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Teachers should be taught to expect behavioral and emotional variety and deviance in their regular classrooms

Providing education for emotionally disturbed children in the least restrictive environment

by Robert H. Zabel



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Probably no children are less welcome in regular educational classrooms than those who present behavioral and emotional disorders. In the past, where public school programs have been provided for such children, they have generally involved separation of the disturbing child from the regular program into special self-contained classes, resource rooms or home bound instruction (Schultz, Hirshoren, Manton & Henderson, 1971).

For a number of years, concern has been expressed by some educators regarding the efficacy, as well as the ethical issues, involved in educating children who are mildly mentally retarded in segregated programs (Dunn, 1968; Goldstein, Moss & Jordan, 1965), since most research conducted in this vein has failed to demonstrate significant, stable academic and social gains for children in these programs.

Most studies that have examined educational interventions for emotionally disturbed/behavior disordered children have not evaluated the efficacy of entire programs, but have concentrated on the effectiveness of particular methods or techniques (Zabel and Wood, 1977). However, the few comparative studies involving entire programs have also generally not substantiated the long-term efficacy of either resource rooms (Glavin, 1974) or special self-contained classes (Quay, Werry, McQueen & Sprague, 1966; O'Leary and Schneider, 1977) for producing either academic or behavioral gains.

There is also some evidence that "spontaneous" improvement or remission of symptoms occurs over time with as many as 2/3 of children who are considered emotionally disturbed (Glavin, 1972; Vaac, 1972; Zax, Cowen, Rappaport, Beach and Laird, 1968).

In addition to growing educational and ethical concern about the appropriateness of different educational settings for exceptional children, including the emotionally disturbed, the recent Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) adds legal and financial pressures from the federal level to provide appropriate education of exceptional children in the least restrictive settings. For several years, the Bureau for Education of the Handicapped has sought to encourage less restrictive education, as evidenced in their financial support of the so-called Dean's Projects intended to promote the development of teacher-training programs emphasizing preparation for "mainstreaming" handicapped children.

Even with legal and financial promotion, however, the question remains of just what constitutes appropriate and least restrictive education for emotionally disturbed children. A recent comprehensive (guide) bibliography on

"mainstreaming" did not include any references dealing with disturbed children (Peterson, 1976). While much has been published regarding conceptual concerns and implementation of mainstream programs for children with other handicaps, the first collection of articles addressing mainstreaming of emotionally disturbed children has only recently been published (Pappanikou and Paul, 1977). The issue of least restrictive and appropriate education for emotionally disturbed/behavior disordered children involves a number of sub-questions, including:

- Who are emotionally disturbed children?
- How many disturbed children are in the schools?
- What kinds of programs should be provided?
- What types of training and support should teachers receive?

Defining emotional disturbance

No instrument has yet been devised to accurately determine the existence of emotional or behavioral problems, and it is unlikely that any ever will be. Some handicapping conditions (e.g., visual, auditory, and orthopedic handicaps) can be partly determined on the basis of physical or physiological measures. For others (e.g., mental retardation, learning disabilities) there are diagnostic instruments purported to objectively indicate something about general ability and/or particular learning patterns of children. As inappropriate as some of these measures may sometimes be for educational planning, at least they provide a systematic means for diagnosing the handicapping condition. In determining emotional disturbance, on the other hand, diagnosis is based largely upon judgment. It is a normative decision.

Widely differing theories regarding the nature of disturbance have been proposed (Rhodes and Tracy, 1974). Some view disturbance as representing underlying biophysical or psychological dysfunctions. Others ignore underlying pathology and concentrate on the form of behavior itself, how it is learned and why it is socially deviant. In addition, ecological analyses of emotional disturbance, postulating a clash between "culture bearers" and "culture violators" resulting in alienation, have been presented as an additional interpretation of disturbance. These major theoretical interpretations of emotional disturbance have also been challenged by "counter theorists" who analyze the "illusion of normality" (Rhodes, 1977).

It seems justified to view emotional disturbance as taking many forms, perhaps as varied as the individuals and settings involved. Essentially, it may indicate the perception by one person of another person's deviance. In school settings, this usually means the perception of disturbance in a child by school authorities (teachers, administrators, psychologists, etc.).

Incidence of emotional disturbance

Like defining disturbance, estimates of incidence rates in school-aged populations are difficult to pin down. Schultz, et al. (1971) reported that state education directors' estimates range from .05 to 15 percent, with the modal value (in 15 states) being 2 percent and overall distribution of estimates at about 2.5-3.0 percent. 2 percent is also the widely cited figure of the United States Office of Education (Mackie, 1969; Froomkin, 1972).

However, there is apparently little basis for these estimates other than "expert opinion" (Wood and Zabel, 1978), and several field studies which have been based largely upon teacher judgments of disturbance have yielded considerably higher rates. For example, studies involving elementary-aged populations have yielded estimates of 22 percent (Stennett, 1966), 28 percent (Rubin and Balow, 1971), and 24 percent (Salvia, Schultz and Chapin, 1974). In a study involving students in kindergarten through grade 12, Kelly, Bullock and Dykes (1977) found that teachers identified 20 percent as behavior disordered.

What can one make of these apparent disparities between incidence estimates ranging from 1.2 to 28 percent? A partial answer may be suggested in a report of the Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children (1969) which discussed emotional disturbance on a continuum of severity. The Commission estimated that 0.67 percent of the child population are psychotic, 2-3 percent are "severely disturbed," and another 8-10 percent are afflicted with emotional problems calling for specialized services.

This type of estimate, based upon severity of disturbance may be related to the low "official" incidence figures and the higher teacher estimates cited above. A number of interpretations may be offered concerning the differences between experts and teachers in estimating the prevalence of behavior problems. One interpretation might be that teachers are less tolerant of problem behavior than administrators or clinicians. A related, though perhaps more reasonable, interpretation is that teachers have more contact with groups of children than either clinicians or school administrators and are thus exposed to more problem behavior (Wood and Zabel, 1978). Of course, measurement procedures used in screening studies can also strongly influence incidence estimates (Salvia, et al, 1974).

There is evidence that different teachers view emotional disturbance differently. Balow and Rubin (1977) found that 58 percent of a sample of 370 students in a longitudinal study were classified as behavior problems by at least one teacher during six consecutive years of screening, yet only 3 percent were rated behavior problems by all six teachers. Apparently, over the years, all teachers do not view the same children as problems, yet the above studies do indicate that each year teachers see a large percentage of their students as behavior problems.

Provision of programs for disturbed children

While teachers view as many as 20-30 percent of their students as problems, a much smaller number—probably nearer the low incidence figures of 2-3 percent—can be viewed as serious, chronic problems requiring specialized interventions in more restrictive educational settings such as residential schools, self-contained classes or even resource rooms. In some cases, with proper programming and support, even some of these more disturbed children can be maintained in regular programs (Moller, 1964).

Obviously, the majority of disturbing children should remain in regular classrooms with regular teachers and typical peer models. It is unreasonable and unjustified to segregate 20-30 percent of the school-aged population into special programs. Indeed, paying too close attention to

possibly transient problem behavior may actually cause them to persist and intensify.

Does this mean that nothing should be done with the large number of troublesome children remaining in regular programs? No, it should not be assumed that, because children in this category do not present chronic kinds of disturbances or because their behavior does not concern every teacher, the issue should be ignored. Some kinds of support should be provided for teachers to help them deal with the problem behavior.

Support for regular classroom teachers

Support for teachers in dealing with disturbing behavior could take a variety of forms. Because of the apparent size of the problem; and since it is a major source of teachers' concern, it is important to provide services in both pre-service and in-service teacher training.

In teacher-training programs, for instance, teachers should be taught to expect behavioral and emotional variety and deviance in their regular classrooms. Developmental perspectives, including study of behavioral deviations from normal patterns of development should be an explicit part of training teachers for "mainstream" education. Efforts should also be made to arrange practicum experiences in "mainstream" programs that include children with a variety of exceptionalities.

Regular classroom teachers should also be taught that, for most problem behavior, highly specialized training is not required. Research (cited above) has generally shown regular programs to be as beneficial for emotionally disturbed children as separate special programs. Regular class teachers should be taught that teachers who are good managers of emotionally disturbed children are usually those who are good managers of typical children (Kounin, Friessen and Norton, 1966; Kounin and Abradovic, 1968). They should also be aware that emotional disturbance is not contagious. There is no evidence that the presence of an emotionally disturbed child in a class has a detrimental effect on the behavior of non-disturbed students (Saunders, 1971).

Both pre- and in-service training for regular classroom teachers should emphasize behavior management skills. These need not be especially complex, sophisticated, or time consuming but rather emphasize basic classroom and group management techniques of a nonintrusive nature that have been shown to have an impact on the efficient operation of classrooms. Examples of such techniques are the "antiseptic manipulation of surface behaviors" outlined by Redl and Wineman (1952) which include specific procedures for defusing potentially troublesome behavior in ways that are also therapeutic. Kounin (1970) has described some related types of teacher behaviors, such as "with-it-ness" (ways of communicating the teacher's awareness of what is going on in the classroom, "group alerting" (keeping students alert and on-task), and "slowdowns and smoothness" (initiation and maintenance of the class's movement). Techniques such as these are fundamental to successful management of groups of children and probably contribute more to a positive classroom atmosphere and improvements in problem behavior than much of the more complicated, intrusive programming requiring specialized training.

In addition to pre- and in-service training considerations, regular teachers working with disturbed children in their classes could benefit from actual day-to-day assistance to deal with the children's disturbing

behavior as well as the stress they themselves experience. A possible vehicle for providing this kind of support could be resource teachers serving as consultants. These persons would be able to assist teachers with specific management problems by actively observing, collecting data, monitoring behavioral programs, providing advice regarding modifications in materials and curriculum, as well as offering support, encouragement and perhaps "time out" relief to teachers by directly assisting in classroom programs.

It may be that the individual who could successfully fulfill the demands of such a role would be an exceptional person. It may also be that the role could be jointly filled by a team of personnel who already operate in schools. Principals, counselors and resource room teachers often may jointly have the skills to effectively provide support for regular classroom teachers dealing with emotionally disturbing children.

Conclusions

A large percentage of the school-aged population is viewed by teachers as presenting emotional and behavioral problems. Even when these behaviors are transient and characteristic of normal developmental stresses, they can cause anxiety and problems of classroom management for regular classroom teachers. It is clearly inappropriate to provide special educational programs for most of these children, at least in terms of special educational placements, yet it is also unreasonable to assume that the disturbing behavior perceived by teachers in regular classrooms is not a real problem. Consequently, efforts should be made to provide teachers with the expectation for behavioral and emotional deviance in their regular classrooms, to provide instruction in basic methods of classroom management, and most importantly, to provide continuous, accessible support for regular teachers in dealing with day-to-day classroom problems.

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