

Providing A Positive School Environment

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All students learn better and more in a motivating environment—a setting that meets their physical, psychological, social, and educational needs. For students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), for whom motivation is often a problem, the provision of a positive school environment is absolutely crucial.

A Positive Environment: What Does It Look Like?

Many educators have commented on the critical need for school programs (particularly for young children) that prevent serious behavioral problems and promote emotional health. Shedlin (1986) has pointed out that between nursery school and sixth grade a child spends 9,000 hours in school—more than twice the amount of time spent in high school. He proposed a qualitative approach for professionals to use in evaluating a school, using questions such as the following:

- Do the students and adults seem happy in the school environment?
- Is there a sense of delight, of enthusiasm and energy, of joy in learning and teaching?
- Are differences in students' learning styles, developmental levels, and interests celebrated?
- Is there evidence—in both verbal and nonverbal interaction—that students and adults within the school have mutual respect and regard for one another?
- Is there evidence that the processes of learning, as well as the outcomes, are valued?
- Is there time in the students' schedules for relaxation, for imaginative activities, and for just pondering?
- Is there as much interest in the "how" of learning as there is in the "how well?"

Conditions, Curriculum, and Consequences

In 1968, Frank Hewett proposed a model for the interrelated variables that affect school learning—a triangle with Child in the middle and the sides labeled Task, Structure, and Reward. According to Hewett, the learning process depends upon (a) selecting a developmentally appropriate task, (b) providing a meaningful reward for effort, and (c) maintaining the appropriate degree of structure necessary to allow learning to take place.

In the second edition of this text, the three sides of the triangle were renamed Conditions, Curriculum, and Consequences (Hewett & Taylor, 1980). This paradigm has proved very helpful to many educators in the field of EBD in (a) conceptualizing emotional disturbance in educational terms and (b) describing the requirements of a positive and relevant educational program.

Conditions

The conditions in the educational setting include a variety of environmental factors such as the facility itself, school climate, classroom arrangement, rules, routines, schedules, level of comfort, and other people in the classroom and school.

Physical and psychological safety for students and adults. It is absolutely essential that students feel safe in the school—from intruders, from the faculty and staff, and from each other. They must not be subjected to harsh punishment, ridicule, or humiliation.

Knowledgeable, skilled, charismatic, and courageous faculty and staff. A strong background in behavior management, a positive self-concept, and a considerable measure of understanding of the characteristics

and cultures of EBD adolescents are absolute prerequisites. Faculty and staff must exhibit a sense of community and a high regard for society and its laws. Adults in the school setting should also maintain every ounce of dignity of which they are capable. Dressing properly (and as stylishly as possible) shows that they respect their students and believe school to be an important place. Teachers and other faculty and staff should also be prepared, confident, firm, fair, patient, kind, truthful, polite, neat, trustworthy, capable of self-disclosure, and possessed of a sense of humor.

Attainable goals and objectives. Goals and objectives of each student's program must be individualized, developmental, measurable, and attainable. Students should collaborate in the setting of goals for the entire group as well as for their own IEPs.

Relevant curriculum. The curriculum should provide for a variety of experiences that are obviously related to the real lives, problems, and needs of the students. Curriculum is further discussed below.

Positive instructional techniques. Instructional techniques must be both humane and effective. School is not a positive event if the student encounters failure or is embarrassed by his/her lack of achievement. Instructional practices must ensure that the student is making satisfactory progress, according to his/her individual goals and objectives.

Opportunities for socialization. Social skills, in which students with EBD are usually lacking, are not learned in a study carrel. These students, more than any others, need to learn to communicate and work with one another in a natural environment (a group setting) under adequate supervision. Instruction in social skills is normally an important part of the curriculum for students with EBD. Students will also profit from peer instruction and cooperative learning activities, but the group should initially be limited to two students (to avoid having two “gang up” on the other).

Beauty. For many years, the educational settings for students with EBD have often been the least attractive buildings or rooms available in the school or district. The aesthetic qualities of the school, classroom, and other learning environments of students with EBD are of great importance. These students need some beauty in their lives.

A welcoming climate for families. The school and classroom must be welcoming places, especially for families with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Welcoming signs should be in every language represented in the school. Parents should be invited and encouraged to participate in the program to the greatest extent possible.

Links between and among the students' worlds. There are several worlds in which a student must function: family, peers, school, and community. The school itself can provide opportunities for student involvement in each of these worlds (socializing with peers, communicating and collaborating with family, forming relationships with other adults in the school and community, and working with public and private agencies). Of greatest importance is the opportunity to provide service to the community, to other children and adults in need.

A full continuum of educational settings. Many of the suggestions listed above can be implemented faster, easier, and with greater success in a special setting. Implementing these components of a positive school environment in a regular school will require more resources—not fewer. They are dependent on more personnel, time, materials, transportation, and money than are usually granted to the special education program in the regular school environment.

Classroom structure. Whether in a regular school or special facility, the learning environment for students with EBD should be highly structured in terms of expectations, routines, rule, and schedules. A behavior management system based on applied behavior analysis (learning theory) is an absolute requirement.

Classroom rules should be few, fair, clear, displayed, taught, and consistently enforced. Rules must have no "loopholes" that can be challenged. Students should participate (to the extent feasible) in the establishment of schedules, routines, and classroom expectations, all of which should be functional and reasonable. One of "Guetzloe's Laws" for determining whether expectations are reasonable is that "Most of the students should be earning most of their points most of the time."

Violence and verbal abuse must be disallowed. There must be a nonphysical aversive consequence for any act of aggression, abusive language, or "putdowns." If there is no consequence, EBD students may believe that such behavior is acceptable.

To carry out a program of behavioral change, every adult with whom a student comes into contact should (a) know the rules and consequences, and (b) be consistent in their enforcement. This requires considerable consultation and cooperation between and among faculty and staff.

Curriculum

Students with EBD need every educational experience available to any nonhandicapped student and even more. They need academics, social skills, thinking skills, computer skills, physical education, moral education, recreation, career exploration, vocational education, job exploration, job placement, and follow-up assistance well into their adult lives. They have missed many experiences that usually occur naturally in families and communities, long before children come to school.

They may not have eaten in restaurants, learned to swim, or gone camping with their families. They may not have been welcomed in neighborhood recreational facilities, community organizations, or even the church. When they have been exposed to positive learning experiences—in the home, school, neighborhood, and community—their behavior and affect may have interfered with their learning what is offered.

Effective, Motivating, and Therapeutic. The curriculum for students with EBD must be more effective and more motivating than that for students without disabilities. The entire program should provide for meeting every student's individual (and sometimes very basic) needs. In that way, the curriculum is also therapeutic, ameliorating the problems that have contributed to the student's being identified as having EBD.

Using thematic units. One of the most positive, meaningful, and effective strategies for students with EBD is the integrated thematic unit, in which all skill and content areas are related to a certain theme or topic. The use of units in the general curriculum is very common, especially in the content areas of science, social studies, and health.

Units have been considered good practice in special education for many years. They were suggested for use with "slow learners" in 1935 (Ingram, cited in Ensminger & Dangel, 1992). Meyen (1981) has written an entire text on the development and use of instructional units in both regular and special education (the first edition of which was published in 1972). More recently, Ensminger and Dangel (1992) have described the components of the Foxfire approach, including the planning and implementation of integrated units, as best practice in special education.

Careful selection of instructional materials. Instructional materials should be relevant to the students' lives, related to what they know about the world from the media, as well as in their neighborhoods and communities. Good for this purpose are newspapers, current books and magazines, and pictures of real people and real places. Whenever possible, classroom lecture and discussion should be enhanced with concrete, manipulable materials. Other things to keep in mind about selecting materials include the following:

- Do not use infantile materials for teaching basic skills to older students. Use materials that are appropriate for the chronological ages of the students, such as newspapers, magazines, and "bites" of videos or movies.
- Choose positive materials that show human beings and society in a favorable light. Students can be challenged to find stories with happy endings and poems, songs, and jokes that are not only funny but also suitable for sharing at school.
- Teach social skills every day—all day. Select appropriate skills from among the many good commercial materials or use the steps of reinforced modeling to teach any skill for which there is an immediate need. Many commercial materials include suggestions for teaching anger control, moral reasoning, assertiveness, and aggression replacement. Use the "teachable moment" when it occurs in the classroom to teach and reinforce social skills.
- Select materials that encourage interaction (under supervision). Students with EBD must learn to converse with one another without putdowns, arguments, or fights. Scripts for plays (even Shakespeare) or "after-school specials" (which may be available from local television stations) are useful for this purpose.
- Provide appropriate models in the classroom, using not only real people (faculty, staff, parents, and guests) but also videos, television program excerpts, film strips, records, pictures, and written materials.

A "Preventive Curriculum". In addition to the subjects required by the general curriculum, students with EBD (particularly adolescents) should be offered short courses or modules on a variety of topics related to their specific issues and concerns. These topics could be considered as a "preventive curriculum" for students without emotional problems as well as those with EBD (Guetzloe, 1989). Such offerings can be included in the general curriculum in the areas of social studies, health, physical education, home economics, and language arts.

- Basic skills (for those who need developmental or remedial work).
- Learning strategies (organizational skills, mnemonics, study skills, self-questioning, and error monitoring).
- Stress reduction (time management, organizational skills, relaxation training), coping skills, problem-solving, decision-making, self-control, and assertiveness training).
- Prescriptive physical education (weight gain, weight loss, body building, and exercise).
- Health issues (nutrition, hygiene, orthodontics, acne, substance abuse, and sex education).
- Grooming and dress (clothing selection and care, color analysis, hair styles, and cosmetics).
- Juvenile law (correctional system, courts, services, and facilities).
- Marriage, family living, and child care (and related legal issues).
- Use of leisure time (hobbies, community service, cultural events, and recreational activities).

Any inclusion to a student's program that serves to enhance feelings of self-worth, security, or self-control also has the potential for preventing emotional and behavioral problems. The problems of an individual student (or an entire class) can be addressed in a positive way by using a simple "If . . . , then . . ." approach (Guetzloe, 1989).

If a student suffers from unrealistic expectations or over programming, then goal-setting, self-evaluation, and self-monitoring would be valuable individual program components. If social isolation is a problem, then training in assertiveness, communication, and social skills would be advisable. Problems of stress could be addressed by teaching self-control, coping skills, time-management, problem-solving, and relaxation exercises. Preparation for the future could be taught under such topics as career and vocational education, government and law, home economics, marriage and family living, and use of leisure time. Problems of self-esteem can be addressed through instruction in art, music, dance, hygiene, cosmetology, clothing selection, weight training, and individual sports.

Consequences

In programs for students with EBD, we deliver many kinds of consequences described by various authorities in various ways (positive, aversive, primary, secondary, concrete, social, natural, logical, and contrived). P. L. 105-17 now mandates the provision of positive behavioral interventions and supports for all students with disabilities. It is important to emphasize consequences that are positive, natural, and logical.

In the early stages of teaching a behavior management system, it may be necessary to use primary reinforcers (food and drink) or concrete rewards (such as funny money or objects related to the current unit of study) paired with social reinforcers (specific praise, saying "Thank You," smiling) until the students understand the worth of the tokens or other secondary reinforcers. Particularly with older students, there is a real need for tokens that cannot be counterfeited. Amusing reinforcers are also usually well received.

The most desirable backup reinforcers for secondary students are usually related to work avoidance (getting out of doing paperwork, earning extra physical activity, listening to music, or being excused from homework). Specific items that seem to appeal to adolescents include hotel-sized shampoos and lotions, used clothing (especially old, large jeans), photographs of teachers and classmates, or other items that can be gifts for family and significant others.

The Premack Principle—that a high frequency behavior will serve as a reinforcer for a low frequency behavior (Premack, 1959)—is a very valuable guideline to use in scheduling activities for either the entire class or an individual student. When an individual or the group has completed a designated amount of a nonpreferred activity, he/she or they may be rewarded with a preferred task. Preferred and nonpreferred tasks will be determined as one of the outcomes of functional assessment, which will give guidance to the teacher regarding which activities to use as reinforcers.

Getting It All Together

It should be noted that the Learning Triangle, as described above, is a useful model for another reason—the relationship between and among the conditions, curriculum, and consequences in the educational setting. If the conditions happen to be less than desirable on any given day, the curriculum must be better than usual and the consequences highly desirable. If the conditions are good and the curriculum is interesting and enjoyable, the consequences may not be so important. If all of these are appropriate for the group at the same time, wonderful things can happen.

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