

# Academic Instruction for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

JOSEPH H. WEHBY, KATHLEEN L. LANE, AND KATHERINE B. FALK

**S**INCE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), services have been provided to a number of children and youth under the disability category of emotional disturbance. According to this legislation, students are eligible for special education if the following criteria are met:

1. The term means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance: (a) An inability to learn which 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; or (e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.
2. The term includes children who have schizophrenia. The term does not include children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance. (Section 300.7(b)(9))

As stated, the term *emotionally disturbed* refers to students whose educational achievement is adversely influenced

by some type of inappropriate behavior. Unfortunately, it appears that the focus on inappropriate behaviors that affect achievement has led to an almost exclusive focus on behavior problems, with little attention given to the educational needs of this population. In other words, the notion that students' behavior must be controlled before they can be taught has become the prevailing approach in the treatment of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD).

Unfortunately, the limited attention given to the academic needs of this population has contributed, in part, to the extremely poor outcomes for students identified as having EBD, including high rates of absenteeism, low grade point averages, course failure, and unacceptable levels of school drop out (National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, 2003). Although concern for these dismal outcomes have been documented for a number of years, it is only recently that the issue of academic programming for students with EBD has come to the attention of researchers and educators interested in this group of students (Lane, Gresham, & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). The problem of poor academic performance takes on added importance because of the recent academic standards associated with the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) as well as the requirements for participation in statewide assessments outlined in the 1997 reauthorization of

IDEA. In other words, while the educational climate continues to move toward more rigorous academic policies, children and youth with EBD are ill prepared to meet proposed academic standards.

Several hypotheses can be generated concerning why there has been limited focus in the classroom on the academic needs of students with EBD. This article suggests four possible reasons:

1. Behavior problems prevent teachers from implementing high-quality instruction to students with EBD.
2. Students with EBD influence the behavior of teachers, essentially shaping teachers into providing less instruction.
3. Within teacher training programs for students with EBD, there is a lack of preparation in the area of academic instruction.
4. The limited research in the area of academic instruction has contributed to the absence of an empirically valid knowledge base with which to guide future research and subsequent preparation of teachers.

## STUDENT BEHAVIOR INTERFERES WITH INSTRUCTION

Students with EBD present significant social and behavioral challenges that fre-

quently disrupt the classroom environment and impede learning. Because of this, educators and researchers have typically focused more attention on interventions and techniques designed to ameliorate these deficits in an effort to create an atmosphere that is more conducive to teaching academics. Because this line of thinking presupposes that academic instruction cannot take place unless a student's behavior is first under control, behavioral intervention is viewed as the first line of defense in addressing both the behavioral and the academic deficits of this population of students. Levy and Chard (2001) highlighted this dilemma, stating, "So much attention has been devoted to managing disruptive behaviors and dealing with emotional crises that the questions of what students should be taught and how they should be taught are often not afforded careful or even sufficient consideration" (p. 439). In fact, the problem of teacher attention to disruptive behaviors at the expense of academic instruction was one that researchers recognized decades ago. Kounin and Obradovic (1968) described "stimulus bounded" teachers as those whose actions are dictated by and reactive to the events in the classroom, rather than the goal of the activity at hand. More recent evidence has revealed that teachers in self-contained classrooms for students with EBD devote only 30% of the school day to actual academic instruction (Wehby, 2003). Indeed, behavioral interventions and social skills instruction have been found to effectively address a variety of problem behaviors in a variety of contexts; however, in light of empirical evidence detailing the link between low academic achievement and problem behavior, the need for behavioral supports should not overshadow the impact of effective academic instruction in addressing disruptive behaviors in the school setting.

## STUDENTS INFLUENCE TEACHER BEHAVIOR

To understand the reasons for the unimpressive academic outcomes of students with EBD, one must also look at the characteristics of the classrooms in which the

students are educated. Classrooms for students with EBD have been described as lacking some of the basic components that are necessary for student learning. Descriptive studies (Jack et al., 1996; Shores et al., 1993; Wehby, Symons, & Shores, 1995) have reported a lack of systematic academic programming in many of these classrooms. In particular, the findings from these studies have revealed a lack of praise or positive statements, low rates of instructional demands, and high rates of reprimands. Unfortunately, the most consistent interactions between teachers and students with EBD tend to occur around instances of inappropriate classroom behavior by the child. Taken together, these studies indicate that teaching practices in classrooms for students with EBD are far from optimal and provide little opportunity for students to make academic progress.

One explanation for this poor academic climate in EBD classrooms may be that aggressive and disruptive children influence the behavior of the adults they encounter on a daily basis (Bell & Harper, 1977; Patterson, 1982; Wahler & Dumas, 1986). Considering this, it is possible that students may direct teachers toward a less demanding curriculum. As noted by Carr, Taylor, and Robinson (1991), if students consistently respond to instruction with noncompliant or aggressive behaviors that are aversive to a teacher, over time, this teacher will most likely provide instruction less often. In fact, much of the descriptive work in this area has evidenced that many inappropriate behaviors exhibited by students with EBD are preceded by some type of academic instruction by the teacher (Wehby et al., 1995). This sequence of teacher instruction followed by inappropriate student behavior may set in motion a series of escape and avoidance behaviors by the teacher that may further decrease the amount of time devoted to academic instruction in the classroom (Gunter, Jack, DePaepe, Reed, & Harrison, 1994; Wehby, Symons, Canale, & Go, 1998). For example, teachers may terminate instruction with a misbehaving child by placing the student in time-out or by removing him or her from the classroom. This scenario is supported

by several studies that have reported that students who show high rates of aggressive behavior receive less instruction from their teachers than do students who exhibit fewer episodes of aggression (Carr et al., 1991; Van Acker, Grant, & Henry, 1996; Wehby et al., 1998). Although speculative, this interpretation does suggest that students with EBD may be the ones directing the level and amount of academic instruction in these classrooms.

## LACK OF TEACHER PREPARATION

A third, and potentially more important, influence on the lack of instruction occurring in classrooms for student with EBD is the type of training that teachers of students with EBD receive during their preservice training. Whelan and Simpson (1996) have suggested that teachers of students with EBD do not receive the type of comprehensive training necessary to meet the multitude of problems exhibited by this population of students. More specifically, we contend that the training that most preservice trainees receive centers on the management of antisocial behavior, with less emphasis placed on academic instruction. This lack of attention to academic instruction and strong attention to social and behavioral considerations is particularly evident in graduate and undergraduate textbooks predating 1998 (Lane et al., 2002). As a result, teachers may be poorly trained in the implementation of effective instructional strategies, and this may exacerbate the teacher-student interactions presented in the previous section. Perhaps systematically well-trained preservice teachers would be more resistant to the impact of student behavior on their instructional behavior. In fact, a growing body of evidence shows that teachers' demonstrating more competence in instructional procedures results in significant improvements in child academic and social behavior (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001; Sutherland, Wehby, & Yoder, 2002). Therefore, it is critical that we emphasize the use of effective instructional procedures that encourage improved academic performance with stu-

dents with EBD, which may in turn decrease the challenging behaviors of this population that seemingly affect teachers' instructional competence.

Tangential to this argument is the fact that more than any other group, students with EBD often receive instruction from teachers who are not certified, have emergency certification only, or who are certified in an area other than EBD. Westat Research Corporation (2002) reported that up to 16% of teachers who serve primarily students with EBD are not certified in this area. In addition, teachers of students with EBD frequently "burn out" at a higher rate than other special education teachers (George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). One consequence of this phenomenon is a constant infusion of new teachers who probably lack the expertise to effectively deal with both the behavioral and the academic needs of students with EBD. These findings suggest that this population of students, who require the most skilled educators to address their academic, social, and behavioral needs, may be being educated by the least prepared and/or least experienced teachers. Compounding this less than ideal arrangement is the finding that teachers of students with EBD feel unsupported by school administrators in their attempts to educate this group (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997).

### LACK OF RESEARCH

Finally, and perhaps most disconcerting, is the lack of research on the academic needs of children and youth with EBD. Recent reviews of academic interventions with students with EBD (Coleman & Vaughn, 2000; Lane, in press; Mooney, Epstein, Reid, & Nelson, in press; Ruhl & Berlinghoff, 1992) have indicated a scarcity of academic, treatment-outcome studies conducted with this population. Such a void in the database is particularly disconcerting because, compared to students in general education, students with EBD have moderate to severe academic deficits (Mattison, Spitznagel, & Felix, 1998) and, according to some evidence, have academic profiles similar to those of students with learning disabilities (Rock, Fessler,

& Church, 1997). Of further concern is the fact that the academic deficits characteristic of students with EBD do not appear to be remediated over time in the absence of intervention efforts (Greenbaum et al., 1996). Thus, it is imperative that the research community identify effective and efficient methods of providing academic instruction to these youngsters.

Although few in number, the foundational studies conducted to date have resulted in improved early literacy skills, computation skills, and spelling skills (Gunter & Denny, 1998; Lane, in press); however, few studies have been conducted to explore instruction of more advanced skills, such as reading comprehension, applied problem solving, and composition. Additional research systematically investigating the effects of academic instruction for a range of skills across the content areas is sorely needed to better inform teacher preparation programs and better serve students with EBD.

Finally, the trend toward serving students with EBD in general education settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) carries additional demands. For example, there is an increasingly obvious need for (a) research on methods of delivering effective academic and social programs for students with EBD in general and special education classrooms; (b) practices that forge strong relationships between general and special educators; and (c) training of direct service providers in state-of-the-art, research-based practices that improve outcomes for EBD.

### SUMMARY

This article presented four hypotheses to account for the lack of attention to academic instruction with students with EBD. Although we may never determine the relative contribution of these or other hypotheses regarding the lack of academic instruction provided to students with EBD, one thing is apparent: We need to establish a solid foundation of empirical work in the area of academic instruction for students with EBD in order for guidelines to be developed for instructional strategies, teacher preparation programs, and future research in this area. We acknowledge that

there is a relatively large body of literature of effective instructional practices for students with special needs. Unfortunately, this literature often excludes students with EBD. Although it is reasonable to assume that many of the same strategies work for children with learning disabilities and other high-incidence conditions, students with EBD are unique as a result of their ongoing emotional and behavioral challenges. Thus, an increased focus on the area of academic instruction and achievement is a needed area of research for this group.

### FOCUS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue of the *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders* presents a sample of current research being conducted in the area of academic instruction with students identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders. It is encouraging that a number of researchers are beginning to focus their attention on this important and complex topic. Within each article, issues regarding the academic status of students with EBD, reading performance, and teacher instructional behavior as they relate to students with EBD have been addressed. The information presented in this issue represents promising work in the area of academic instruction for students with EBD, and we hope that it will serve as a prompt for our field to broaden its perspective beyond the management of behavior.

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