How to Maintain Your Sanity in an Inclusion Classroom

Learning to Appreciate Students with Emotional Disabilities Through Understanding and Behavior Management

Suzanne Curtice and Jennifer Weg

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From “Exclusion” to Inclusion...

As inclusion began, students with more visible disabilities were blended into classrooms (ie. visual/auditory/physical impairments). Educators understand that these students' disabilities are of no fault of their own and could benefit from an inclusion setting. Next, students with less visible disabilities were included (ie. speech/learning impairments) and are seen in much the same way—they want to learn but need help. Lastly, students with emotional disabilities were included. Many educators have a hard time accepting these students in the same way that they do the previous ones. The students with emotional disabilities do not have “visible” impairments and seem like “regular students—except for their behaviors (Hewitt).
Mary Beth Hewitt, in training students and staff in inclusion acceptance, used Winnie the Pooh to show the different types of disabilities that might be in the classrooms (Hewitt). Although each of the characters could be considered to have an emotional disability, they are all important to the make up of the Hundred Acre Woods.

*Foster the belief that all students contribute something positive to a classroom!
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Even though student behavior may not fit into the traditional definition, it doesn’t mean that we can’t appreciate the students for what he or she has to offer. Imagine famous people who have made wonderful contributions to society but who may not have been “traditionally behaved” in school… These connections to famous people can be used at a middle/high school level. Imagine the people below in your classroom:

Jim Carrey         David Letterman
Robin Williams
Sylvia Plath      Andy Warhol

Unconventionally behaved adults…

*Adopt a positive mission statement for your classroom!*  
“As educators and students, we will strive to create a learning environment in which all students can find success. This success is based on individual ability rather than preconceived expectations. Educating students academically, behaviorally, and socially is a challenge in which we will all find our own successes. All students, regardless of ability, are valuable within our school and classroom.”
Whether an optimist or pessimist about students with emotional disabilities in an inclusive classroom, there are myths that need to be dispelled before we can find success in our schools.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Truth</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Emotional disabilities aren’t “real” disabilities. Students choose their behaviors. And can control them if they want to.</td>
<td>1. An emotional disability is a “real” disability. The same way that a student doesn’t wake up and say “Oh, I’d like to be blind today”, students with E.D. don’t choose their disability. Students with E.D. can be successful in their schools and communities.</td>
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<td>2. Students with E.D. have behaved poorly because they were in classes with other students with E.D. Being in classes with “appropriate” role models will help them behave better.</td>
<td>2. Emotional disabilities is not learned behaviors. Putting a child with E.D. in with non-coded students won’t fix their problems.</td>
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<td>3. Students with ED act they way they do because it is “accepted.” If you expect better behavior, they will live up to the rules.</td>
<td>3. Students with E.D.’s behaviors were not condoned in a self-contained setting. They were expected to follow a set of rules and expectations that were realistic and which would benefit them as individual learners.</td>
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<td>4. If staff members know about a student’s prior history, it will prejudice their interactions with the students, exacerbating the negative behaviors. If you don’t tell, they’ll be treated the same and will behave.</td>
<td>4. Staff needs to know about the history these students. Rather than prejudicing them, or creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, it will dispel the feeling that the kid is just being “bad,” leading to a teacher’s frustration or anger or overreaction.</td>
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<td>5. Students with E.D. act up/out because it has been “allowed” in the past. If they are disciplined, they will behave.</td>
<td>5. Many students with E.D. have run the gamut of the discipline system, from the principal’s office to suspensions to arrests, etc. For students with E.D., sometimes they feel they “deserve it” or</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Students with E.D. want to be in inclusion classrooms. They'll behave so they won't be pulled out again.</td>
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<td>Students with E.D. who come from a self-contained setting may not want to be in an inclusion setting. They may fear the return of stereotypes of being the &quot;bad kid&quot; or being teased by others. Many have not have had positive experiences in school.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>If instruction is interesting and engaging, behavior will improve.</td>
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<td>Negative behaviors exhibited by students with E.D. are not solely school/academically incited. Although an interesting program will help a student with E.D. find success, it won't cure the problem.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>The educational environment should not have to adjust to the students. If he/she can't adjust, then he/she does not belong there. It is a lack of self-control and will-power. They don't try to control themselves.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Just because modifications for a student with E.D. aren't as physical as a wheelchair ramp or adjustable seats, doesn't mean they aren't needed. E.D. modifications may need to be changes in types and timing of interventions, training of ALL staff, and access to support staff services.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>If a behavior isn't immediately addressed, you are condoning the behavior. Then the other students will think that the behavior is okay.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Emotional disabilities aren't &quot;contagious.&quot; A planned ignore doesn't mean that the behavior won't be appropriately addressed. Changing language can de-escalate a volatile situation while maintaining appropriate behavior boundaries.</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>In order to be fair, all students must be treated the same. If they have to be treated differently, they shouldn't be here.</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Treating everyone the same isn't fair. Fairness is giving students what they need in order to be successful.</td>
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(Hewitt)
As you are working with challenging behaviors, remember Mary Beth Hewitt’s definition of discipline:

THREE MAJOR GOALS OF DISCIPLINE (which means “to teach”)
1. to change, shape, modify behavior
2. to set an example of standards
3. to provide a physically and psychologically safe environment.

Functional Management Ideas

There are many things that you can plan to do before the students even walk into your room! Here are some functional management ideas that you can try!

❖ Be a good role model; consistently set a good example through your own attitudes and behaviors. Don’t break the rules just because you are an adult. If the children are not allowed to have beverages in the room, don’t sip that desperately needed coffee in front of your students (Daniels, 2001).

❖ Tell and show students what they should be doing, instead of constantly pointing out what they are doing wrong (Behavior Management).

❖ Greet your students in the hall! Let them know that they are important enough to give up that precious 30 seconds of silence! Thank them at the end of a class for a job well done or something they specifically did right (“Thanks for raising your hand today!”) (Daniels, 2001).

❖ Positive reinforcement goes a long way; focus on what your students are doing right, memorize the thesaurus entries for “great”, “wonderful”, “fabulous”, etc. Drop a student a positive note if they respond negatively to public compliments (Daniels, 2001).
Document the effectiveness of your methods with individual students as well as whole classes so you know what works and what doesn't. Constantly reassess your methods. Try keeping a professional journal (Daniels, 2001).

Teach students to self-manage their behavior. Try having them keep a journal, draw a cartoon, act in a skit with a friend, or write a rap instead of acting on inappropriate impulses (Daniels, 2001).

Learn the difference between being flexible and being inconsistent. Never deviate from your posted (and thoroughly understood by the students) list of expectations. Be prepared for a "rough start" until the students learn that you mean business, in the nicest of ways of course. However, be flexible in how you enforce them. Students may react differently to you day-to-day and even minute-to-minute (Daniels, 2001).

Get to know your students personally. Show them you are interested in their lives with things like "Great job in the basketball game yesterday," or "How was your weekend?" Take it one step further and figure out how to deal with each individual student by learning what works best for them in certain situations. When students know that you care about and respect them, you can expect the same in return (Daniels, 2001).

Offer choices to give a student power and freedom, but keep in mind that too many choices can overwhelm and frustrate him/her. Be sure that you can live with the choices you offer (Daniels, 2001).
Preventative Tactics

There are strategies that you can use in your classroom that can head off a volatile situation or negative behaviors. These can be modified and reassessed as the year progresses.

1. **Be Psychic**: Try to predict situations in your classroom that may incite an unwanted behavior. Address the student before the activity or directive.

2. **Say it Sweetly**: By making students feel that they are not being controlled, you can gain control in your room. Rather than telling them, give them a choice or make a request; they might be more willing to comply if they feel that their needs and point of view have been considered. Try using "I" statements ("I would like everyone to take out a sheet of paper.").

3. **Offer Choices**: If you know a student will refuse to do the work assigned, give him/her alternatives. Having them hand in some work is better than nothing at all and will avoid a full-on confrontation. If they're supposed to write an essay, offer to that student to write a paragraph instead. Get them to add onto it at a later time. If you know they won't write in class at all, ask them to draw a picture with a caption and have them explain it out later.

4. **Have Students Self-Evaluate**: Let students decide on how they are working in class. This gives the student the power to make choices about his/her behaviors.

5. **Send a Note**: Non-verbal communication can prevent an explosion (and spread cheer)! There are many different kinds of notes that are effective (just remember to be clear about your emotion—smiley faces help).
a. Preventative notes: “Remember to raise your hand...”  
b. Post-incident: “You seemed upset, let’s talk...”  
c. Humor: “Dear Mark,  
I’m bored.  
Sincerely,  
Your book”  
d. Help notes: “Do you want help with this?” (Be sure to use the word “want” and then watch for a non-verbal reply.)

6. Listen to the “Real” Message: Before you confront the students who says “I’m not doing this, it’s stupid!” hear what the student is saying. He/she may be saying “It’s too hard for me but I can’t let my peers think I can’t do it (McIntyre, 2002).” Try a Help Note!

The Games They Play

Students will often “play games” that have ulterior motives. They key to avoiding confrontations that will diminish academic time and increase your frustration levels is identifying the game, its objectives, and understanding how to win.

The Letter of the Law: They follow your EXACT directions. For example, if you ask the student to turn around, he/she will spin all the way around.  
Objective: Attention, fluster the teacher, work avoidance.  
How To Win: Teach and ENFORCE the spirit of your rules and requests. Be specific! “Turn around and face me.”

The Negotiator: Student will make a million deals to get what he/she wants. “I’ll finish the work if you’ll first let me...” The deals take the place of the work and are often followed by multiple pleas and begging.  
Objective: Work avoidance.  
How to Win: Don’t tell... ASK! By asking what he/she should be doing, they answer their own question and may prevent The Negotiator from beginning.
The Contradiction Conundrum: No matter what you ask the student to do, he/she will do the exact opposite (which will, no doubt, irk you).

Objective: Push your buttons, work avoidance, attention.

How to Win: Planned ignoring! As long as the class is aware that no deed goes unnoticed, this will take the focus off of the player. The player will not engage you and you can deal with the behavior later.

The Detective: Student will question absolutely everything he/she is told to do. “Please sit.” “Why?” “So we can begin.” “Why?” etc.

Objective: Work deterrent, fluster teacher, attention.

How to Win: Agree to answer all of their questions during a free time. Suddenly questions will not seem so important to them. Or, try asking rather than telling.

The Last Word: The player will be sure that he/she says the absolute last thing in a confrontation or discussion.

Objective: Power.

How to Win: Let THEM win! Let them have the last word and the argument is automatically over. Administer consequences for breaking rules at an appropriate time.

Split-the-Teachers: Player will try to convince the teacher that another teacher condones their behaviors, so it should be allowed in your room.

Objective: Get their way with minimal argument, avoid consequences.

How to Win: Put the spotlight back on them. Remind them that you are focused on their behavior at the moment, not what they do in other classes.

You Can’t Make Me: When asked/told to complete a task, a student will reply that you cannot make them do it.

Objective: Power, work avoidance.

How to Win: Agree with him/her! This avoids argument and you can give them consequences to ponder. For example, “You’re right. I can’t make you write your essay. That is your choice. I hope it’s the best one for you right now.” (McIntyre, 2002)
Your preventative tactics haven’t worked, the games have started, and trouble is brewing... now what?

Putting Out the Fire

When you can smell a problem arising, use the “nip it in the bud” approach by giving the patented “teacher warning” look, coming in close physical proximity to the student, or by asking that student to help you with a task. (Be careful not to use proximity with a student who needs personal space!) (Inclusion, 2000)

Avoid yelling; it will only elevate your blood pressure and model inappropriate behavior for students. Instead, try breaking out into a very loud, horrible rendition of a show tune! Your students will be shocked into silence and will do anything to avoid hearing you belt out “Tomorrow, tomorrow, I’ll love ya, tomorrow” again. Use the reminder/threat “don’t make me sing” all year long. This can also be used to break up a physical confrontation in a classroom or in the halls/cafeteria.

Develop a sense of humor and use it. Don’t penalize a student for practicing his ninja moves while he should be working on his project; simply get him back on task and then chuckle about how he looked with his gym shorts knotted on top of his head. Laughing can deescalate a situation rather than incite it. (Motechin)

If you’re having a problem, utilize your resources. Find different strengths in your colleagues, go to a counselor, or an administrator and ask them for advice. Find out what worked well for them in certain situations. Remember, it is ok to ask for help! (Inclusion, 2000)
Allow the student to “time out” him/herself. Many students will know when they are losing control or reaching their boiling point. By giving them the resources to “cool off,” academic work will not be interrupted and the student can learn how to be in control of their behaviors and avoid negative consequences. (Inclusion, 2000)

“Students with all forms of disabilities have the right to be educated in the least restrictive, most appropriate environment. The movement toward less restrictive environments is not only a school phenomenon; it is a societal one with the ultimate goal being to have individuals with all types of disabilities live, work and be educated in their own communities.”

References


