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Robert A. Gable  
*Old Dominion University*, [rgable@odu.edu](mailto:rgable@odu.edu)

Jo M. Hendrickson

Stephen W. Tonelson  
*Old Dominion University*

Richard Van Acker

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## **Integrating Academic and Non-academic Instruction for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders**

Robert A. Gable  
Old Dominion University  
Jo M. Hendrickson  
The University of Iowa  
Stephen W. Tonelson  
Old Dominion University  
Richard Van Acker  
The University of Illinois at Chicago

### **Abstract**

Students with emotional/behavioral disorders exhibit a wide range of academic and behavioral problems. Not surprisingly, there is growing support for integrating instruction to address overlapping students' needs in both areas. In this article, we discuss instructional variables that contribute to a positive classroom climate and that serve as setting events for more focused group-individual instructional programs. We draw on the accumulated research to identify common non-academic challenges that should be incorporated into those programs. We examine issues that relate to the efficacy of instruction and also the cultural and chronological age differences among students and how they relate to planning for instruction. Finally, we offer several forms that illustrate ways to combine academics and non-academics into a manageable instructional plan.



A substantial body of literature documents that students with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) manifest a wide range of problems from impulsive, antisocial, and aggressive behavior to social withdrawal and isolation. These problems can adversely affect student academic performance as well as impinge on their social relationships (e.g., Kauffman, 2001). Academic failure—especially in the critical area of reading, places students on a slippery slope to school avoidance/drop out and can accelerate the rate of antisocial and maladaptive behavior (e.g., Maag, 1998; Walker, Colvin, &

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Please address all correspondence to: Robert A. Gable, Professor of Special Education, Child Study Center, Old Dominion University, Norfolk VA 23529 (757) 683-3157; rgable@odu.edu

Ramsey, 1995). In fact, some authorities assert that "low achievement and behavior problems go hand-in-hand" (Kauffman, 1997, p. 247). Although the exact nature of that relationship is unclear, there is general agreement that it is both reciprocal and deleterious to the teaching/learning process (Gunter & Denny, 1998; Nelson, Scott, & Polsgrove, 1999). There is little question that, if a student's learning and behavior problems go unabated, they will pose enormous challenges not only to school personnel, but also the larger community (Maag, 1998).

A false dichotomy sometimes exists between program priorities for students who manifest learning verses' behavior problems. For students classified as learning disabled, emphasis is on remedial or compensatory instruction; whereas, for students with emotional disturbances, getting behavior under control usually takes precedence (Schuermann, 1998). Recently, Lewis, Heflin, and DiGangi (1991) argued that, rather than viewing academic and non-academic deficits separately, it makes more sense to view both as "errors in learning." According to Greenwood (2002), positive student outcomes are predicated on how well we arrange, implement, and sustain instruction across time. Programs that emphasize student academic success produce a concomitant reduction in collateral "interfering" (or impeding) behaviors (Deno, 1998). It stands to reason that teachers of students with E/BD must be competent in planning, delivering, and evaluating quality instruction (Deno, 1998; Gunter & Denny, 1998; Kauffman & Wong, 1991).

In what follows, we reiterate the importance of establishing a classroom environment that reflects positive teacher-pupil interactions, encourages active student engagement, ensures high rates of correct responses, and affords students high rates of positive reinforcement. Next, we discuss ways to identify predictable learning and behavior problems to facilitate planning at three levels: class-wide planning; planning for subgroups of students; and lastly, individual students. We offer several forms designed to accomplish that task. Finally, we contend that planning for instruction should reflect both acculturation and chronological age differences among students.

#### *Establishing a Positive Climate for Instruction*

Today, teachers face numerous obstacles to delivering quality instruction. Changing student demographics, dwindling resources, state legislated curriculum, high-stakes testing, and the proliferation of unsubstantiated practices are among them (e.g., Berryman, 2000; Education Commission of the States, 2001). Other barriers stem from a clash between teacher attitudes and expectations and pupil characteristics and behavior. Shores, Gunter, and Jacks (1993) described well the often coercive nature of these interactions, as one party confronts the other to force a capitulation ("throw

in the towel"). For example, frustrated with Carl's classroom behavior, Mr. Larson angrily admonishes Carl to "stop talking and get to work." If the student complies, the teacher is positively reinforced for yelling, whereas, the student is negatively reinforced for responding in a way that terminates an aversive interaction. It is not surprising that students who engage in challenging behavior generally receive less instruction than students who routinely comply with teacher expectations (Carr, Taylor, & Robinson, 1991; Wehby, Symons, Canale, & Go, 1998). Research also shows that teachers give challenging students fewer opportunities to respond. Those same students give correct answers less often and, in turn, receive less praise than more compliant, higher performing classmates (Van Acker, 2002). Often, an unspoken agreement is struck between teacher and student—I won't bother you, if you don't bother me. The net result is a curriculum of non-instruction (Gunter, Denny, Jack, Shores, & Nelson, 1993).

Across time, aversive teacher/pupil interactions serve as a catalyst for a significant amount of classroom misconduct; students "act-up" to escape the constant drubbing associated with academic frustration and failure (Shores et al., 1993). Teacher reactions are equally predictable and mainly consist of the imposition of some kind of punitive consequences (Colvin, Sugai, & Kameenui, 1993). Nelson, Scott, and Polsgrove (1999) maintain that a clear pattern emerges—the student misbehaves and the teacher sends the student away (e.g., to the office, in-school suspension, expulsion). Short circuiting this coercive cycle is predicated, at least in part, on positive teacher-pupil interactions and instruction that is aligned with student capability and motivation. That instruction should reflect both reactive (i.e., corrective) strategies and proactive (i.e., precorrective) strategies that address both academic and non academic needs of students (Colvin & Sugai, 1988; Colvin, Sugai, & Patching, 1993). There is good reason to believe it can best be accomplished through careful planning of group-individual instruction.

#### *A Rationale for the Integration of Academic and Non academic Instruction*

According to Greenwood (2002), the cumulative amount of classroom instructional engagement can mitigate against factors that otherwise negatively influence academic achievement (e.g., ethnicity, language, or socioeconomic circumstance). Although planning for that instruction is one variable that teachers control, there is a dearth of research on classroom planning for instruction. Nonetheless, failure to adequately plan likely increases the probability that daily instruction will be nothing more than a succession of haphazard, loosely linked activities. Failure to plan also makes it difficult to distinguish between a flawed lesson and one that has potential to be effective but is poorly executed (Gable, Hendrickson, & Van Acker, 2001; Gresham, MacMillan, Beebe-Frankenberger, & Bocain, 2000). Finally,

poor planning substantially decreases the probability that a teacher can either replicate a successful lesson or analyze critically a failed lesson to strengthen future outcomes.

The accumulated research shows that a regular curriculum is an anathema to many students with disabilities, as conformity takes precedence over accommodation (Arllen et al., 1996). In light of that research, various authorities have advocated ways to better plan for instruction of students with diverse learning needs. For instance, Thousand and Villa (1990) proposed that education personnel organize instruction according to a model that includes: class-wide objectives (e.g., same expectations for all); curricular content that reflects multi grade-level objectives (e.g., objectives for all students drawn from 5<sup>th</sup> grade science, objectives for some drawn from 7<sup>th</sup> grade science textbooks, and for a few, a computer search serves as an additional objective); overlapping content that incorporates academic and non-academic objectives (e.g., primary objectives for most students relate to science; but, for Sara, self-control is the primary target of instruction); and finally, objectives that are ideographic (specific) to a particular student (e.g., completing a science crossword puzzle). Similarly, Bos and Vaughn (1998) proposed a pyramid model that includes: what all students should learn; what most students should learn; and, what some students should learn. These approaches afford school personnel manageable ways to differentiate instruction. We can draw on these approaches to further define the non academic side of the planning and instruction equation.

#### *Academic/non-academic Intervention for Students with E/BD*

In an article on attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders, Maag and Reid (1994) proposed a step-wise approach to planning and intervention. Maag and Reid suggested that practitioners single out factors that likely contribute to students' behavior problems in order to select appropriate intervention strategies and procedures. To facilitate that process, they identified four common problem areas: behavioral skill deficits; cognitive distortions; problem-solving deficits; and, self-control deficits. Maag and Reid further asserted that interventions focus on student deficits or excesses and on ecological (or contextual) variables. As students move from one area of the classroom to another, Tiffany is accidentally brushed by another student. She responds aggressively, perhaps because she lacks the ability to do so more appropriately (i.e., skill deficit). On the other hand, her aggression could signal an inability to self-regulate her behavior long enough to weigh other response options (i.e., self-control or problem-solving deficit). Tiffany may have attributed physical contact to a hostile intent, became angry, and sought to retaliate (i.e., cognitive distortion)(e.g., Dodge & Frame, 1982; Dodge & Somberg, 1987; Maag & Reid, 1994; Van Acker, 2002). Lastly, a potentially volatile situation may have been exacerbated by the

fact that too many students were moving about in too close physical proximity. As this encounter illustrates, observing student behavior may not be enough to identify the functional properties of aberrant behavior or to develop an adequate plan of intervention.

Some years ago, Skinner (1975) posited that internal feelings were closely associated with behavior and the conditions under which behavior occurs. Recent attempts to shift functional behavioral assessment from clinic to classroom have raised numerous issues, including questions about assessment. The main reason to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) is to isolate functional relationships between significant aspects of the social, academic, or physical environment and the occurrence (or nonoccurrence) of a target behavior (Dunlap et al., 1993). A substantial amount of what has been written on FBA focuses on direct observation of target behaviors. Indeed, Nichols (2001) has argued that current thinking about the functional assessment of student's challenging behavior ignores internal events. She asserted that assessment should account for intra personal factors associated with observable behavior. Nichols maintains that assessment should go beyond the topography of the target behavior to include information on covert or cognitive processes (i.e., thoughts and feelings) that may serve as antecedents to overt behavior.

In discussing the previous incident with Tiffany, we may find that her aggression was precipitated by a misinterpretation of the intentionality of a classmates' behavior. Because of prior learning experiences, she viewed physical proximity and incidental contact as an act of provocation. Although not without methodological shortcomings, functional interviews with students can yield potentially useful information on covert excesses and deficits, and, in turn, yield a fuller understanding of a student's diverse learning needs (Gable, Quinn, Rutherford, Howell, Hoffman, & Butler, in press). Furthermore, the classroom incident underscores the transactional nature of behavior problems and that the context in which behavior occurs is an equally significant aspect of assessment (e.g., Hendrickson, 1992; Maag & Reid, 1994). Today, most experts agree that efforts to address excesses or deficits in student behavior without dealing with the context(s) that occasion such behavior is counterproductive to achieving long-term positive outcomes (e.g., Gresham, 1991). In all, a mix of variables affect student behavior—encompassing internal and external events. In planning instruction for students with E/BD, school personnel should look for ways to incorporate knowledge of both into a plan of instruction.

*An Integrated Planning Model for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders*

Given that both academic and non-academic problems can pose life span challenges for E/BD students, it seems shortsighted to address one set of

problems and to ignore the others (Bullock & Gable, 2000). A group-individual approach appears to be the most practical way to merge aspects of academic and non academic instruction. Integral to the functional behavioral assessment process is the concept of conditional probability—the ability to predict future events based on knowledge of present events (Gresham, 1991). By compiling data on student needs, school personnel are able to anticipate and plan strategically to address specific learning and behavior problems (e.g., Scott, Nelson, & Liaupsin, 2002).

Drawing upon the work of Bos and Vaughn (1998), Maag and Reid (1994), Nichols (2001), and Thousand and Villa (1990), we put together a three-step planning process whereby teachers can identify and prioritize group-individual instruction for students with E/BD. Figure 1 presents a Classroom Diversity Profile Form on which teachers record information that relates to student academic functioning in major curricular areas. The accumulated data can strengthen the planning process and help school personnel align instructional methodologies with specific student needs. Mr. Larson plans to introduce a particular topic in science. The instructors manual stipulates that students read independently from their textbooks for 20 minutes and then complete a written worksheet. Information previously compiled allows Mr. Larson to identify those students who may lack the prerequisite decoding or comprehension skills to complete the lesson as assigned. Other students may not be able to successfully complete the written portion of the lesson. Still other students may not be able to self-regulate their behavior well enough to concentrate on relevant aspects of the assignment. Once these obstacles are identified, Mr. Larson can plan specific academic accommodations (e.g., material is read aloud to one student) or modifications (e.g., fewer simpler objectives are imposed on another student) to address group-individual “prohibitive prerequisites” to effective instruction. In completing a classroom profile, at primary grade levels, the teacher might list information on every student. In contrast, at the middle and secondary school level, a teacher may instruct as many as 150 students each day. It may be more sensible to record information only on those students who are judged to be at-risk for learning or behavior problems, or both.





**Class Profile and Management Form**

**Setting Classification:** self-contained \_\_\_\_; resource room \_\_\_\_; regular classroom \_\_\_\_; **Other (specify)** \_\_\_\_\_.

**Number of adults** \_\_\_\_; **Number of students/category(ies)** \_\_\_\_\_; **Age range** \_\_\_\_\_.

**Pertinent classroom information:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Records review:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Other data:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

	Academic	Non-academic
<b>Class-Wide Interventions</b>		
<b>Targeted Interventions</b>		
<b>Student-Specific Interventions</b>		

Figure 2.

clusters of students may manifest similar high risk behavioral responses that demand targeted instruction at a small group level (e.g., intensive reading support, social skills instruction). Finally, records may suggest that one or more students will require more complex, intrusive intervention programs to address their needs (e.g., anger management or self-control training)(e.g., Lewis & Sugai, 1999).

Figure 3 presents an Individual Instructional Plan Form. This form is designed to allow school personnel to identify strategies that are aligned with individual student academic/non-academic needs. First, the teacher records preliminary information, including student(s) identifiers and then, on the lefthand side of the form, lists specific areas of strength and concern for student(s), along with various instructional or curricular accommodations/modifications that are aligned with student academic needs. On the right hand side, the teacher can specify strategies to teach students replacement behavior that serves the same function or results in the same outcome as the target behavior(s)(Gable et al., in press). In succeeding sections, we discuss behavior problems common among students with E/BD, namely, socialization, self-control, and critical thinking/problem solving (Cullinan, 2002; Kauffman, 2001; Maag & Reid, 1994). Not all students will evidence difficulties in every area; other concerns may apply to particular students and would be listed under the other category (e.g., language deficits). In completing the planning process, the goal is to capture the most critical dimensions of instruction, including overlap within and across academic and non academic intervention efforts.

1. *Social/behavioral Skill Deficits.* A defining characteristic of students with E/BD relates to problems in socialization (Sugai & Lewis, 1996). Research indicates that students with E/BD struggle to accurately assess and appropriately respond to various social situations. Social interactions often trigger negative responses—especially when students are frustrated, fearful, angry, or otherwise emotionally aroused (Maag & Reid, 1994; Nichols, 2001). Over time, many of these negative responses become highly predictable (Van Acker, 2002). The behavior is neurologically programmed such that it requires less and less thought or effort on the part of the student. At least for some students, social skill deficits may need to be addressed before—or at least concurrent—to other cognitive or behavioral problems (Maag & Reid, 1992). That instruction usually begins with the identification of specific skills, selected according to their propensity to be elicited and reinforced in the natural environment (McConnell, 1987).

Social skills instruction usually is designed around modeling and behavioral rehearsal of the target behavior(s), social reinforcement, and programming for maintenance/generalization. Furthermore, rather than time limited or decontextualized (“pull-out”) instruction, research supports the integration of social skills and academic instruction (e.g., Maag, 1998). In planning instruction, it is useful to know that classroom investigations



document that students with E/BD can effectively serve as behavior change agents (Gable, Arllen, & Hendrickson, 1992) and academic tutors (e.g., Rutherford et al., 1996). There also is evidence that various cooperative learning arrangements can set the stage for positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Goor & Schween, 1993). Even so, many students with E/BD evidence a range of serious problems—problems associated with skill deficits, performance deficits, discrimination, and motivation. Accordingly, social skills instruction alone may not resolve complex behavior problems; instead, a bundling of multiple interventions may need to include: behavioral-reduction, cognitive, and skill building programs, along with environmental manipulations.

2. *Cognitive Deficits.* Some students with E/BD misinterpret social situations and respond in ways that have been reinforced in the past (e.g., with anger, aggression, or social withdrawal). In struggling to find a solution to a given problem, students with E/BD sometimes draw upon cognitive misperceptions regarding how to respond to a situation (e.g., Tiffany punched a student who brushed into her in the classroom); across time, that physical reaction invokes less thought or effort—essentially it becomes automatic (Van Acker, 2002). Simply sharing information on appropriate responses with the student (e.g., debriefing the student following an act of physical aggression) may not be powerful enough to change the behavior. Direct intervention may be needed to ameliorate behavior problems that stem from the student's cumulative learning history (e.g., cognitive and behavioral interventions). It is useful to keep in mind that appropriate as well as inappropriate behavior takes time to learn and even more time to unlearn (Van Acker, 2002).

3. *Problem-Solving Deficits.* Many students with E/BD manifest problems in the area of critical thinking and problem-solving. Students with E/BD may be deficient in various cognitive and behavioral skills, struggle to discriminate among various response options, and fail to successfully engage in behavior that is deemed socially acceptable or appropriate (Cullinan, 2002; Kauffman, 2001). Among the strategies that have proven effective is to teach students a step-by-step process, demonstrating each step, modeling a "think aloud" strategy, introducing behavioral rehearsal, giving the student corrective feedback, and finally, orchestrating multiple opportunities for the student to engage in the behavior and be positively reinforced for doing so.

4. *Self-control Deficits.* Another common characteristic among students with E/BD is behavioral disinhibition or the limited capacity to manage their behavior, especially under stressful conditions. Students may find it difficult to suppress responses that have served them well in the past even though they are socially unacceptable (e.g., verbal or physical aggression). These same students may lack the ability to self-regulate or self-monitor their own covert or overt behavior, or both. An intervention plan might

include: direct instruction on recognizing internal and external cues surrounding a difficult situation; “placeholder” behaviors that serve to buy time for the student; a set of appropriate social responses; along with self-management strategies, to support maintenance of the behavior across time (e.g., self-reinforcement).

*Efficacy of behavior as an instructional variable.* In developing a group-individual academic/non-academic plan, school personnel should probably factor in the efficiency and effectiveness of instruction. The effort required to engage in a behavior, along with the immediacy and the level of the reinforcement available to the student for doing so, may dictate selection of one target behavior over another (Gable et al., in press). Likewise, the time and effort required for a student to learn one skill versus another should be considered before developing an intervention plan. The student who makes crude or inappropriate remarks during class may be seeking peer attention and affiliation. In an effort to promote an acceptable replacement behavior, school personnel might explore the use of social skills training or casting the student in the role of peer tutor. While either of these strategies could increase the student’s social status with his peer group, they may require too much effort (time and energy), trigger a loss in status (the student is now seen as someone needing a “social worker”), and result in too few chances to gain peer attention. Indeed, as Scott et al. (2001) point out, many behavior problems afford students ready access to teacher or peer attention. Not surprisingly, the student may actively resist any plan to thwart what has become an effective means of gaining attention (e.g, disruptive comments). In making decisions about intervention priorities, it is important to critically evaluate the present and future relevance of the skills that will comprise instruction. And, regardless of the intervention, that plan should probably include booster training—periodic reintroduction of a scaled down version of the original intervention, to help assure fidelity of student application (Gable & Hendrickson, 2000).

#### *Interventions that Reflect Cultural and Chronological Age Differences Among Students*

In that a student’s behavior is a reflection of his or her cultural and linguistic background (Cartledge et al., 2002), growing diversity within the schools heightens the risk that education personnel may misunderstand or misinterpret student behavior. Differences among students are not synonymous with deficits; therefore, quality planning should mirror community norms, values, and expectations. For example, the typical middle-class Anglo American (as a listener) maintains eye contact with the speaker during a verbal exchange, while the speaker frequently breaks eye contact with the listener. This may not hold for the typical African American who breaks eye contact while listening and maintains direct eye

contact when speaking (Kochman, 1981). Accordingly, if two students—one Anglo American and the other African American, engage in a verbal dispute and are confronted by an Anglo American teacher, the Anglo American student is more likely meet the social expectations of that interaction. A teacher might interpret the African American student's failure to maintain eye contact, when being addressed as disinterest, as a lack of concern, or even dishonesty. When speaking to the teacher, student direct eye contact might be construed as an act of defiance. Because of a discriminatory attribution regarding the students' behavior (Obiakor, 1999), school personnel might well impose a more punitive consequence on the African American student (e.g., Ishii-Jordan, 2000; Van Acker, 2002).

Knowledge of the pupil-specific cultural norms and expectations is an integral part of teacher/pupil classroom interactions; it should also inform decisions about academic instruction. For example, the communicative behavior, task orientation and task performance, and social behavior of students from diverse backgrounds may differ from that of Anglo-American students (Townsend, 2001). African American students typically come from a collectivistic rather than individualistic culture. For that reason, authorities have advocated use of group management contingencies, cooperatively learning activities, and peer-mediated academic and non academic interventions. Finally, African American often perform well when given multiple rather than single instructional assignments (Cartledge et al., 2002).

*Chronological age as an instructional variable.* The chronological age of the students has a significant influence on the planning process as well. As Walker et al. (1995) assert, reality dictates that the focus of our intervention will change across time. At the preschool level, emphasis is on screening and early identification, delivery of quality academic and social skills instruction, and family supports. Together, these efforts stress prevention. In the primary grades, the goal is to provide early intervention geared toward remediation of emerging problems, interventions that include academic and social skills instruction and family support. At the middle school level, attention shifts to amelioration or buffering the deleterious effects of student behavior problems through teaching coping and survival skills. Intervention emphasizes not only academic and social skills instruction, but also self-control, career education, and pre vocational skills. At the secondary level, Walker and colleagues (1995) recommend that we weigh carefully the probability of long-term behavior problems and emphasize accommodations in the areas of vocational and transition to work skills, along with coping and survival skills instruction. In sum, planning and instruction should reflect the changing needs of students and align with those instructional priorities most likely to produce success beyond the classroom (see Walker et al., 1995).

## Conclusion

We have long accepted that quality academic instruction hinges on: accurate curricular placement; group and individual alignment of instruction; repeated opportunity for students to respond correctly; and, routine data-driven adjustments in that instruction (e.g., Deno, 1998; Greenwood, 2002; Rutherford et al., 1996; Scheurmann, 1998). These same standards hold for non academics as well. Predictable student misbehavior reflects errors in learning that can be ameliorated through direct instruction, no less so than reading, arithmetic, or spelling problems (Colvin et al., 1993). In the preceding discussion, we have attempted to draw a parallel between what defines academic and non academic success and to blur distinctions regarding planning to address common learning versus behavior problems of students with E/BD.

Today, there is a growing sense that an integrated approach to instruction—within and across skill areas and students, contributes significantly to positive student outcomes (e.g., Arllen, Gable, & Hendrickson, 1996; Korinek & Popp, 1996). While experts agree that quality instruction is essential to assuring pupil progress (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999), there is only a limited amount of literature on ways to differentiate the kind or amount of pupil-specific academic and non-academic instruction (e.g., Gunter, Hummel, & Venn, 1998; Ruhl & Berlinghoff, 1992). We acknowledge that the planning model we have described is neither complete nor without some limitations. But, as Greenwood (2002) put it, education personnel should rely on an “organizing construct” to improve instruction. In that both learning and behavior problems are endemic to students with E/BD, we have sought to provide a way to draw on strategies for which there is empirical support (e.g., Kauffman & Wong, 1993) and put them into a manageable plan of instruction.

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