

Teaching Students with Disabilities: Emotional Disturbance and Behavioral Disorder¹

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Introduction

Agriculture teachers have the unique opportunity to expose students to a variety of careers through hands-on instruction that appeals to a wide variety of learners. Consequently, students of varying abilities and backgrounds may all be in the same class simultaneously. Some students are identified as having a behavioral disorder or being emotionally disturbed. These students present a wide range of behaviors because the intensity of the disorder depends on the experiences of the student and the way the student reacts to those experiences. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), emotional disturbance is defined as

A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004, 300.8 c 4 i)

Teachers are not responsible for identifying students as emotionally disturbed, but they do have the responsibility to refer students for evaluation if they suspect that a student may qualify for special education placement. (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007). A large number of students do not receive special services for this classification, despite demonstrating a need for accommodations and support, with less than one percent of the school-age population being identified as emotionally disturbed (Quinn et al., 2000).

Emotional disturbance can be caused by biological, family, school, and environmental factors, and the resulting observed behaviors can be categorized into two broad categories—externalizing behavior or internalizing behavior. Examples of externalizing behavior include aggression, hitting, lack of attention, and impulsivity, while examples of internalizing behavior include shyness, withdrawal, depression, fears/phobias, and anxiety (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007). As a result of their disability, students who are emotionally disturbed or have a behavioral disorder often experience difficulty with learning and may have learning disabilities (Forness, 2004; Rock, Fessler, & Church, 1997) and/or attention deficit disorders (Bussing, Zima, Belin, & Forness, 1998). Teachers can best prepare for students with behavioral disorders and emotional disturbance by creating

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a safe and welcoming environment while working in tandem with the student's case manager to meet the specific needs of the student.

Application in the Learning Environment

Before beginning instruction in a class with a student who has been diagnosed with a behavioral disorder or emotional disturbance, meet with the student's case manager to learn about his or her educational history. Reviewing the modifications on the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) independently and with the case manager will help to clearly outline the student's needs and aid in planning instruction. Sometimes the modifications will indicate the level of performance at which to assess the learner or they may indicate that the student should be graded on a pass/fail basis. Additionally, the school psychologist or social worker may be involved with helping provide services to the student and can serve as a valuable resource in helping to create a positive environment for the student, as well as helping to educate the instructor of the student's background history. If the situation permits, the instructor might also contact the parents/guardians of the student to gain their perspective and valuable information on what works best for their child. The instructor should be sure to include the student's guidance counselor in the conversations regarding the progress of the student because the counselor may also have developed a relationship with the family that can prove to be a valuable asset in helping meet the needs of the learner. On the rare occasion, students with more severe cases of behavioral disorders will sometimes be paired with a paraprofessional aide to assist them in their classes throughout the day. It would be beneficial to include the paraprofessional in conversations with the case manager in order to facilitate clear communication. Assembling this information before the school year begins can help to make a smoother start for both the educator and the learner.

Classroom Environment

According to Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm (2007), strategies for working with students identified as having a behavioral disorder can be broadly organized into a few major techniques:

- Maintaining an organized physical environment
- Establishing positive relationships
- Changing behavior
- Resolving conflicts and promoting self-control
- Adapting instruction

Establishing clear expectations and an organized environment is beneficial for all students, but especially for students identified as having a behavioral disorder or emotional disturbance. Teachers can create the best working environment for these students by ensuring that materials, equipment, and personal items are well maintained, neatly arranged, and presented in a predictable way, creating an organized and structured atmosphere (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007). This includes not only the physical layout of the classroom but also the lighting, ventilation, noise levels, visibility of instructional space, and personal spaces for both the instructor and students. Predictable routines, spaces, and expectations help create consistency for students who might otherwise be experiencing a lack of structure.

All students benefit from working with an instructor who develops a positive rapport with them. The foundation to any relationship is trust, a factor that is even more important to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Instructors should demonstrate that they care equally about all students and that they follow through with what they say they are going to do in order to show students that they will behave in predictable ways, helping to create even more consistency and trust in the student-teacher relationship. Another strategy that can be used when establishing connections with students is to correct students in terms of their behavior instead of in terms of the student. This is especially important when reprimanding inappropriate student behavior. Be careful to state that you are dissatisfied with the behavior, not the student, when working with all students, but especially for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007).

Depending on the student, certain behaviors might be present or absent based on the nature of their emotional behavioral disorder. Consulting the student's case manager to review the behavioral goals of the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can be a valuable tool to help the instructor determine how to best approach behavior management. Establish clear expectations at the beginning of the class along with clear consequences for violating these expectations. Keep the approach toward behavior management logical with a focus on helping students realize that the work they are doing is helping them with their own education. Students with emotional or behavioral disorders may lash out emotionally toward others, so it is important as an instructor to not take the things they might say as a personal affront. A key approach to assist in creating an appropriate emotional environment is to listen to students and their perspectives before responding. The

instructor may guide the student through the process of identifying the appropriate behaviors and developing strategies for how to respond in the future. Promoting a positive environment may be enhanced by praising students when they are demonstrating appropriate behaviors, utilizing humor to build relationships with students, and considering student feedback when making changes to instructional procedures or classroom routines.

Students with an emotional or behavioral disorder may find working with others in group situations challenging. Helping students develop strategies for working with their peers can help them assimilate better to the classroom environment. Providing instruction in leadership, teamwork, and communication can benefit all students and help prepare them for future employment. Agricultural education is particularly adept at incorporating this type of instruction through FFA and Life Knowledge lessons and may be more prepared to offer personally significant leadership and character education opportunities to students (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008). Some techniques to model for students include compromising, sharing, apologizing, active listening, and positive self-talk.

When adapting instructional or assessment strategies for students identified with an emotional or behavioral disorder, the instructor should first check their IEP modifications and discuss different strategies with their case manager. Oftentimes the strategies work in tandem with behavioral modification goals. Since academic failure or frustration can aggravate a student's emotional or behavioral disorder (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007), providing opportunities for students to experience success and highlighting their successes instead of shortcomings is a positive way to reinforce desired performance. For example, the instructor might create an opportunity for students to demonstrate their strengths in front of the class, allowing them to really "shine" in front of their peers. Additionally, if a student becomes extremely frustrated and is continually failing to perform the desired academic task, then the instructor may subtly change the task assigned and redirect the student's attention to a new task. The instructor can also reinforce positive behaviors by noticing improvement in progress toward a goal and recognizing that improvement. Developing and maintaining motivation and interest in the topic studied is key to engaging all students. Engagement is equally effective with students who have an emotional or behavioral disorder. Using a variety of materials and approaches to capture student interest helps reduce inappropriate behaviors. Furthermore, providing alternative forms of assessment will allow students to express their

individual learning style preference and may allow them to better perform the learned skills (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007).

Laboratory Environment

Clear routines and norms are also important in the laboratory setting. Laboratory settings in agricultural education range from a science laboratory, agricultural mechanics facility, greenhouse, or a livestock handling facility. The instructor should emphasize appropriate attire, safety, and behavioral expectations in these settings and contact the parents of the student to communicate this information to them as well. Prepare all students for anticipated changes and transitions by reviewing upcoming tasks and explaining the need for these changes. For example, a few weeks before the end of the growing season, it would be beneficial to explain to all students the need to anticipate changes in the weather that would necessitate adjustments to the management practices in a school garden. As the weather begins to change, calling attention to these changes and asking students to explain the appropriate response in management can help students to learn appropriate crop management techniques and also model appropriate strategies for coping with change.

The laboratory environment creates an opportunity for students to work in pairs or groups when learning or reinforcing new skills. The social nature of this learning environment can help students with emotional and behavioral disorders become more successful (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007). For example, the instructor might demonstrate a new task such as trimming goat or sheep hooves in front of the whole class and then ask for a student volunteer to try it out under the guidance of the instructor while the class observes. Through this observation, students learn the appropriate hoof trimming techniques and also see appropriate student behavior when interacting with the instructor, experiencing frustration with learning, and experiencing success in learning. It is important to select student volunteers to model behavior who are considered academic peers of others. If the instructor invites a student who is always successful the first time that he or she tries a new task, then other students might not view themselves as having the same ability to do well. If a student who peers consider to be their academic equivalent is asked to demonstrate a new skill and experiences success, then other students are more likely to have a positive learning experience and gain self-efficacy. This will lead to higher confidence in their own ability to perform the new task for the remainder of the peers.

Non-formal Environment

Agricultural education takes advantage of a variety of non-formal learning environments, including class field trips to area farms and businesses, FFA conferences and workshops, and Supervised Agricultural Experience projects (SAE). All students should be taught appropriate behavioral expectations for these environments. The SAE project is a particularly ideal vehicle to teach personal goal setting as well as personal and vocational skills growth. Through the SAE, students can be taught to identify their problem behaviors, set personal goals, and to monitor their academic and social behavior, leading to more student self-control (Polsgrove & Smith, 2004). Older youths can build their skill sets as well as their confidence through vocational training and work experience opportunities (Quinn et. al., 2000). Depending on the degree to which the student is affected by their emotional or behavioral disorder, they might be assigned a workplace mentor by the special education department at the school. Collaborating with this mentor and the employer is vital to the success of the work placement and SAE project.

Conclusion

Learners diagnosed with emotional disturbance and behavioral disorders interact with the learning environment in unique ways. Of primary difficulty to these learners is demonstrating appropriate behaviors in a variety of environments. Working to establish a clearly structured, effective learning environment is key to the success of these learners. Consulting the student's case manager, guidance counselor, school psychologist, and school social worker can all be valuable resources for learning how to appropriately respond to and positively shape student behavior. Further resources regarding promoting positive behavior from all students can be found from the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), established by the US Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs. Additionally, the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institutes for Research has compiled a document entitled "Educational Strategies for Children with Emotional and Behavioral Problems" that provides several detailed descriptions for more strategies to employ when working with students with this disability. Resources for teaching communication, teamwork, and leadership skills can be found on the National FFA Organization's website for free download through the Life Knowledge curriculum. Examples of various learning strategies that can be used to help differentiate instruction can also be

found on the National FFA Organization's website for free download as "e-Moments."

<http://www.pbis.org>

http://cecp.air.org/aft_nea.pdf

<http://www.ffa.org/resources/educators/lifeknowledge>

http://www.ffa.org/MyResourceDocuments/lk_eMoments_All.pdf

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