that these students are fully capable of being successful in this environment (Cook, Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003), this group of students tends to have the lowest grade-point average of all students with disabilities, with approximately 50% failing one or more

classes per year (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). Additionally, Sutherland and Wehby (2001) argue students with EBD have high dropout rates, and even higher unemployment rates among those who do complete school. Several strategies for improving education exist to help students with EBD have a greater chance for success. Some of these ideas include increasing praise and student opportunities to respond to academic requests, setting up the classroom in an organized manner, and improving the training and education preservice teachers receive in educating

students with EBD. Due to the large number of mainstreamed students with EBD, it is not only important but absolutely essential that teachers begin learning how to effectively educate this unique group of students.

According to Wehby, Lane, and Falk (2003), emotionally disturbed refers to students who exhibit some type of inappropriate behavior that adversely influences their education and ability to achieve. Students with EBD are characterized by an inability to build acceptable relationships in their home and school environment, inappropriate behavior under normal circumstances, and/or a persistent mood of unhappiness. In academic situations, students with EBD are inclined to act out, frequently fall off-task, and defy rules. Good and Brophy (as cited in Gunter, Coutinho, & Cade, 2002) indicate that students spend 70% of the school day doing independent work. During this time students with EBD have difficulty with social behaviors and staying on task. Because of the frequency of these behaviors, teachers often become frustrated when handling problematic situations. In response to their frustration, teachers usually provide less instruction for students who are disruptive, instead of helping them cope and succeed in school (Wehby et al., 2003). Additionally, Sutherland and Wehby (2001) assert that there is a strong inverse relationship between problematic behavior and instruction. The teacher usually attributes higher rates of student misconduct with lower rates of instruction.

A significant amount of research in educating students with EBD has focused on the rates of Opportunities To Respond to academic requests (OTR). An effective method of educating students with disabilities revolves around the teacher providing a significant number of occasions for students to respond to questions

during a lesson. This strategy allows for students' active participation in class, leading to fewer behavior problems and more retention of information. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has established effective rates of OTR ranging from four to six responses per minute with 80% accuracy to 8 to 12 responses per minute with 90% accuracy, depending on the material being taught. However, descriptive research indicates that most teachers of students with EBD rarely provide adequate OTR (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). In their review of the literature related to OTR and students with EBD, Sutherland and Wehby examined the effects of increased OTR on the education of students with EBD. The research indicated that increased rates of OTR resulted in increased educational outcomes, increased task management, and decreased inappropriate and disruptive behavior of students with EBD. An additional study by Sutherland, Wehby, and Yoder (2002) examined the relationship between OTR and teacher praise. This study confirmed the results in Sutherland and Wehby's article that increased OTR does lead to increased academic achievement and decreased disruptive behavior. Moreover, Sutherland et al. (2002) discovered that teachers who praise students frequently provide high rates of OTR, and teachers who seldom praise students have low rates of OTR. Consequently, increasing OTR provides teachers with more opportunities to praise students. These two strategies prove to be effective methods of helping students with EBD achieve academically while minimizing the disruptive behavior that often occurs with this group of students. These findings indicate that the current trend of teachers ignoring and providing less instruction for students with EBD, who exhibit undesired behavior(s), can significantly inhibit their chances at suc-

cess. Therefore, educators need to focus heavily on implementing these strategies into their classroom in order to increase opportunities for students with EBD to succeed.

Besides the alterations educators can make in their teaching styles, teachers can also institute specific classroom management strategies that have been proven to lead to increased rates of success in students with EBD (Gunter et al., 2002). These strategies include establishing and posting five rules and the consequences of breaking these rules where all students can see them, designing the classroom to increase interactions between the teacher and student, and setting up a token economy to assist in behavior management. Token economies, where fake money is awarded for positive behavior and exchanged for tangible items such as food or playtime, have received a significant amount of support. The positive results are indicative of success for all students, not just those with EBD (Cook et al., 2003; Gunter et al., 2002). Furthermore, Cook et al. highly recommend self-monitoring and class wide peer tutoring, both leading to increased on-task behavior and academic engagement. However, neither Cook et al. nor Gunter et al. detail how to implement these strategies in the classroom. While they list what has been proven to work, they provide few strategies or suggestions as to where to begin and how to establish such a system.

When instructing students with EBD on academic subjects, research suggests educators should teach new material through direct, teacher-led instruction and provide opportunities to practice learned skills through independent seatwork. However, in order to keep students with EBD from becoming discouraged during independent work time, Gunter et al. (2002) recommend giving students one task at a time, such as one worksheet

rather than a packet of worksheets. In addition, teachers need to be careful to select work that is neither too hard nor too easy for students because students with EBD will often exhibit disruptive behavior in order to stop working. When this disruptive behavior begins, teachers usually interrupt the class in order to terminate the problem behavior, which leads the disruptive behavior to be reinforced by the continual avoidance of work. Thus, teachers should be aware of their students' abilities and assign work that is doable, yet challenging.

While the research has suggested several strategies to minimize disruptive behavior of students with EBD, seemingly, very few educators actually incorporate these strategies into their daily practice (Wehby et al., 2003). Without these strategies, educators might be failing to manage these students, and this is evidenced by the high burnout rates that teachers of students with EBD exhibit. Wehby et al. (2003) hypothesize the frequent burnout rate is related to the lack of teacher preparation during preservice years. What is yet to be answered is why teachers fail to employ evidence-based strategies as opposed to those lacking effectiveness. Most preservice educators receive instruction on managing anti-social behavior but learn little about effective academic instruction. This may be one reason why teachers do not use proven strategies in their classrooms. Unfortunately, most teachers may not have been taught specific strategies to use and how to implement them.

Furthermore, most students with EBD are often educated by teachers who are not certified in EBD (Wehby et al., 2003). With the emergence of the inclusion movement, the opportunity for students with EBD to only be educated by special educators who are certified in EBD is dwindling. This is partly due to the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA). According to IDEA, all individuals between the ages of three and twenty-one have the right to a free, appropriate public education despite the severity of the disability the person may have. Another mandate of IDEA is the right for students with disabilities to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), meaning children with disabilities must be educated in as normal an environment as possible, most often with their nondisabled classmates (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). For many students with EBD, the LRE is in the general education classroom with a general education instructor. However, general educators often do not receive enough training in EBD, become stressed when handling problematic behaviors demonstrated by students with EBD, and tend to quit early in their career.

A study by Nelson (2001) examined stress levels of teachers whose students have EBD. Prior to Nelson's study, research had indicated a definite relationship between occupational stress and job satisfaction. Nelson concluded from his research that teachers who were confident in their abilities to handle externalizing behaviors of students with EBD and had a good relationship with their colleagues were under little stress in their job. This was the general consensus of most of the participants. Nelson's study, however, reviewed mostly older, experienced teachers, while in actuality most teachers of students with EBD are young and inexperienced. Therefore, Nelson's research is controversial because it is not an adequate representation of the teachers who typically educate students with EBD.

Due to time constraints, it is difficult for the undergraduate curriculum to fully accommodate the needs of preservice teachers. Therefore, most future educators receive minimal training on special

education topics, including EBD. For example, at Indiana University, general elementary education majors have only one class to prepare them for teaching students with various special needs. However, the research discussed here coincides heavily with what has been talked about in Indiana University education class K305, Teaching Exceptional Learners. Because of the nature of K305 and the amount of material to be covered, this class can only briefly discuss special education issues, and therefore cannot provide future teachers with all the information they need to be an effective educator of students with special needs. However, with the increase in mainstreaming students with special needs into the general education setting, it is likely teachers will be forced to educate students with special needs early in their career. As a result, future educators need to dedicate themselves to exploring research and effective teaching strategies for students with all types of disabilities, not just EBD.

In conclusion, effective education for students with EBD reaches far beyond understanding the internalizing and externalizing characteristics of this unique group of students. Just because educators can properly handle and minimize disruptive behavior often exhibited by students with EBD does not mean that these students will automatically be given opportunities to be successful. Rather, teachers need a combination of academic instruction and classroom management strategies to establish a classroom environment conducive to learning. Further research needs to explore these aspects together as well, because current research focuses on either classroom management or academic instruction. In addition, it would be beneficial to continue research on burnout rates and stress among teachers of students with EBD because, as stated previously, there are discrepancies in this area.

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