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## **Hard Times and an Uncertain Future: Issues that Confront the Field of Emotional/Behavioral Disorders**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I examine challenges to better preparing teachers of students with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD). Foremost among these challenges is the lack of agreement regarding a conceptual framework upon which to build quality prevention/intervention practices; instead, various authorities advocate disparate approaches, not all of which have empirical support. I assert that unresolved issues surrounding translating scientific research into classroom practice further hinder efforts to apply the most efficacious intervention options, as does our failure to exert control over the infrastructure of public education and the context in which we serve students with E/BD. Finally, I offer some modest proposals for removing obstacles to better preparing those who serve students with E/BD.



Rarely are we at a loss for challenges—now is no exception. One initiative that poses a major challenge to ensuring quality education to students with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) is standards-driven education. General education has long adhered to an egalitarian philosophy, predicated on the notion of the greatest good for the greatest number of students; whereas, special education has focused on individual pupil performance (Hardman & Mulder, 2003). Not surprisingly, vastly differing considerations have shaped decisions regarding education priorities and allocation of resources to address those priorities. Aside from occasional rhetoric, the general education community has given scant attention to the heterogeneity of variance within the student population. However, concern over poor academic achievement prompted the U.S. Congress to enact legislation aimed at forcing schools to ameliorate the problem. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, emphasis shifted from voluntary to involuntary compliance with the mandate to assure that all stu-

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dents' evidence satisfactory annual progress reflected by performance on high stakes tests. As a result, two once sharply contrasting education philosophies are far less transparent; however, given our lack of control over what transpires in general education, blurring the boundaries between general and special education puts students with E/BD in an extremely vulnerable position (Nelson, 2003).

Recently, a full-page advertisement in the *Washington Post* (November 10, 2003), sponsored by the United States Telecom Association, extolled the virtues of market-driven competition, characterizing it as better than costly regulations and asserting that it has triggered a wave of consumer choice and innovation. As I see it, there are troubling parallels between the business world and evolving policy as it relates to public education and teacher education. At the same time Congress is promulgating more rigorous academic standards, we are witnessing a major reduction in regulations governing teacher licensure, down to nothing more than a criminal background check and a passing score on tests of content knowledge. The loosening of standards to accommodate a market-driven approach is tantamount to deregulation of teacher education, further imperiling educational prospects of students with E/BD. In all, we face a mix of philosophical, legislative, and programmatic challenges to serving students with E/BD effectively. In examining the current scene, I chose to discuss briefly the following issues: (a) our conceptual framework, (b) the strength of our scientific base, (c) the quality of teacher preparation, and (d) the teaching/learning environment itself.

### *The Adequacy of the Conceptual Framework By Which We Operate*

Plato wrote that we live in shadows and search for the light of truth. As our field evolves and we search for truth, we are encumbered by the fact that we lack some of the defining characteristics of most professions—we have no canons or overarching principles, no unifying philosophy, except as it relates to a commitment to serving students. We operate from a conceptual framework of choice and deal with the facts as we see them, which is at odds with our goal to better to serve children/youth. Is it really in the best interest of our students to maintain a non-evaluative stance or to infer that all theoretical perspectives are equal and any one will do (Kauffman, 2001)?

Obviously, we must choose carefully the theoretical framework we advocate on behalf of students with E/BD. Experts in the field have examined critically various theoretical perspectives on special education (e.g., Cullinan, Epstein, & Lloyd, 1991; Kauffman, 2001; Rhodes & Tracy, 1977). While some of these perspectives are overlapping or at least complementary, others focus on very different factors and give way to contrasting—even conflicting—interpretations of emotional/behavioral disorders. Some perspectives are largely of historical interest, such as the work of early

psycho-dynamists, which represented the first attempt to establish predictable laws of behavior or the work of sociological theorists that paved the way for viewing human behavior within a larger social context. Today, there is growing recognition that ardent beliefs and strong convictions are no substitute for empirical facts when it comes to making critical decisions about children's lives. As George Sugai (1998) put it, "time is unforgiving. For that reason, promoting any theory that lacks sound empirical support risks squandering the limited number of "life chances" of students with E/BD. For the majority of students with E/BD, second chances are in short supply.

Differences in opinion regarding theory are nothing new. In ancient Egypt, once a year, the high priests would parade an Afis bull through the streets and translate for the people along the way the wisdom of the bull, as found in the droppings on the street. Recent excavations have uncovered hieroglyphics that suggest that on one such occasion, a skeptical onlooker was overheard to remark: "Wisdom my foot ... that's bull s\_\_t."

As was the case thousands of years ago, current debate over theory centers on who decides what qualifies as truth. Much like the skeptical onlooker, some question whether truth is a "monologue spoken by the voice of a single paradigm or frame of reference" (Skrtic, 1991, p. 19). While the high priest might have argued that scientific truth is tentative (Kauffman, 1999), the disbeliever might have countered with the assertion that a purely subjective perspective blinds us to the possibility of errors (Brigham & Polsgrove, 1998). For students with E/BD, there is scant margin for error.

Old or new, the strength of any theory rests with its power to explain a particular phenomenon—in our case, the origin and nature of E/BD and, in turn, give direction to its treatment (Cullinan et al., 1991). Polsgrove (2003) described well the current dilemma when he observed that, in spite of the accumulated evidence to support specific treatment efforts, "interventions and services are still guided by vague philosophical notions" (p. 339). Absent a sound conceptual framework, school personnel find themselves adrift in a sea of uncertainty, contradiction, and hyperbole. That may explain, at least in part, why so many teachers succumb so quickly and easily to the corrupt culture of the workplace.

The philosopher John Locke argued that one sign of respect for truth is not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs upon which it is built justify. A major obstacle to ensuring students with E/BD quality education is the fact that we have a high opinion of too many truths for which there is too little proof (e.g., facilitative communication, learning style based instruction). Every conceptual model has its limitations. Cullinan and his colleagues (1991) detailed the essentials that distinguish the psycho educational, behavioral, and ecological models. Since then, having gained a better understanding of the magnitude of the challenge, we are able to draw on a larger empirical body of evidence, and we are more cognizant of critical issues that relate to treatment. These issues include the reciprocal nature of learning and behavior problems, the signifi-

cance of treatment acceptability, fidelity, and generalizability, to name a few (Greenwood, 2001; Gunter & Denny, 1996; 1998; Kauffman, 2001; Nelson, Scott, & Polsgrove, 1999; Sugai, 1998; Wehby, Lane, & Falk, 2003). In sum, I feel strongly that we must embrace a more unified conceptual framework upon which to build quality programs of prevention/intervention for children and youth with E/BD.

*The Strength of our Scientific Base for Students with E/BD*

A second issue relates to research-based practices. With the No Child Left Behind Act, a bright light shines on scientifically based research (SBR). Feynman (1998) contends that science is a way of living with uncertainty and doubt. That describes well the current education scene. One might argue that an empirical perspective has become essential to assuring children and youth quality special education. Among other things, such a foundation serves the discriminative function spelled out in the No Child Left Behind Act that relates to the use of strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective.

Some in the field have sought to capitalize on the pressure on schools to improve student outcomes and preyed on the despair of parents of children with E/BD to promote their fad-du-jour. Researchers have questioned the efficacy of many of these practices, including full inclusion, whole language, aptitude treatment interaction or learning styles instruction, and facilitative communication (e.g., Kavale & Forness, 1987; Mostert & Kavale, 2001). These authors have repeatedly challenged the unsupported claims of those "intellectual alchemists" who believe that it is possible to turn personal beliefs into scientific truths. Recent legislation puts an exclamation mark on the argument that failure to evaluate the efficacy of an intervention creates a climate within which ineffective strategies remain in practice and potentially valuable strategies become suspect or is disregarded because they lack empirical support (Cullinan et al., 1991). It is past time to drive a stake through the heart of any classroom practice that lacks empirical support.

In the past decade, the volume of research on what constitutes effective classroom practices has grown enormously (Cook, Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003; Greenwood, 2001; Mostert & Crockett, 1999-2000; Nelson et al., 1999; Polsgrove, 2003). Even so, a huge gap remains between research and practice, which represents a real crisis in special education (Cook et al., 2003). If we are to rely on evidence-based practices, we must find ways to bridge that gap. It is incumbent upon researchers to talk more to practitioners and vice versa about treatment priorities, contextual issues that impinge on classroom practices, and ways to incorporate multiple, overlapping strategies into group-individualized academic as well as non-academic instruction. A similar dialogue must occur among special educators, school psychologists, social workers, public health personnel, and others who share a common research agenda (Nelson, 2003).

We must enlarge our capacity to serve students with E/BD by finding ways to make what we know works more accessible, transportable, and practical (Cook et al., 2003). We can do so only if we base decisions regarding best practices on evidence that stems from rigorous scientific inquiry. In advancing that agenda, we must: (a) identify pragmatic questions that we can empirically investigate; (b) apply research methodology that allows us to thoroughly investigate those questions; (c) conduct a coherent sequence of investigations; (d) directly and systematically replicate those studies across critical variables (e.g., gender, cultural/linguistic, chronological age differences); and (e) explore realistic ways to bring them to bear on classroom practices. Ultimately, our preparation must afford teachers the ability to select judiciously from among various strategies those that best suit a particular situation, to accurately and consistently apply them, and feel reasonably confidence that they will meet their students' needs (Van Acker, 2003). If we really wish to accomplish that goal, we must pay assiduous attention to the systematic overhaul of teacher education and the infusion of practices backed by scientific research.

#### *Longstanding Questions Regarding the Teacher Preparation*

The third issue that I would like to mention relates to teacher preparation in the area of E/BD. Before talking specifically about teacher preparation, I would like to digress for a moment to comment further on the special education profession. Whereas, most professions have their own distinct body of knowledge, we often speculate about what constitutes an effective teacher of E/BD. We extrapolate a set of skills from the professional literature to profile what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for someone to work successfully with this population of students. Fortunately, a growing body of empirical research on teaching and learning should bolster our credibility, assuming we can better convey that knowledge to the larger professional community (e.g., Cook et al., 2003; Polsgrove, 2003).

A second characteristic is that most professions reward its members for doing their jobs well; I am not sure that is the case when it comes to colleges of education. Research publications and external funds are more likely to garner recognition than quality teacher preparation. The problem is compounded by the fact that a similar contingency problem exists in the public schools. The absence of strong building-level administrative and collegial recognition and support is closely linked to teacher dissatisfaction and high attrition rates—especially among inexperienced teachers (e.g., George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995). Rhetoric aside, if we really wish to improve the quality of teacher education, university administrators must elevate significantly the status of teacher preparation.

A third and particularly relevant characteristic of most professions relates to the amount of control that can be exerted over the education and licensing of those who engage in a particular practice as well as the context

within which that knowledge/skill is applied. It is disconcerting that a major shift is taking place in the locus of teacher preparation—away from the university and toward less traditional market-driven options. Prompted, at least in part, by both numerical shortages and a scarcity of teachers from diverse backgrounds, there has been a proliferation of alternative licensure programs. Indeed, researchers at Johns Hopkins University have identified some 117 alternative licensure models in 41 states (Rosenberg, 2003). The number of options available to anyone seeking fast track entry into the classroom continues to grow, as does the number of teachers entering the profession ill prepared for the challenges of the workplace. In effect, there is a churning or revolving door process that succeeds only in providing the field more fodder in the form of poorly prepared and inexperienced teachers. If we continue on this path, the possibility exists that special education will become nothing more than a trade. Rather than obtaining formal preparation, teachers will simply serve an apprenticeship, much like cobblers or other artisans of the past. The net effect will be an inverse relationship between the rigor of teacher preparation and the demands of the student population.

For those special education teachers who receive training before entering the classroom it is likely to be of a generic or noncategorical nature. Today, 80% of special education teachers serve students drawn from two or more disability areas; over 30% teach students from four or more categories (Van Acker, 2003). The assumption is that there are common sets of skills that will be effective—regardless of the disability label. I am not sure that the accumulated research supports these assumptions (e.g., Cook et al., 2003; Kauffman & Wong, 1991).

Some years ago, Cruickshank (1977) argued that there was nothing more harmful to children than lost opportunities to learn. There is ample evidence that learning and behavior problems co-occur among students with and without a disability label (e.g., Gable, Hendrickson, Van Acker, & Tonelson, 2002; Kauffman, 2001; Sutherland, Alder, & Gunter, 2003; Wehby et al., 2003). Furthermore, there is a burgeoning database to support that academic achievement is a powerful antidote and that insuring student success at the primary level can decrease significantly the risk of problems at the secondary level. Conversely, failure to address overlapping learning/behavior problems in the early grades places many children on a slippery slope from which there is only about 50-50 chance they will recover, which are not good odds to bet on success (Walker, Calvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

Research documents that inadequate instruction triggers many of the behavior problems manifested by students with E/BD. Every day students “act-up” to escape the frustration that comes from not understanding the question or not knowing the answer (Shores, Gunter, Denny, & Jack, 1993). Indeed, a growing body of literature suggests that incorrect curricular placement and inadequate instruction is a slow burning fuse that can ignite noncompliant, antisocial, and other norm-violating behavior, motivated

by the desire to escape from an aversive classroom situation. In many instances, the classroom is anathema to students with E/BD who struggle to perform under conditions in which behavioral conformity takes precedence over instructional accommodation. If these problems go unabated, the numbers of life changes that exist for students with E/BD are diminished ... until there are none. Figures compiled by the U.S. Department of Education indicate that students with E/BD have the poorest outcomes of all students and that the prognosis becomes grimmer across the age span and according to the complexity and severity of presenting problems (Walker et al., 1995). In that inadequate preparation exacts a heavy toll on students and teachers, we must improve substantially the quality of teacher preparation in special education, which, in turn, should contribute to increased teacher retention (George et al., 1995). That change is not going to come easily.

Absent uniform standards or regulations (Polsgrove, 2003), E/BD teacher preparation reflects essentially an "anything goes" philosophy, with a curriculum that is analogous to a puzzle that is missing some pieces and consequently is impossible to put together. In an attempt to sort out the content of teacher preparation, we are guilty of disaggregating knowledge/skills and, to facilitate instruction, putting it in separate containers—one for behavior management; another to collaboration/consultation; another to pupil assessment; and so on. That content-specific organization is at odds with the multiple, concurrent demands of the classroom. Another impediment is that teacher training too often is a private act, meaning that there is not enough professional collaboration or content integration across courses and disciplines to ensure that teacher preparation closely mirrors the realities of the classroom. As Cook and colleagues (2003) remind us, it is the consistent and routine implementation of strategies of proven effectiveness that defines special education. One option is to develop a mix of simple to complex "case learning" (analyzing intervention choices of others) and "case study" activities (identifying and prioritizing the problem(s) and detailing practical and appropriate solutions). In contrast to traditional teacher preparation, emphasis should be on promoting knowledge/skill that is additive and cumulative in terms of skill development and application.

Closely related to content is the organization of programs of teacher preparation. In most instances, we decontextualize instruction—no less so as when we provide "pullout" instruction on social skills or self-control, in that it takes place far removed from the classroom. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that teacher preparation fails to reflect the complex and muddled realities of the classroom. It is inevitable that some interventions plans will not produce positive outcomes. Giving teachers-in-training too simplistic or too sanguine a view of the teaching/learning process diminishes the prospect that they will persevere in the face of poor initial outcomes of instruction. We do not normally assign students readings that contain equivocal or failed outcomes of intervention, but that is exactly



how the real world operates. While a course-by-course arrangement is common practice, teachers-in-training might be better off if first we introduced a conceptual framework for organizing building-wide and classroom level programs; second, a schema for selecting and incorporating specific skills (e.g., skills that align with the needs of the entire class, a subgroup, and to individual students); and then, a range of proven strategies and procedures to address specific target behavior (e.g., cognitive behavior modification, mnemonics).

In universities across the country, teacher preparation programs look essentially the same and most fail to produce competent special educators (e.g., George et al., 1995; Gunter & Denny, 1996; Polsgrove, 2003). Another issue that undermines efforts to improve teacher preparation is our measurement standards. The quality of teacher preparation has long been linked to various licensure examinations. Judging the worth of a program according to the percentage of graduates that meet the cut score begs the question whether the program produces teachers capable of consistently and predictably changing student behavior, an outcome consonant with the No Child Left Behind Act. We must find manageable ways to measure directly the acquisition-to-proficiency, generalization, and integration of those skills that we judge to be essential to successful instruction.

#### *The Context for Teaching and Learning in Special Education*

The forth and final issue relates to the host environment in which teaching/ learning occurs. As I have argued, many classroom practices are at odds with what the accumulated research suggests as best practices. Even so, simply strengthening the research basis of teacher preparation is not enough. Uprooting of folklore, superstitious thinking, and mythology that masquerades as quality instruction (Crockett, 2001) represents a necessary but not sufficient step to overhauling teacher preparation. In addition, we must look critically at the social and political context in which teachers function to better understand the setting-specific variables that exert influence over their behavior.

In preparing classroom teachers, our primary focus has been on strategies to change ideographic student behavior and less on school-wide administrative and organizational variables. However, Sarason, in *Revisiting the Culture of Schools and the Problem of Change* (1999), highlights the dramatic differences that exist between universities and K-12 schools, differences that rapidly undermine the integrity of initial teacher preparation and, in turn, play a significant role in teacher disillusionment and classroom abandonment. Unfortunately, we have yet to resolve systemic problems that cause large numbers of teachers to walk away from the classroom or to address the fact that those teachers who do not abandon the profession find it so easy to discard evidence-based best practices in favor of a hodgepodge of ineffective practices. Many classroom teachers say that

they learn the most about teaching “on-the-job” (Polsgrove, 2003) and find the advice of colleagues most trustworthy and usable (Landrum, Cook, Tankersley, & Fitzgerald, 2002). These data underscore how important it is to exert control over the infrastructure of schools so that it reinforces and supports teacher use of best practices (e.g., Kauffman, 1999).

There are a number of teacher preparation issues that relate to the context in which teachers operate. For example, among those strategies and procedures for which there is strong empirical support, some are more likely to be elicited and reinforced at the building or classroom level. At present, we have little or no idea whether the skills being taught reflect teacher behavior that is reinforced in the natural environment. Other questions arise as well. For instance, which setting-specific variables can we manipulate or otherwise exercise control over to boost student outcomes? For those variables we cannot control, how can we prepare teachers to defend themselves against the vicissitudes of the workplace that otherwise mitigate against best practices? What comes to mind is the 1950s movie *“Invasion of the Body Snatchers”* in which unsuspecting town folks were taken over by aliens while they slept. I picture an exhausted classroom teacher sitting at her desk long after her colleagues have gone home—nodding off—she becomes one of them. Perhaps preparation should include resistance training to increase the probability teachers engage in best practices in spite of an unsupportive work environment.

Another option is to blur the distinction between pre-service and in-service teacher preparation. Steve Tonelson and I (2000) proposed a performance-based pairing and fading strategy that stretches over a three-year period beyond initial teacher licensure. Colleges of education would introduce scaffolding procedures to support teacher induction into the workplace and, at the same time, provide inducements for schools to create support teams at the building level comprised of skilled and experienced general and special educators. The training institution would offer a year-long seminar to both beginning teachers and their colleagues, during which time faculty would observe and otherwise support the teacher(s); thereafter, faculty would be available in a trouble shooting or support capacity, as needed. A supportive induction program would better transition beginning teachers, increase the probability they will gain a firm foothold in the classroom and, in turn, positively influence teacher retention.

I am not optimistic that the No Child Left Behind Act will provide the impetus necessary for education authorities to reorganize schools to achieve more positive student outcomes. For now, we must encourage building level administrators to exercise more control over setting variables that potentially adversely impact on teacher performance, such as: (a) the physical location of the classroom; (b) the number of students and heterogeneity among them; (c) the number of extracurricular activities assigned to the teacher; and (d) the kind and amount of collegial support afforded that teacher. In that effort, it may be possible to address more systematically and situationally factors that pose the biggest challenges to beginning teach-

ers and cause beginning (and experienced) practitioners to abandon the field. In all, we must do a better job of accounting for contextual variables that co-vary with ideographic teacher variables and that likely differ as a function of gender, age, ethnic, or linguistic background of both teachers and students.

Notwithstanding previous discussion, there is some justification for cautious optimism. There is a cadre of dedicated and capable researchers and teacher educators who are doing some remarkable things. For example, with the growing presence of positive behavior supports (PBS) in schools, there is a greater economy of resources and, in turn, an increased opportunity for school personnel to (a) narrow the variance and, at the same time, (b) raise the performance level of all students, a shift that Gerber (2003) has characterized as a new technology. The emergence of PBS may signal the beginning of a paradynamic shift toward service options that are based on the intensity of intervention. Finally, recent legislation may prompt teacher educators to convince both general and special classroom teachers that academic and behavior problems are legitimate targets of stay-put instruction.

### Conclusion

In closing, I would like to reiterate several of the points I have discussed:

- 1) We must make a case for a conceptual framework that facilitates enlarging our stockpile of research-based practices and bolsters our capacity to address the increasingly diverse and challenging needs of students with E/BD.
- 2) We must continue to apply sound research methodology to the investigation of questions we deem critical to the education and treatment of students with E/BD.
- 3) We must prepare teachers to embrace only those skills that empirical research shows will produce positive outcomes and to make daily classroom decisions that are principle rather than strategy driven.
- 4) A century ago, Emile Durkheim wrote about a condition he described as anomie, a circumstance that can engulf and destroy a person who is trying to survive without norms. A similar fate awaits E/BD teachers who are poorly prepared and forced to operate in a cult of isolation (Simpson, 2003) unless we take bold and decisive steps to change the structure and culture of schools.

These are difficult and uncertain times; however, we cannot wait for the storms of controversy to pass or the fog that masks ineffective practices to clear. Nor can we sit on the sidelines and allow others to subvert our positivistic tradition or otherwise diminish the role of scientifically based research in teacher preparation in special education. Students with disabilities—including students with E/BD, deserve competent professionals who rely on proven practices within and across skill areas and apply those skills

at the right time and in the right place. Gene Edgar (1998) put it well when he asserted that we have a moral responsibility to increase the goodness-of-fit between social institutions and the people they serve; in our case, universities, public schools, and students with E/BD.

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