Creating a positive classroom setting is exciting for teachers. At the beginning of the school year, before even meeting the students, anticipation mounts and teachers begin to consider every possible detail. The event is much like that of arranging a party. First, the host must consider the environment. She selects the colors, the place settings, and images to post, the seating arrangements, and the visual effects to enhance the setting for all those attending. She also thinks about who will be seated next to each other and considers the structure or flow of the party—when will the band begin to play? And when will the guest of honor make a toast?

Second, unless everyone is aware of her role, a party can be uncomfortable for both the host and the attendees. The primary objective of the party is for everyone to learn more about one another. The host must consider her own role in arranging the party. Will she take the lead and facilitate mingling among those attending while remaining on the periphery of the small groups? Will a best friend or family member be on hand to share in the lofty burden of maintaining a successful event? Or will she want to be the center of the party? And what role should the members of the party take on? Clear, specific details could be described on the invitation—what to bring, what to wear, and the timeframe for the party. Expectations lead to minimal surprises—communicating clearly will govern a successful evening.

Finally, the host considers the food to serve the guests. These choices are endless, and a considerable amount of time is required to learn all the various selections in addition to the essential items that everyone will need to access. Once the host understands the comprehensive list of vendors, she makes a selection after considering each individual's needs. Some may prefer seafood, others may prefer spicy selections or light finger foods. So, the host differentiates according to the preferred eating "style." A stand-up or sit-down event? Plastic dinnerware? Fine china?

And the most obvious preplanning component for a party is to make a list of everyone to invite. How are they selected? The host presumably has a positive relationship with everyone attending her engaging party. However, when those attending are given the option to bring one selected "guest," the host's ability to be proactive in achieving an ideal guest list is affected. The unexpected may drift in, and if so the host may have a nagging concern about the possibility of an unfamiliar guest challenging her harmonious environment. The dynamic will certainly be altered, and some of those attending may be unable to meet the objective of the party. What does the host do? What does a teacher do to maintain a positive learning environment while still supporting a student with an emotional and/or behavioral concern?
We can never fully prepare for the unexpected—be it a party event or a classroom event. Teacher preparation programs provide preservice teachers with evidence-based teaching strategies, skills of behavior management, and various field experiences. The greatest learning however, is acquired the very first year of instruction in the teacher's own classroom. Teaching students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders (EBD) may prove to be the most challenging for preservice teachers. However, when teachers begin to take a proactive role in shaping their perceptions and subsequent behaviors toward a student with EBD, looking closely for the student hiding underneath these behaviors, a positive learning environment and a positive student-teacher relationship ensues. One cannot exist without the other.

The supervision of novice teachers in the field illuminates four considerations that may improve the way we think about students with EBD as members of our positive learning environment: reflection, relationships, roles, and resources.

1. Before managing the behaviors of others, adults must be able to manage their own. Foremost, a teacher of a student(s) with EBD should be a reflective practitioner, that is, she should consider her mindsets, biases, and perceptions of students with EBD.

2. The teacher should develop a relationship with every student in order to establish trust and a commitment to the established ground rules.

3. The teacher should strengthen the teacher-student relationship by empowering students with a sense of belonging and clarity in an environment that has clearly defined roles for learning, playing, and participating.

4. The teacher should provide and use creative resources to support the learning and behavior of the individual with EBD.

**Guiding Consideration 1: Reflection**

Well-qualified teachers enter the classroom believing that all students should be valued, can learn, and have an innate need to belong. These ideals of the first-year teacher can be diminished when atypical student behaviors surface. Teachers initially trust the practical tools they acquire from preparation programs detailing how to create a positive behavior management system in the classroom. When these tools fail to demonstrate any success with a particular student, teachers may feel inadequate, incompetent, and helpless, often resorting to traditional means of behavior management (i.e., punishment; Sugai & Horner, 2002). They may claim that they have exhausted all tools and therefore find insult to their futile attempts to engage a learner. In fact, high stress and a lack of preparation in the area of behavior management may be a leading contributor to attrition in the field of special education (Billingsley, 2004). When struggling to manage the behaviors of a particular student or class, reflecting on our own perceptions and skills is necessary. A lack of self-awareness may actually lead to problematic student behaviors and negatively affect classroom management and learning (Richardson & Shupe, 2003; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001).

A mindset often preventing the progress of novice teachers is that of "control" versus "manage." Beliefs about behavior will certainly affect how we respond to behavior. Consider that everything a teacher and a student does is behavior—behavior is both purposeful and motivated. For new and experienced teachers, behavior management may be misconstrued as control—a need for fulfilling their own ego. Ego, unfortunately, is often a culprit hindering a positive classroom environment. Reflecting and considering our own ego is a task central in life but is particularly salient in the classroom, where power can sometimes validate our self-efficacy beliefs. No one can control another individual's behavior. However, we as teachers can attempt to manage student behaviors.

When a teacher is struggling with a particular student behavior or an emotional concern, she should look critically at the behavior a student displays—assess the pattern of the situation and determine the function of the behavior, collect objective data, and consider replacement behaviors. Practical and reputable solutions have been developed by the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) feature evidence-based interventions and supports across varying levels of intensity and settings (e.g., districtwide, statewide, schoolwide, classroomwide, and individually) to prevent the development and intensification of problem behaviors and...
**What Are Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)?**

Elementary and high schools in more than 30 states and the District of Columbia have employed features of PBIS in order to reduce problem behaviors and enhance learning environments. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provides methods to teach staff and all students how to establish behavioral expectations (school-wide and/or individually), acknowledge appropriate behavior, use ongoing data to make decisions, and establish a continuum of consequences for violating behavioral expectations. PBIS has been positively associated with a decrease in discipline referrals, an increase in instructional time, and an increase in perceived school safety (Sugai & Horner, 2006). The state of Maryland reports that 467 schools trained to use features of PBIS attribute their successful implementation to the investment in technical assistance, staff development activities, and behavior support coaches (Barrett, Bradshaw, & Lewis-Palmer, 2008).

Although elements of PBIS suggest a positive impact for students in both general and special education, the federal government has mandated that those students with individualized educational programs (IEPs) receive a functional assessment of behavior. Problematic behaviors of students tend to be progressive throughout schooling and given the significance of discipline problems and aggression in schools, the federal government has mandated that student IEPs should include a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) with a proactive positive behavioral intervention plan (BIP; Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

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**What Is a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and What Is a Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP)?**

An FBA is a process in which a team of individuals (a) identifies a problematic behavior to target and (b) observes the environmental events that precede and follow the behavior in order to develop a hypothesis statement as to why the problematic behavior is occurring (Scott, Anderson, & Spaulding, 2008). An example of a hypothesis statement may resemble the following cloze example from Scott et al.: "In [description of a specific routine], when [antecedent] occurs, the student will [explicit behavior observed]. When this happens, [consequences] occurs. Thus, the function of the behavior is [specific function of behavior is described]."

When an effective hypothesis is formed, the team may then act on the design and execution of a BIP, sometimes referred to as a behavioral support plan. The design of the BIP, very much contingent on the effectiveness of the FBA, is fluid in its development, with the ultimate goal being to teach an alternative skill or replacement behavior to the targeted problem behavior (Maag & Katsiyannis, 2006). Maag and Katsiyannis emphasize that the BIP include a summary of the findings from the generated hypothesis, a clear description of the operationalized behavior (include the type of data used to evaluate the behavior), a summary of all modifications to the plan, instructional strategies, positive and differential consequences, and future replacement behaviors.

Thoughtful reflection and productive collaborations with individuals in the school building (e.g., counselors, behavioral specialists, special educators) allow teachers to become engaged in this diagnostic process rather than reluctant to work with a particular child and/or resistant to the possibility of change.

Another response would be to start reflecting within—closely examine the established mindsets and perceptions one may have about a child who appears unmotivated with a low self-concept, a negative attitude, or a reluctance to participate. The teacher's preconceptions and ego should be removed from the equation—the child’s reaction is not necessarily about the teacher. Children with EBD often display their hurt outwardly to others without discretion as to the recipient of their anxiety or aggression. Focusing on our own reaction is manageable and productive in effecting change in others. The psychoeducator Nicholas Long embraces the notion of adjusting teacher behavior with the Conflict Cycle paradigm. (The conflict cycle is a component of one theoretical model to explain challenging behaviors. Multiple approaches should be considered when working with students with EBD).

The Conflict Cycle model (Figure 1) asserts that students with EBD tend to come to the school environment with irrational beliefs—beliefs that are grounded in their personal experiences and poor self-concept (Long & Morse, 1996). These beliefs persist, causing the stress to affect their thoughts and feelings. Their irrational thoughts foster their feelings, yet the teacher tends to enter their world only when the child's thoughts and feelings enfold into an exhibited behavior. Students with EBD are characterized by internalizing (e.g., anxiety, fear, depression, social withdrawal) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, overactivity, noncompliance, and delinquency; Coleman & Webber, 2002). During the child's time of crisis, teachers have the ability to feed into the student's irrational beliefs (e.g., ALL teachers are against me) or choose to manage their behaviors and proceed in a different
direction. With the goal of maintaining a positive learning environment, a teacher can alter her response to a student with EBD and choose to not perpetuate the cycle of irrational beliefs of the child. Depending on the individual situation, such responses may include providing clear choices for the child, planned ignoring, providing the child with a direction and then moving away, and/or reminding the child of his goals. Our responses are most effective when there is an established relationship with a child and when we free ourselves from our own ego.

Looking beyond the child’s veil of surface behaviors, we may proceed with an empathic way of thinking.

**Guiding Consideration 2: Relationships**

A frequent adult reaction to conflict in classrooms is to redirect a child and to deliver expectations. Choosing words with care is essential because one comment can create or destroy a positive student relationship. A student’s self-control, social competence, and even academic performance can often indicate the depth of the interpersonal relationship between the child and the teacher(s) in the school (Murray & Greenberg, 2006). Students with EBD are characterized by their inability to develop and maintain positive interpersonal relationships with others. Peers may reject them, and their reputations may precede them from one grade to the next. No one can argue that positive energy can empower others. For example, increasing the rate of a teacher’s behavior-specific praise to a child with EBD can increase the on-task behavior of that child (Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2001).

The teacher of a child with EBD has the task of building trust with that student. Trust can be fostered by the teacher's sincerely demonstrating that she/he values the child, provides for their needs, and sets them up for success. The child should know that despite all misgivings on a particular day, the next day is anew and the routine and the trust will persist.

Students with EBD have a low self-concept, and despite attempts of teachers to overflow their insatiable buckets with positive reinforcement, they often continue to seek more. This need can be exhausting for teachers considering class size and schedules—and the reality that one individual cannot be a solid figure for every student. Just like teachers, children are only human; relating to just one adult may be all they are able to do initially. Consider finding at least one other adult who can connect with that student—one who will provide his time, energy, and care.

Teachers and facilitators of the classroom environment should also arrange opportunities for students with EBD to develop positive relationships with their peers. Identifying these students' strengths can give them unique roles in the classroom so that they are perceived positively by others in their community of learners. Every arrangement made should be carefully thought out with the intent of optimal success. If a child has difficulty understanding integers, teach them. If a child has difficulty with spelling, provide him with tools to support this area. If a child has difficulty with social skills, teach them social skills, model them, and provide opportunities for the child to generalize these skills. Educating is about making connections and teaching others how to do so.

**Guiding Consideration 3: Roles**

The roles of the teacher and the student in a classroom need clarity. From one lesson to the next, the roles vary; for example, a cooperative group exercise establishes very different roles for the teacher and the students in comparison with a direct instruction lesson. Likewise, roles vary during an interactive writing lesson versus an independent writing exercise. An accurate assessment of a student’s ability is necessary when establishing the roles of both teacher and student. Oftentimes, students with EBD are reluctant to perform independently of the teacher. This reluctance is a reflection of limited academic achievement across all areas of instruction and again, a reflection of such students’ irrational beliefs—for example, “I will not succeed at this math test because I am horrible at math.” Accurate assessment of a student’s ability enables a teacher to plan for and design the optimal role for him that can contribute to a positive experience.

In addition, clarity of expectations for everyone’s role supports the success of student learning. Cooperative
learning methods (i.e., peer tutoring, peer-assisted learning strategies) of instruction have been conducive to positive social and academic outcomes for participants with disabilities, as in this role, they overcome many obstacles to learning when provided structured student roles and an opportunity to learn with others (Ginsburg-Block, Rohrbeck, & Fantuzzo, 2006). When using cooperative learning methods, teachers should support students with EBD by verbally rehearsing the routines of all individuals involved. Posting a visual reminder of the sequenced tasks to be followed supports students’ clear understanding of the expectations. All students can use such a posted listing not only for self-regulation but for assisting peers as well.

Communicated expectations, both verbalized and displayed visually, support students with EBD. A teacher can support all students when she provides a visual schedule for each school day, refers to it, and uses it to share what is expected in the environment. Task-analyzing this support system means to also provide an agenda for each lesson within that school day (Figure 2). Students with EBD may need even further supports by hearing the expectations of each activity within an individual lesson. Frequent reminders and a system of referring back to these posted and verbalized expectations can act as anchors for classroom teachers to minimize behavioral disruptions that can lead instruction and focus astray. Communicated expectations limit surprises and reinforce everyone’s learning.

Academic and behavioral self-regulatory techniques are specific tools used to support and empower students who respond to structure and routine. These techniques include self-monitoring checklists with a written guide that cues the student to complete sequenced steps of a specific task (Reid, Trout, & Schartz, 2005). Students can take a role in planning for their day, recording the events of the day, and even making self-evaluations of their performance. Frequent and consistent feedback encourages desired behaviors and empowers students as they gain skills of independence.

**Guiding Consideration 4: Resources**

Just as food selection is a crucial component of a party’s success, the resources teachers use can be a crucial component of a harmonious classroom setting—of rich learning. Selected resources can enhance or alter student learning. A “resource” is a broad term that certainly varies from one county to the next and sometimes from one school to the next. However, one consistency is that any student identified with EBD will have an IEP, and this documentation is the first step when identifying resources for the student to be successful in the classroom. The modifications and accommodations provided on the student’s IEP support his access to the general curriculum. Such modifications may include adapting the length or type of paper-pencil tasks, using assistive technology, and/or permitting intermittent breaks while a student is working on a particular task.

The IEP will also indicate other individuals who will be working with this student—individuals who are rich resources for the teacher to use to best meet the needs of the student. For example, the student may be receiving services from a school counselor or services from a speech and language therapist. Although consultation and collaboration among personnel within special education is routine, the notion can be somewhat challenging to translate into practice. Often, individuals may be underutilized. Any individual who interacts with a student is a resource. When defeat feels just around the corner and the teacher has tried everything to engage the child, communicating with a parent, a counselor, another teacher, or the art/music/physical education teacher may bring new insight into the situation.

Resources commonly used by teachers include consumable materials, basal readers, textbooks, and/or programmatic materials (e.g., SRA/Corrective Reading, Englemann et al., 1999; Read Naturally®, 2001; Step Up to Writing®, 2007). Many research-based commercialized programs are adopted by the county, so teachers may or may not have options about using all or components of the specified program. However, teachers generally have autonomy when selecting methods of instruction. Varying the methods of instruction and employing differentiated curriculum enhancements (i.e., mnemonics, text-structure analysis, peer tutoring, ample practice; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2007) can ensure that the teacher is meeting the needs of diverse learners in the classroom. Creative materials that support the vast methods of instruction are one
way to accommodate student preference for perceptual input. The four modalities of perceptual input include visual, auditory, and the often underutilized kinesthetic and tactile modalities. Children with EBD are often resistant to paper-pencil tasks and respond favorably to hands-on activities that involve active participation and experiential learning. Integrating a variety of methods tends to foster the internalization of new material for students with disabilities in contrast with more traditional modes of instruction (e.g., science content, Scruggs & Mastropieri; social studies content, Spencer, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2003).

A third resource to consider is yourself! Self-evaluation is often used to promote teacher introspection and to identify the crucial aspects of teaching. Teacher behavior, such as asking high-quality questions and providing positive praise, affects student behavior and can result in increased on-task behavior and lower levels of inappropriate behavior (Good & Brophy, 1994; Kauchak & Eggen, 2007; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001). Self-evaluation seems pertinent if we have the student's interest in mind. For example, teachers can record frequency data on the occurrences of positive reinforcement in the classroom, occurrences of opportunities to respond, and additional teacher behaviors that may encourage or suppress productive learning environments. Feedback is central to the process of learning any skill, and because teaching is often conducted in isolation, teachers may need to generate this feedback in creative ways.

Just as we would consider how to collect data regarding the function of a student's behavior, the same tools can be used for self-evaluation. For example, teachers may audiorecord 20 to 30 minutes of a classroom session, videotape a 50-minute lesson, and/or ask another teacher to observe her classroom. An audiorecording could monitor the use of language—perhaps the teacher's most powerful tool in the classroom (e.g., How often am I praising Jamal? Do I ask Mary multiple questions back to back? Do I frequently elicit student responses?).

Whether you are the host of a party or the lead teacher of a lesson, the desired outcome should be a positive experience for everyone. When teachers consider reflection, relationships, roles, and resources, not only are students with EBD supported, but all students are given the opportunity for high achievement. All participants enjoy the party.

References


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