Becoming a Therapeutic Teacher for Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Brian J. Abrams

Teachers who work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD) know that their job is often challenging. High levels of stress and burnout are common among these teachers. Therapeutic teachers, however, are able to meet these challenges, as well as meet the academic and social needs of students with E/BD. This article will describe what a therapeutic teacher is, how such teachers can create a therapeutic environment for these students, and how they can manage the “stressors” of teaching these students. Most important—becoming a therapeutic teacher is a process of continually maintaining positive attitudes toward oneself, one’s work, and one’s students.

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD) exhibit a number of negative behaviors. Some of these students act out and are both verbally and physically aggressive. They can be hyperactive, oppositional, and argumentative. Other students are withdrawn, depressed, anxious, and defensive. Many have poor impulse control, are easily frustrated, and lack self-control. They often have limited insight into their behavior, blame others for their behavior, and exhibit poor social skills. Added to these characteristics is the reality that many of these students have limited academic skills, poor attention span, and low levels of motivation in the classroom (Coleman, 1996; Kauffman, 2001). As a result of these deficits, students with EBD often dislike school and do poorly in academic work. How can teachers manage students with such a variety of negative behaviors, and yet still effectively teach them academic and social skills?

Teaching these students can be a very challenging task. Many special education teachers who succumb to the inherent stress of the job risk developing physical or emotional problems. They either stay in the field but become ineffective teachers (i.e., experience burnout), decide to work with a different population of students, or leave the field of teaching altogether (Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002; Whitaker, 2001; Zabel & Zabel, 2001).

Teaching Students with E/BD: Student Stress and Teacher Stress

The educational stressors of students with E/BD may include the following:

• Limited academic and social skills.
• Unmet psychological needs.
• Limited insight and self-awareness.
• Emotional and behavioral deficits.
• Disorganized or inconsistent teachers.
• Boring or irrelevant curriculum.
• Overuse of punishment.
• Feelings of powerlessness (Shores, Gunter, Denny, & Jack, 1993).

The social lives of students with E/BD are often very stressful in and out of school. The behavioral, social, and emotional deficits of these students often result in low self-esteem, a negative self-image, and a social environment in which many of their psychological needs are unmet. Their lives are often chaotic and unstable; many have experienced rejection, loss, neglect, or abuse in their young lives (Paul & Epanchin, 1997).

Students with E/BD are often filled with anger, rage, fear, sadness, and grief. They are unable to understand or control their emotions. Frustration is their common companion. Their behavior is often inconsistent, antisocial, maladaptive, and self-defeating. Schools
should be a safe haven for them, but in many cases the school environments are not therapeutic. The behavioral and social deficits of these students are often met with anger and punishment from teachers who react to their behavior rather than understanding the whole person. These students have learned to be mistrustful of adults, and they often have negative expectations of themselves and others. They want approval and security, but they expect rejection and failure. “Most antisocial students experience academic failure and rejection by peers and adults in school” (Kauffman, 2001, p. 352).

Teachers of student with E/BD also experience a number of stressors. These may include:
- Having unrealistic expectations of self or students.
- Experiencing a lack of support from peers, parents, or administration.
- Having too many tasks and too little time.
- Feeling an increased emphasis on standardized testing.
Working with students who are often angry, aggressive, or oppositional can be very stressful for teachers, and teachers often react with fear, anxiety, or anger (VanAcker, 1993). Many teachers may be unprepared to work with such a difficult population, and may lack the necessary instructional or classroom-management skills to be effective. These teachers may also have limited self- and stress-management skills.

Too often the result of student stress and teacher stress in classrooms for students with E/BD is teachers’ doing very little teaching, and students’ doing very little learning. Much of the time is spent in off-task behavior, and high levels of tension are often exhibited among staff and students. Students and staff engage in negative behaviors, and the stress and tension in the classroom often escalate.

**What Is a Therapeutic Teacher?**

**Attitudes of Therapeutic Teachers**

Therapeutic teachers are able to create an environment that meets the academic and social needs of students with E/BD. The teachers’ attitudes toward their students, their job, and themselves are essential elements in being “therapeutic.” “To be therapeutic, teachers must listen, talk, and act in ways that communicate respect, caring, and confidence, both in themselves and in their students” (Kauffman, 2001, p. 536).

Teachers must recognize the importance of managing their own stress and taking care of their mental health to be effective and therapeutic in teaching students with E/BD. Therapeutic teachers have developed effective stress-coping skills. They have good mental health and high levels of self-awareness and self-confidence. They exhibit and model self-control in managing stress (Long & Newman, 1980).

**Understanding Students With EBD**

Therapeutic teachers show respect for each student’s dignity, even when the student engages in antisocial behavior. Teachers are able to understand the frustrations and anxiety that trigger students’ negative behavior, and are able to avoid reacting with anger or fear. They do not resort to threats and revenge. They are able to establish a positive classroom climate of trust and rapport with their students. These teachers have the training and skills to defuse tension in the classroom. They are able to establish order, structure, and consistency in the classroom. Therapeutic teachers establish class rules that are enforced with positive and negative consequences. These teachers rely primarily on preventive discipline. By creating a positive classroom climate, these teachers are able to reduce much of the frustration and stress that trigger negative behaviors in the classroom (Abrams & Segal, 1998).

**Helping Students Experience Success**

Therapeutic teachers are well-organized and have clear, realistic, and positive expectations of themselves and their students. They enjoy teaching and are able to maintain their enthusiasm for teaching and learning. By recognizing the needs, talents, strengths, values, and interests of each student, these teachers are able to create a classroom climate in which the curriculum is relevant to the students’ lives. The lessons use individualized instruction and implement a knowledge of students’ learning style (Dunn & Dunn, 1993) and multiple intelligences (Armstrong, 2000). Students begin to feel comfortable in the classroom and show an interest in learning. Therapeutic teachers are able to create a positive classroom environment in which students experience success and feel safe. “Teachers must be skilled in using the setting, the curriculum, and most especially the relationship with the child to provide the atmosphere that promotes both academic and social development” (VanAcker, 1993, p. 31).

**Realistic Expectations of What You Can Accomplish**

This description may sound like therapeutic teachers are one-half saint and one-half Superman or Wonder Woman, but this hyperbole is not true. Therapeutic teachers are realistic about what they are able to achieve. They make mistakes but usually are able to learn from their errors. Many educators have tried to be “perfect teachers” (and as far as the author knows, they have all failed); this ambition is unrealistic and leads only to frustrations for teachers.
and students. Do not try to be perfect—if you were perfect, growth would be impossible.

**Becoming a Therapeutic Teacher and Creating a Therapeutic Environment**

Therapeutic teachers are able to create a positive classroom climate. “The teacher’s primary task is to structure or order the environment for the pupil in such a way that work is accomplished, play is learned, love is felt, and fun is enjoyed by the student and the teacher” (Kauffman, 2001, p. 533). How does a teacher working with students who exhibit a plethora of challenging behaviors create such an environment? Aside from the students, two major components of the classroom environment are the teacher and curriculum. If we want to help students to grow and change, two things we can change first are ourselves, as teachers, and the curriculum, that is, how we provide and modify instruction.

**Becoming Aware of Your Expectations**

Many teachers working with students with E/BD have been unsuccessful because they have had unrealistic expectations of themselves and their students. Teachers must examine their attitudes and expectations. Do you believe your students are “bad” or troubled? Do you truly care about each of your students? Do you respect the dignity of each student each day? How do your actions in the classroom demonstrate this caring and respect? How often do your words and actions conflict with caring and respect (e.g., by becoming angry and hostile, not listening to your student, or focusing on their deficits rather than their strengths)? What can you do to be more consistently caring and respectful? Developing and maintaining positive and realistic expectations of oneself and each student are essential to becoming a therapeutic teacher (Abrams & Segal, 1998).

Gallagher (1997) discussed how teachers can promote dignity and competence in students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Important concepts include communicating caring to students, discovering students’ strengths, and promoting positive teacher-student relationships.

**Improving Your Instructional Skills**

Prior to 1990, most of the research on teaching students with E/BD dealt with classroom management and interventions to modify behaviors. Since then, much more research has focused on effective academic instructional strategies for students with E/BD. Variables related to the effectiveness of classroom instruction include task difficulty and social skills, both directly and indirectly (see Figure 1).

**Therapeutic teachers create a positive classroom environment in which students experience success and feel safe.**
Examine your attitudes toward each student:

- Do you believe that all students are capable of learning?
- Do you dislike some students?
- Do you become angry or hostile in reaction to a student’s misbehavior?

Recognize the talents and interests of each student:

- Get to know each student as a full person, not just a student who should learn your subject matter.
- Observe students in different school environments (gym, playground, art, music, shop class).
- Be aware of the multiple intelligences and learning styles of each student.

Use effective instructional methods:

- Teach to capitalize on each student’s abilities and strengths.
- Incorporate student’s interests into lessons—the curriculum must be relevant to students’ lives and backgrounds.
- Use a variety of assessments to modify instruction and task difficulty.

Meet each student’s psychological needs:

- Recognize the dignity of each student; recognize and value students’ feelings.
- Promote a classroom climate of tolerance of individual differences.
- Show respect for students by using active listening.

Teach problem solving and stress management to students:

- Actively model ways to solve problems and manage stress.
- Include the teaching of social skills in the curriculum.
- Reinforce students’ demonstration of improved self-control Use humor and games in the classroom:

- Make lessons and activities fun.
- Use educational games to teach and review academic materials.
- Use humor to promote learning and belonging; do not use sarcasm or hostile humor.

Maintain hope and faith in yourself and your students:

- Believe in your abilities to teach and reach your students.
- Believe in the abilities of your students to grow and develop.
- Communicate your faith in your students’ abilities.
Continuing to Grow as a Teacher and Person

Therapeutic teachers continue to grow as individuals and as teachers. They read and learn about new instructional and behavioral strategies and keep abreast of new technology. They implement new methods in the classroom, then use ongoing assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of those methods. Therapeutic teachers continue to learn about the subject matter they teach. They communicate with fellow teachers and exchange ideas about effective interventions. They support fellow teachers and contribute to a positive schoolwide environment. They refuse to become negative and sarcastic. They value the power of faith, hope, and optimism. Maintaining hope and optimism may be difficult in the face of all of the stressors of teaching students with E/BD, but doing so is essential if we are to be therapeutic. One of the most important skills needed by therapeutic teachers is to learn how to develop a therapeutic environment.

Stress Management for Teachers of Students With E/BD

It is impossible for teachers to be effective and therapeutic if they have poor self-control or limited stress-management skills. Teachers who work with students with E/BD can learn to manage their stress. Teachers should recognize the importance of stress management as an essential skill. Too many teachers suffer the negative effects of stress before they try to manage it. Teachers—especially new teachers—should be realistic about the types of behaviors they will encounter from students with E/BD, as well as about how they might respond.

Teachers need to develop realistic expectations of themselves and others, and develop a realistic perception of stressors (Brownell, 1997). Teachers should be aware of the power of negative attitudes and beliefs. Research confirms that teachers who exhibit acceptance of self and others, along with a positive belief system, are able to cope more effectively with the stressors of teaching students with E/BD (Center & Steventon, 2001).

Time management is also important so that teachers do not feel overwhelmed by too many deadlines. Setting priorities, scheduling tasks, and engaging in problem-solving are all necessary skills needed to manage time and tasks effectively. Teachers need to budget their time and to organize their time through such tactics as creating lists.

Most resources on stress management agree that a healthful diet, exercise, and rest are necessary for good physical and mental health (Dedrick & Raschke, 1990; Delaware State Education Association, 2003; Swick, 1987). Maintaining a support system inside the school (e.g., through co-workers) and outside of school (e.g., through friends and family) helps us cope with stress and put it in perspective. People who are overly stressed often feel isolated and alone. Sharing feelings and strategies with co-workers can reduce our stress level and can help us learn what other teachers are doing to solve similar problems.

Being flexible helps us adjust to change. People who are rigid have more difficulty dealing with stressors. Having a healthy sense of humor allows us to cope with stress. When we step back from the immediate stressors, we realize that humor can still be found in our lives (and sometimes we have to laugh to avoid crying). Recognizing and acknowledging our feelings are important adaptive skills. If we do feel anger, fear, or anxiety in the classroom, we should realize that these feelings are valid. We should try to identify their source and develop a plan to deal with those feelings. We might ask ourselves such questions as:

- How can I stay more relaxed in the classroom?
- How can I feel less afraid of my students?
- How can I feel like I have more control of my class?

Talk with co-workers and administrators, ask for help, and learn new strategies that will help you feel more confident and effective. Allow yourself to grow, and try to ignore the critical voice in your head that deals only with negatives.

Engage in personally rewarding hobbies that take your mind off problems and provide enjoyment. Remember to value your family and friends. Develop ongoing professional and personal renewal activities so that you continue to learn and grow as a teacher and as a person. An important skill as a teacher is recognizing the importance of rejuvenating yourself (Clement, 1999).

Whether or not one is religious, most of us are familiar with the quote “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference” (Neuhr, 2004). This quote is very relevant to stress management. Too often we get stressed over things we cannot change, or accept things that we can change. Effective stress management involves putting energy into changing conditions for the better while accepting the fact that some conditions cannot be changed. Knowing the difference truly does require wisdom and experience (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Stress Management for Teachers of Students With EBD

- Have realistic and positive expectations of yourself and others.
- Have a realistic perception of stressors.
- Employ time management.
- Develop a support system inside and outside of school.
- Adopt healthful diet, exercise, and rest routines.
- Be flexible.
- Recognize the value of humor.
- Acknowledge your feelings.
- Engage in personally rewarding hobbies.
- Continue to grow as a person and as a teacher.
- Use problem solving to minimize stressors and their effects.
Benefits of Therapeutic Teachers for Students With E/BD

Therapeutic teachers model and teach effective stress-management skills and social skills.

Teaching students with E/BD is a very challenging job and becoming a therapeutic teacher does take time and effort. Maintaining a positive attitude toward school and learning. Students receive more positive feedback and fewer reprimands. Teachers model and teach effective stress-management skills and social skills.

Teaching students with E/BD is a very challenging job and becoming a therapeutic teacher does take time and effort. Maintaining a positive attitude toward school and learning. Students receive more positive feedback and fewer reprimands. Teachers model and teach effective stress-management skills and social skills.

References


Correspondence can be sent to Brian J. Abrams, Career Preparatory High School, 111 Cantiague Rock Road, Westbury, NY 11590 (e-mail: bjabrams@optonline.net).


Copyright 2005 CEC.