

Strategies for Success: Evidence-Based Instructional Practices for Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Mary E. Niesyn

ABSTRACT: The number of students with special needs, including those with emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) who are being served in the early elementary classroom, is increasing rapidly. The actual number of students with EBD in Grades K–3 is frequently underreported, as the formal process of identifying students for special education services has either not yet begun or is delayed for developmental considerations. Only 17% of children with EBD are identified by 9 years of age (M. Conroy & C. Davis, 2000). Thus, many primary grade (i.e., K–3) teachers work with EBD students whose needs exceed those of the typical student. Traditional teacher education training focuses on preparing teachers to work with groups of students across content domains with less attention given to individual differences or special needs. This article presents research on evidenced-based instructional practices and behavioral and student self-management strategies that teachers of Grades K–3 can use when working with students with EBD.

KEYWORDS: *elementary, emotional and behavioral disorders, instructional practices, self-management strategies*

IMAGINE THAT 20 SECOND-GRADE STUDENTS are actively engaged in classroom activities. Suddenly, without any apparent antecedent, desks are flipped over and materials are strewn about the room. Nineteen students abandon their work, line up, and exit the classroom as quickly as possible. What has happened? An earthquake perhaps? No, this is the scene in a second-grade classroom in which one child's emotional variability resulted in what may appear to be drastic safety procedures. More and more frequently, general education teachers are finding themselves in similar situations, working with students whose specialized needs surpass the teacher's repertoire of effective strategies.

As a result of the federal government's support of the goals set forth by the regular education initiative (REI), the number of students with special needs receiving instruction in the general education classroom has increased rapidly over the past 2 decades (Helfin & Bullock, 1999). At present, only one third of students with emotional and behavioral disorders

(EBD) receive 60% or more of their education outside the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). General education teachers are increasingly finding themselves responsible for serving students with special needs, but many have neither the training nor the support necessary to ensure success for all students (Helfin & Bullock; Lopes, Monteiro, & Sil, 2004).

Teachers' feelings of inadequate preparation and assistance are unlikely to change because of the current focus of teacher training programs under the mandates of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. NCLB requires all teachers to be "highly qualified," which is defined as having subject-matter competency in areas for which they are the primary instructor. The emphasis is on content knowledge rather than on the ability to deliver that content (Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Hardman, 2004). Unlike special education teacher preparation that focuses on preparing teachers to work with students with learning and behavior differences, general education teacher preparation concentrates on preparing teachers to work with groups of students across content domains, with little attention paid to individual differences or specialized needs. To further compound the issue, whereas the literature describes the goals of full inclusion as social rather than educational (Helfin & Bullock, 1999), the mandates of NCLB, and the 2003 reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, hold general education teachers accountable for increasing the performance of all students including those with special needs (Rosenberg et al.).

Although students with EBD represent the fewest number of students who have special needs and who are being

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served in the general classroom, their numbers are growing, and inclusion for these students is being implemented without careful planning (Kauffman, Lloyd, Baker, & Reidel, 1995). General education teachers have reported a lack of the necessary skills needed to support students with EBD (Helfin & Bullock, 1999; Lopes et al., 2004). This problem is exacerbated in the K–3 classroom in which the number of students with special needs—specifically, students with EBD—is frequently underreported. Only 17% of children with EBD are identified by 9 years of age (Conroy & Davis, 2000). The formal process of identifying students for special education services is often delayed because of the fear of stigmatization. Likewise, the deviance of children’s behavior may be denied for reasons associated with age or diversity. As a result, general education K–3 teachers frequently find themselves serving a greater number of students with special needs, including students with EBD (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003).

A review of the literature on teachers’ attitudes toward working with students with EBD reveals that general education teachers frequently report a resistance to full inclusion. Their resistance is generally not a result of rejecting students, rather their resistance results from feelings of a lack of competency (Lopes et al., 2004). These feelings suggest the need for effective instructional, behavioral, and self-management strategies. Fortunately, most instructional practices that are effective for students with special needs have even larger effects when used with general education students (Boardman, Arguelles, & Vaughn, 2005). This is especially important for general education teachers who wish to support students with special needs while still meeting the needs of the general population. However, despite the need and desire to teach all students, the interventions most likely to be implemented with fidelity are the following: “(a) easy to implement, (b) not time-intensive, (c) positive, (d) perceived to be effective by the teacher, and (e) compatible with the context in which the intervention will be employed” (Landrum et al., 2003, p. 152).

Unfortunately, many of the practices proven most effective for students with EBD do not meet these criteria. Effective instruction for students with EBD requires consistency in delivering, monitoring, and adapting instruction beyond what is often feasible in a regular classroom. Because of these challenges, it is understandable that when working with students with EBD in general education settings, teachers rarely modify their instruction (Gunter, Kenton-Denny, & Venn, 2000; Landrum et al., 2003; Levy & Chard, 2001). The purpose of the present article is to present teachers with a repertoire of evidence-based strategies that are effective in increasing time on task and decreasing levels of disruptive behavior for students with EBD. The strategies included are also considered feasible to implement in the context of the general classroom environment.

Effective Instructional Strategies

Teacher Praise

General education teachers need support in developing proactive classroom practices that focus on antecedent-based interventions to reduce the inappropriate behavior of students with EBD. Antecedent-based interventions, when implemented with students with EBD, result in an increase in desirable behavior and a decrease in undesirable behavior. Perhaps the easiest antecedent-based modification the general education teacher can implement when working with students with EBD is an increase in praise. Praise should be immediate and specific, describing for the learner the exact nature of the behavior being rewarded (Landrum et al., 2003; Lane, Graham, Harris, & Weisenbach, 2006). Praise should be delivered every time an appropriate behavior is displayed. Although this modification may seem self-evident, studies have suggested that teachers rarely give praise to students with EBD (Landrum et al.; Sutherland, 2000; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001).

Scaffold Independent Seatwork

Approximately 70% of a typical school day for elementary students is allocated to independent work (Gunter, Countinho, & Cade, 2002). Students with EBD often have difficulty managing their behavior during independent seatwork. Presenting materials individually rather than collectively (e.g., giving students a single worksheet rather than a work packet, folding worksheets in half to reveal only a few problems at a time) and giving shorter assignments are positively associated with relieving students’ stress (Conroy & Davis, 2000; Gunter et al., 2000; Weaster, 2004). Moving about the room, assisting, and physically and verbally interacting with students during independent activities also increases desired student behavior (Gunter et al.).

Increase Opportunities for Correct Responses

Another strategy for increasing desirable behavior during independent work is providing numerous opportunities for students to give correct responses (Barton-Arwood, Wehby, & Falk, 2005; Conroy & Davis, 2000; Gunter et al., 2002; Gunter et al., 2000; Gunter & Reed, 1997). During the instruction phase of a lesson, teachers should elicit four to six responses from students. Teachers should pose questions that would ensure responses with at least 80% accuracy before having students move on to independent practice. During independent work, the number of student responses should increase to 9 to 12 per minute with a 90% accuracy rate (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 1987; Gunter et al., 2000; Gunter & Reed). Teachers can increase the likelihood of students with EBD giving accurate responses by frontloading their questions with required information. Supplying the needed information results in an

increase of accurate student responses, which, in turn, leads to increased opportunities for teacher praise.

Establish Peer Tutoring Opportunities

Peer tutoring is one of the most frequently cited instructional strategies for decreasing negative behavior and increasing positive behavior for students with EBD. Peer tutoring has been reported to improve both academic and behavioral deficits as well as student engagement and response rates for all students, including those with special needs (Atkinson, Wilhite, Frey, & Williams, 2002; Barton-Arwood et al., 2005; Gunter et al., 2000; Landrum et al., 2003). Peer-assisted learning strategies, reciprocal peer tutoring, and classwide peer tutoring are all forms of effective peer tutoring. Although variations exist among instructional approaches, the underlying theory is consistent: Peer interaction can have a powerful influence on academic motivation and achievement. The tutor is afforded the opportunity to construct an explanation of the problem being addressed, thereby increasing his or her own understanding. The tutee is afforded increased opportunities for guided practice as well as increased opportunities to receive specific feedback and praise, all of which are associated with an increase in desired behavior for students with EBD.

Student Choice

Giving students a choice of instructional materials and incorporating their interests into curricular activities is also an effective strategy for increasing time on task and decreasing levels of disruptive behavior for students with EBD (Conroy & Davis, 2000; Gunter et al., 2000; Salend & Sylvestre, 2005). The choices offered to students are no different than the choices that could have been selected by the teacher. For example, the student can be allowed to choose a book to read aloud from a selection of five to six different titles. This strategy can also be implemented when a student is required to work independently. Allowing the student to pick from a few academic activities, with the option to change choices during independent worktime, can result in greater on-task behavior. Teachers can easily embed student interests into curricular activities. If a student demonstrates a strong interest in science and space exploration, then during a cursive lesson a teacher can include sentences from a book about planets. This high-interest topic could also be incorporated into guided reading selections, math word problems, and creative writing activities.

Direct Instruction

A compilation of instructional strategies that are effective with students with EBD is incomplete without a discussion on direct instruction. The use of direct instruction methods with students with EBD is well cited in the literature

(Atkinson et al., 2002; CEC, 1987; Gunter et al., 2002; Gunter et al., 2000; Gunter & Reed, 1997; Landrum et al., 2003; Lane et al., 2006; Weaster, 2004). Researchers have suggested that the delivery of new information through direct instruction for students with EBD may be the form of instruction that provides the most benefits for students and teachers (Gunter et al., 2002). The direct instruction model includes the following six components: (a) gain students' attention, (b) review past learning, (c) present new information (demonstrate or model), (d) assist students to perform task-guided practice, (e) evaluate students' independent performance, and (f) review the lesson. The CEC (1987) training manual includes an additional step—communicate the goal of the lesson—after Step 2 (review past learning). This form of explicit instruction enables the teacher to incorporate many of the previously discussed instructional strategies throughout the sequence. During the modeling stage of the lesson, teachers can increase the frequency and accuracy of student responses by supplying necessary information before asking questions about the content. This increase in correct responses is directly related to an increase in teacher praise. Using this instructional model, teachers can also delay independent practice until they are certain the student will be able to perform the skill with the 90% accuracy rate associated with increased on-task behavior and decreased negative behavior.

Behavior-Management Strategies

Many general education teachers are reluctant to implement behavior-management systems suggested in the literature as being effective with students with EBD because these systems appear to be too time intensive and dependent on consistent implementation. Also, they are generally not considered necessary for the rest of the student population. One example is a token economy system that relies on external rewards. Students earn tokens for appropriate behaviors. Tokens can later be exchanged for tangible rewards such as stickers and small toys (Gunter et al., 2002). There are other simple management strategies that general education teachers can implement that benefit all students.

Classroom Rules and Procedures

Almost all K–3 teachers begin the school year by establishing class rules. As a simple modification to this ubiquitous activity, teachers can ensure that rules are stated positively regarding observable behavior. Clear statements of positive consequences for following rules as well as consequences for violating the rules must be included (Gunter et al., 2002). Rules should be posted, explicitly taught, and reviewed periodically. Transitions between activities can also prove to be challenging for students with EBD. For this reason, posting daily transition schedules, in addition to class rules, is important (Salend & Sylvestre, 2005).

The benefits of explicit direct instruction hold true for establishing simple routines and content-based lessons. Modeling and providing explicit practice for classroom procedures (e.g., what do if a pencil breaks, student needs to go to the bathroom, work is finished) are associated with increases in positive behaviors (Gunter et al., 2002; Salend & Sylvestre, 2005). Teachers can post and review daily schedules and routines and alert students in advance of possible changes in procedures (Salend & Sylvestre).

Another effective management strategy is the scheduling of activities. Scheduling a quiet activity between recess and independent seatwork can reduce problem behavior and increase positive behavior for students with EBD. Educators should avoid scheduling consecutive activities that require children to be seated and pay attention. It is best to alternate activities between those that require the learner to sit quietly and pay attention with those that involve movement and hands-on activity (Conroy & Davis, 2000).

Teacher Directives

To increase the likelihood of a student complying with a directive (noncompliance with direction is cited as the most frequently demonstrated oppositional behavior), the teacher should make a precision request. This can be done by making a predictable request, incorporating the consequence in the request—positive for compliance and negative for noncompliance—and providing wait time for the student to comply. Teachers should deliver high-probability directives (ones that the students would most likely comply with) before delivering low-probability directives (Landrum et al., 2003).

Student Self-Management Strategies

Students with EBD commonly demonstrate great difficulty using self-management strategies in school settings. With training and support, students can learn to independently use self-management strategies (Atkinson et al., 2002; Landrum et al., 2003; Lane et al., 2006; Mason, Harris, & Graham, 2002; Mooney, Ryan, Uhing, Reid, & Epstein, 2005; Patton, Jolivet, & Ramsey, 2006; Weaster, 2004). The positive results of teaching students to use proactive self-management strategies are reported for students with and without disabilities. Therefore, the investment in instructional time devoted to teaching students to use self-management strategies benefits all students, not just those with EBD. The most common self-management strategies include the following: self-monitoring, self-evaluation, self-instructions, goal setting, and strategy instruction (Mooney et al.) and self-reinforcement (Lane et al.; Patton et al.). The success of these interventions is not based on any particular combination or order of usage. Also, although each of the strategies is associated with an increase in desired student behavior and achievement, self-monitoring is reported as the most widely implemented self-management strategy for students with EBD.

Self-Monitoring

In self-monitoring, students can learn procedures for observing, evaluating, and recording their own behavior during specific times (Landrum et al., 2003). Self-evaluation is embedded in the process of self-monitoring. Together, the student and the teacher can select and define the behavior to be changed. They then determine the criteria for mastery. Appropriate and inappropriate behaviors should be discussed (e.g., what does the appropriate behavior look like during the transition to recess? What does the inappropriate behavior look like?). The teacher introduces the self-management system (e.g., a self-monitoring form). Guided practice is provided in both the desired behavior and how to complete the self-monitoring form. During a difficult transition, (e.g., transitioning to recess) the student can complete the self-monitoring form, checking off the steps successfully completed.

During the initial training phase, the teacher observes the student during the transition and also completes a self-monitoring form. After the transition, the student and teacher can compare forms. The teacher can praise the student for exhibiting positive behaviors. Initially, this system requires greater teacher input because the student and teacher must complete and compare self-monitoring forms. However, over time, students should become adept at independently managing their behavior using self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement (Patton et al., 2006; see Appendix A).

Self-Instructions

Student use of self-instructions is also widely cited (Lane et al., 2006; Mooney et al., 2005; Selend & Sylvestre, 2005). Self-instructions take the form of orally coaching oneself through the steps in a given activity or assignment. Teaching students to use self-instructions requires the teacher to explicitly model self-statements to direct behavior within a specific activity. This modeling of self-instructions can be easily incorporated throughout the day in all content areas. Students with EBD benefit from writing a list of specific self-instructions. Students can then independently refer to the list throughout various activities. Strategy instruction is the process of teaching students to identify key steps to follow in solving a problem or achieving an outcome. Once these steps are determined, students can set goals for completing or mastering the individual steps. In this way, students can monitor, evaluate, and reward their own behavior independently.

Putting it all Together: Self Regulated Strategy Development

Self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) is an integrated instructional approach combining academic strategies with self-management procedures (Mason et al., 2002).

Academic and self-management strategies can be taught through explicit direct instruction incorporating six recursive instructional steps: (a) develop background knowledge, (b) discuss it, (c) model it, (d) memorize it, (e) support it, and (f) independent performance (Lane et al., 2006; Mason et al.). These steps are closely aligned with the steps for direct instruction. The following example illustrates SRSD instruction for story writing in the primary grades.

Teachers share the POW (pick an idea; organize my notes; write, write, write) general writing strategy with students, explaining that writing with POW results in more powerful writing. During the organizing step, students learn and apply the WWW, What = 2, How = 2 strategy (see Appendix B).

Following the SRSD model, the teacher develops background knowledge, ensuring that students are familiar with all seven parts of a story using the WWW, What = 2, How = 2 mnemonic. Teachers can guide students as they match parts of a story read aloud to the graphic organizer. Next, students and teacher discuss how the POW plus WWW, What = 2, How = 2 strategy can make stories more fun to write and more interesting to the reader. The teacher models how to use the strategy to write a story. A critical part of this modeling stage is the teachers' use of self-instructions. Students are prompted to discuss the self-instructions the teacher used and to develop their own list of self-instructions to be used during independent writing. Students practice memorizing the POW and WWW, What = 2, How = 2 mnemonics and their meanings.

During the guided practice, students can write a collaborative story with the teacher. The teacher provides as much support and scaffolding needed to ensure students' success. During this step, students are encouraged to use their list of self-instructions as needed. Students are given a WWW, What = 2, How = 2 story organizer. Students can refer to the organizer as they write. This self-management process encourages students to self-monitor the completeness of their stories. As sections of the organizer are completed, students are encouraged to recognize their own efforts through self-reinforcing statements. Last, once students have demonstrated that they are able to perform the skill with the 80% accuracy rate recommended by the CEC (1987), they can move on to independently writing stories incorporating all seven story parts. Students may refer to their self-instruction list as needed as well as self-monitor their progress with their organizer. Teachers can provide ongoing specific praise regarding students' positive behavior.

Summary

At present, only one third of students with EBD receive 60% or more of their education outside the general education classroom. As a result, general education teachers are finding themselves working with students whose specialized needs surpass the teacher's repertoire

of effective strategies. This problem is exacerbated in the K-3 classroom where the number of students with EBD is frequently underreported. Only 17% of children with EBD are identified by 9 years of age (Conroy & Davis, 2000). As a result, K-3 teachers need support developing proactive classroom practices that focus on antecedent-based interventions to reduce the inappropriate behavior of students with EBD. The strategies and interventions suggested in this article were selected on the basis of being empirically demonstrated to be effective in increasing positive behavior and achievement for regular education students and students with EBD. The strategies included are also considered feasible to implement in the context of a general education K-3 classroom (see Appendix C).

Most studies of instructional strategies used with students with EBD are not conducted in the general education classroom and therefore generalization to this setting must be done with caution. However, given the success of the strategies included in this article and the high demand for effective instructional strategies, it seems logical to suggest that teachers implement these proactive, antecedent-based interventions when working with young students with EBD in the K-3 general education classroom (see Appendix D).

AUTHOR NOTE

Mary E. Niesyn is an elementary school teacher and adjunct faculty member at the University of San Francisco. Her current research interests include evidence-based instructional interventions, teacher education and training, and professional development.

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APPENDIX A
Self-Monitoring Form

Name: _____ Date: _____

Classroom to recess

Did I remember to . . .

walk?	Yes	No
remain in line?	Yes	No
keep my hands to myself?	Yes	No
use a quiet voice?	Yes	No

APPENDIX B
Story Organizer

Story part	Question	Check off if included
Who	Who is the main character?	_____
When	When does the story take place?	_____
Where	Where does the story take place?	_____
What	What does the main character do or want to do; what do other characters do?	_____
	What happens when the main character tries to do it; what happens with other characters?	_____
How	How does the story end?	_____
	How does the main character feel; how do other characters feel?	_____

APPENDIX C
**Evidenced-Based Instructional Practices for K–3 Teachers Working With Students
With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in the General Education Classroom**

Instructional practices

1. Give frequent, immediate, and specific praise.
2. Present materials individually, shorten assignments, and reveal few problems at a time.
3. Interact with student during independent seatwork.
4. Implement peer-tutoring opportunities.
5. Frontload questions with required information to increase correct responses.
6. Delay independent seatwork until student can perform task with 90% accuracy.
7. Embed student interests into curricular activities.
8. Allow student to choose from a few academic activities during independent seatwork.
9. Teach new concepts using explicit direct instruction method.

APPENDIX D
**Evidenced-Based Behavior-Management Strategies for K–3 Teachers Working With
Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders in the General Education Classroom**

Behavior-management strategies

1. Establish positively stated rules regarding observable behavior.
2. Post, teach, and review rules periodically.
3. Post and review daily schedules, routines, and transitions.
4. Alert students to any changes in routine.
5. Model and provide explicit practice for classroom procedures.
6. Schedule a quiet activity between recess and independent seatwork.
7. Alternate between passive and active activities.
8. Deliver high-probability directives (ones that students will most likely comply with) before delivering low-probability directives.

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