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Educating All Students? Successfully Supporting Students with Emotional Disabilities

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Abstract

Within the last five years, the Department of Education Archives (n.d.) indicates the number of students classified with emotional disabilities ED enrolled in public schools has increased by ten percent. These increased numbers require that teachers need to be prepared to successfully support students with ED. This analytic review explores ways to meet the students' needs both academically and emotionally. Discussion of placement, academic and social interventions, and the nature of special education proved focal. My analysis suggests that there needs to be a blend of academic supports and behavior modifications in place for students with ED for them to be successful. The most successful placement is found to be a self-contained classroom within a mainstream building. This placement allows students to move fluidly between mainstream and self-contained classroom. As a result, they are academically challenged while also having the emotional support of an educator who specializes in that work.

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Where Do I Begin?

I am sitting in the main office of King Middle School[1]. It's early June. I'm waiting to interview for a position for which I think I have no chance. My palms are sweaty. It is June, after all but what I am really nervous about is the actual position: can I do it? I keep seeing the subject line in the email I received one week earlier "8:1:1 Position Interview." How was I going to convince whoever was in that room that I could successfully support up to eight adolescents with emotional needs in a self-contained classroom setting when I wasn't even sure myself?

Days later, when I received the offer for the position, I was both thrilled and terrified. My principal repeatedly reminded: "We want to 'do right' by our students academically," he said. "They deserve access to grade-level content and grade-level experiences." Like any new teacher, I assured him that my goal would be exactly that.

As the school year started, I would question what 'doing right' really means for my students. Specifically, how would I help students with emotional but not cognitive disabilities experience academic and social success at the expected grade level?

From what I learned, the five students—all boys--assigned to my 8:1:1[2] class had always struggled emotionally, and, in turn, they weren't meeting grade level expectations. Two of the boys, John and Tim, were 8th graders and returning to a self-contained setting after being in an

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

[2] A special class is a class consisting of students with disabilities who have been grouped together because of similar individual needs so that they can receive specially designed instruction. In special classes, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction is adapted to ensure the student has access to the general curriculum and the opportunity to meet the educational standards that apply to all students.

alternative setting placement outside their school districts. The other three students were 6th

graders who had also been in an out-of-district location. Instead of being welcomed, they had

been far removed from their assigned school district for years. These boys all shared one basic

trait: their behaviors led to them being removed from "typical" classrooms. They had acted out;

they screamed, tipped desks over, and would cry for seemingly no reason. Their behaviors were

considered so unruly –so much so the district had decided that the students' needs would be

better met in placements outside of the district. All of this made me wonder: Was there something

different about these placements that might account for their failure to thrive in school?

Their behaviors also impacted their academic lives. Each student was reading about two

to three grade levels below where they were expected to be. Their district test scores in math and

science landed them in the bottom third to fourth percentile. However, their cognitive and

psychological testing showed that all five students were cognitively capable of meeting (and

perhaps exceeding) grade level expectations. What did they need to support their academic

success?

The idea of 'success' really made me think—what did success look like or mean for these

students? For example, would improving Jordan's ability to perform better on tests reduce the

number of times he would cry without warning? So what would be a 'success' for him? To seek

the answers to these questions, I needed to really hone in on a definition of 'success'.

What had teachers done to successfully navigate students toward emotional and

academic growth? I wanted to seek out social and academic supports that would enhance

students' lives. Was there a way to increase their academic growth and improve emotional well-

being? Given that I wanted my students to be successful and appropriately challenged, I wanted

answers. The research, methods, and findings in this paper all connect back to my experience as an educator.

What Do We Currently Know About Supporting Students with Emotional Disabilities?

What is currently known about special education placement and settings is complicated. Best case scenario, students classified with an IEP[3] would remain a mainstream classroom setting in the district. The point is to place students in the "least restrictive environment" or an environment where students have the opportunity to learn among peers, be challenged academically, and to socially interact with peers. The idea of a least restrictive environment is what led to more students with special needs to be placed in mainstream[4], or inclusion [5]classrooms rather than self-contained special education settings[6].

IEPs all have one basic value: The student who requires it must have a need that substantially hinders academic performance. That a student's academic performance is the impetus for the IEP is often a source of misunderstanding and confusion. The type of social, emotional, cognitive, or physical need often confounds a student's ability to meet grade-level expectations. Because the IEP was created for academic success, teachers tend to focus solely addressing on students' academic needs. As many studies confirm: "Teachers are willing to have

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[3] The Individualized Educational Plan (**IEP**) is a plan or program developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services.

[4] Mainstreaming, in the context of **education**, is the practice of educating students with special needs in regular **classes** during specific time periods based on their skills. This means regular **education classes** are combined with special **education classes**.

[5] **Inclusion** in education was once described as an approach wherein students with special educational needs spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students. Now it is crucial that all policy makers, school boards, administrators, guidance counsellors, teachers, parents and students ensure inclusive practice in all aspects of educational environments. Research suggests that inclusivity is no longer defined by physical and cognitive disabilities but also includes a full range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, culture, gender, age and of other forms of human differences

mainstreamed students in their classrooms as long as the students do not exhibit emotional or behavioral problems."(Schumm & Vaughn 2001) Additionally, most teachers are more likely to make academic modifications to content than behavior support. Behavior supports are specific plans that can change or improve social interactions for a student. Interestingly, teachers do not lack desire or willingness. Rather, factors that inhibit teachers efforts are "class size, lack of teacher preparation, problems with emotionally handicapped students, and limited instructional time" (Schumm & Vaughn 2001, p 148). Teachers in the general education setting[7], then are unprepared, or unable to support the students who are placed in their classrooms.

Within the last five years, the Department of Education Archives (n.d.) research and data collection the percentage of regular classroom placements of students with IEPs reported by States increased by almost 10 percentage points. Within the last five years, the number of students classified with emotional disabilities ED enrolled in public schools has increased by ten percent (Department of Education, n.d.). These increased numbers point to the need for teachers to be prepared to successfully support students with ED. Otherwise, students with ED are being placed in classrooms with teachers who do not feel prepared to teach them. While teachers may feel prepared to address the students' academic needs, they are likely unprepared or unable to address students' emotional needs. Because they feel unprepared to support students emotionally, they may lower academic expectations or modify content to allow these students to succeed in their classes. Expectations for student performance on high-stakes testing is now married to school and teacher accountability (and their jobs are now on the line) (Cimbricz & McConn, 2015). Consequently, the pressure and push for students' meeting grade-level

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[7] a program of **education** (as in some liberal-arts colleges and secondary schools) intended to develop students as personalities rather than trained specialists and to transmit a common cultural heritage — compare liberal **education**

expectations are at an all-time high. As my principal's words suggest, concerns about "doing right academically" (especially on high-stakes testing) for our students holds great value.

Research Questions

With this in mind, this review seeks answers to the following overarching research question: How teachers can effectively meet the needs of students with ED? I also revisit questions asked at the beginning of this paper. Specifically:

1.) How can I support students with emotional (but not cognitive disabilities) experience academic 'success' at the expected grade level? What is success?
2.) Is there something different about placements (i.e., mainstream, self-contained, and alternative) that might account for students' failure to thrive in school?
3.) Is there a way to increase their academic growth and improve emotional well-being?

Methods:

To find how teachers can effectively meet the needs of students with ED, I conducted a preliminary search using the terms: 1.) *self-contained class*; 2.) *student success;* 3.) *students with emotional disabilities;* and 4.) *expectations.* Three databases were used; EBSCOhost; Academic Source; and PsychInfo.

What came of these initial searches was a list of 1,500 studies. They are represented in the chart below:
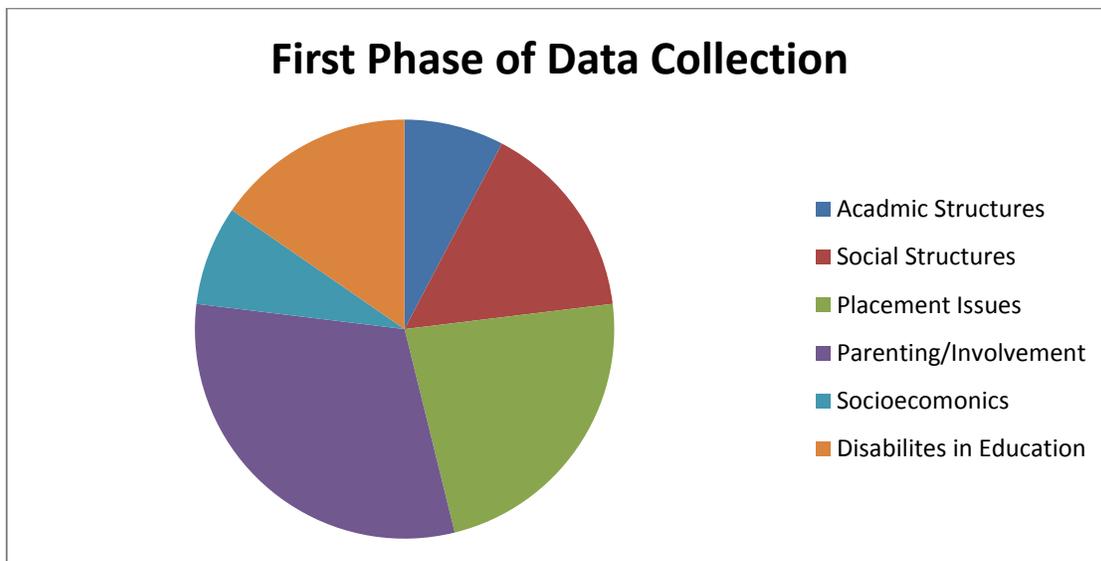
Due to the high number of studies that came of these phrases, the second phase in the data selection process was to limit studies to those published between 2005 and 2015. In so doing, I could offer the most up to data analysis. Additionally in the second phase, studies that were strictly quantitative in nature or that focused on parent involvement were excluded. I purposefully selected empirical work that combined qualitative and quantitative measure and

focused specifically on what teachers can do (especially what I could do). That way, I could gain

a richer understanding of what various statistical information meant or looked like. Clark and

Creswell (2015) suggest this grouping of mixed methods is both flexible and complementary.

Thirty-five studies of the 1,500 original studies remained.

In the final phase in this process, I further reduced to those longitudinal in nature. The

criteria for this phase focused on those studies where data were gathered for more than one year

and that involved a minimum of 75 participants. That way, the suggestions or interventions

offered were those that not only stood the test of time, but were generalizable to larger multiple

and varied populations.

From this research process, three major categories emerged from my deliberation of the

20 studies that remained. Those categories are:

- Nature of Special Education

- Placements

- Interventions

These categories emerged as significant to supporting students with emotional disabilities.

Findings

In this next section I share the findings related to the category called "Nature of Special Education". This category illuminates the importance of teachers and mental health professionals working together and having high expectations for student with ED.

The Nature of Special Education

Ferguson (2014) found that there has been a significant increase in the hiring of professionals who support students with emotional needs such as social workers, counselors, and school psychologists. These professionals are more in demand due to the increasing number of students identified with emotional and social disabilities and the expertise and the services that these mental health professionals offer. The need for collaboration between the mental health professional and teachers is critical. This collaboration allows students with ED to be more fully and appropriately supported. Teachers and mental health professional can work together to provide the multiple supports that students with ED need. As mentioned previously, classroom teachers tend to focus solely on a student's academic need and also lower their expectations. Lowered expectations come with a price.

In studies that consider social issues, finances, and socioeconomic inequalities what was found to be the most detrimental to a student's future is lowered expectations for students (Aron & Loprest, 2012). Research further shows that standards are the key and largest predictor of success in maintaining employment in the future. Lowered standards negatively impact student ability to be successful in obtaining and maintaining gainful employment. Students need to be challenged and held to high expectations. Having said that, they need supports that help them

successfully meet these expectations. When expectations are high and support is appropriate, students have almost limitless potential in school and potentially in life (Kamps et al., 2003).

Teachers need to understand the impact that low expectations have on students. If teachers want to make a difference in the lives of students with ED, teachers need to be hold students accountable to high expectations and what some might call rigor.

Placement

When it comes to successfully supporting students with ED, placement matters. Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley (2005), in particular, looked at the differences between a self-contained classroom housed within a high school and a self-contained classroom housed in an alternate location (within the district but separate from the 'mainstream' high school) in a metropolitan school district in the South. Seventy-five participants were involved in the year-long study. All were high school students who were classified as having emotional/behavioral disorder (EBD). The students were of diverse sociocultural backgrounds and they were placed in either the in-school or out-of-school setting within the same district.

Lane, et. al., (2005) questioned whether students with EBD are better served in self-contained classrooms within mainstream setting different than those being educated in separate facilities. These researchers found two key differences. First, "the students who were enrolled in self-contained settings that were placed in mainstream buildings were 43% more likely to be more successful on exams." (p. 354). Additionally, "students who were enrolled in more 'mainstream' classes were perceived as being 'higher achieving' in psychological evaluations of students" (p. 354).

The authors attribute this success to notions of academic rigor, and ability of the students with ED to be able to connect with the larger school community. It was important for students to feel as if they belonged. When students felt they were a part of this 'mainstream' school community, they were highly motivated, they were also held to higher s, and performed dramatically better on statewide exams than their alternative setting peers. Furthermore, teachers and administrators perceived students as more successful, confident, and more willing to take risks. In contrast, participants from the alternative setting reported feeling disconnected.

Hoge and Rubinstein-Avila (2014) noted similar trends in their year-long study. They looked at the differences between these placements housed within a middle school and a self-contained classroom housed in an alternate location (within the district but separate from the 'mainstream' middle school) in a suburban district in a southwestern state.   Eighty-two middle school students who were classified as having ED were involved. Like Lane, et. al., (2005), students were of diverse sociocultural backgrounds and they were placed in either the in-school or out-of-school setting within the same district.

Again, it was important for students to feel as if they belonged. Participants from the alternative setting reported feeling disconnected and that this had a dramatic impact. Once they were separated from their mainstream peers, students had difficultly re-integrating into the 'mainstream' middle school setting. Reasons for this occurrence stem from the stigma that was attached with being placed in the alternative setting. Students and teachers alike reportedly feeling disconnected with little to no association with the district. This research illuminated the importance of connectivity and belonging. Interestingly, the well-intentioned decision to move students to an alternate location within the district ultimately was detrimental.

Recognizing the significance of placement for students with ED is critical. When

students are placed outside the 'mainstream' setting, they lack connectivity and belonging with

home districts. Additionally, it can significantly affect their academic performance on statewide

exams. It can then be assumed then, that the best way to successfully meet the needs of students

with ED is to place them within a 'mainstream' setting. What remains to be considered, however,

is which supports are most beneficial in these 'mainstream' settings.

Interventions

Two kinds of interventions, academic and social, will be discussed in this next section.

To successfully support students with ED, a balance between academic and social interventions

is important.

Academic Interventions. A goal of academic interventions is maintaining grade-level

requirements in a self-contained setting. Oftentimes, interventions involve using targeted

instruction (e.g., push-out, expressive writing).

In a large, year-long study across a school district, Lane et al., (2005) studied the

effectiveness of middle and high school students being 'pushed into' mainstream classrooms

within the same building and district. The researchers tracked behavioral and academic data of

75 middle school and high school students. Of the 75 students, 55 showed significant academic

gains. The academic gains noted were a jump in four grade levels for reading, and higher GPA's

among the students studied. Students who received targeted instruction via the "push-in" method

showed scored slightly higher by about ten percent on statewide exams. However, behavior data

showed that although their test scores had improved, the frequency of outbursts and behavioral

incidences increased noticeably. Gained from this research, is the idea that it is not enough to

merely academically challenge students with ED. Students benefit from social/emotional interventions to help them cope with all that a mainstream classroom setting requires. Including, but not limited to, academics.

Houchins, Viel-Ruma and Dever (2014) explored connections between expressive writing and grade level requirements in a high-school setting. Throughout the school year, students were provided with specific targeted-instruction around expressive writing related to their English class. The study found that when students were held to a high academic standards, they rose to the challenge. In turn, they were highly motivated and were able to maintain grade-level expectations. Based on teacher reports and student samples, the high level of academic rigor and improved social awareness were noted.

Overall, these studies suggest that a focus on academic intervention is insufficient. It is not enough to just academically challenge students with ED. Providing academic interventions may improve student performance on standardized testing. Doing so may result in greater emotional and behavioral consequences.

In order to seek out how teachers can effectively meet the needs of students in self-contained settings, teachers cannot only include academic interventions. Because students with emotional disabilities need so much support in social areas, the next intervention considered were social.

Social Interventions. Additional studies have been completed that seek to find how social structures and rigor effect students placed in self-contained classrooms. "Social interventions" is defined in these varied studies as holding students accountable for their choices

in a pre-determined social plan. The structure and rules of these plans may vary, based on the need of the students in the classroom.

The idea of increasing social confidence by keeping academic challenges in classrooms is discussed in Scott and Shearer-Lingo's study in 2002. This study actually sought to repeat the Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley completed previously—but instead focuses on the social implications or rigorous academic work. It found that by increasing educational opportunities, students are more likely to build social confidence. Growing in the area of social confidence isn't always an idea that just happens in a rigorous academic setting. Many teachers seek out opportunities to maintain rigor and improve social emotional awareness.

Mattison (2011) sought to replicate Lane et. al.'s (2005) study in with middle school students. Mattison, looked at the differences between a self-contained classroom housed within a middle school and a self-contained classroom housed in an alternate location (within the district but separate from the 'mainstream' middle school. Seventy-six students in grades 6-8 were involved in this study. The groups were compared at the beginning and the end of a school year, using demographics, IQ and achievement testing, a teacher checklist for DSM-1V psychopathology, and standard measures of school functioning. The baseline self-contained school students were significantly lower in both IQ and achievement. The self-contained classroom group was significantly higher in acting out behaviors in the school setting. Over the course of the school year students within the self-contained classroom (within a 'mainstream setting) socially "functioned" significantly better than the self-contained school students. That is to say fewer incidents of "acting out" were reported.

Students who were housed within the mainstream school setting showed noticeable social growth. Teacher reported an overall improvement in students ability to act in socially appropriate ways, and fewer incidences of "acting out." The social and emotional supports for academic learning are clearly of value. If students are given all of these supports they are more likely to be successful in mainstream classes. Thus, speaking to overall goals in placing students in least restrictive environments.

The benefits of having "mainstream" interactions was also studied and noted in a follow-up study completed by Kamps, Wills, Greenwood, Thorne, Lazo, Crockett, and Swaggart (2003). This study supports the idea that students need to be challenged, and need to have additional emotional supports in place. However, once the groundwork is laid and rigor is included in their academic program they have almost limitless potential.

Kamps et al., (2003) highlight the need for students with ED to be able to "check-in/check-out" with an adult. Although this study takes place in a residential facility, this system could easily be adapted in the K-12. Here, the role of the special education teacher and/mental health professional becomes critical as they can connect with students one-on-one. Check-in/check-out involves placing an adult with a specific student to encourage positive, appropriate behavior as well as a sense of connection. Checking in and checking out involved goal setting and monitoring social goals at the beginning and at the end of the day. Connecting with an adult allowed students to set small and reasonable goals as well as held them accountable for the achievement of those goals on a daily basis. This intervention resulted in a serious decrease of behavioral referrals and overall classroom behavior, and improved academic performance. In these easily reproduced interventions, the focus on social well-being results in social growth for students.

Academic and Social Interventions. Scott and Shearer-Lingo (2002) effectively marry academic and social interventions. For this study, teachers in a self-contained classroom implemented a reading intervention program with three students who were in 7th grade during a school year. Teachers experimented with goal setting within a reading program. Two students were given goals to meet by the teachers; the third student was able set his own goals. By the end of the study, the student who set his own goals showed greater success in the reading program in that he went up three grade levels in reading. The same student, when presented with challenges, persevered to achieve is own reading goals. In contrast, the two students who had the teacher set their goals were more likely to give up.

Ownership of one's goal is a critical social support that allows students to self-regulate and progress monitor. When coupled with high academic standards, students with ED are more likely to be successful in a number of ways. Students with ED need to be able to experience frustration and potential failure as part of a larger life skill. Much value rests in their learning how to grow through frustration and failure, but cannot do it alone.

Conclusions

What I hope to make clear in this analytic review are three things.

- Students with ED are returning to schools, and they require additional supports.

- Students with ED have the most opportunity for growth in self-contained class, placed in a "mainstream" school setting.

- Students with ED require a 'marriage' of academic and social interventions.

The numbers of students with ED are growing in schools. With the increasing numbers, teachers need to be prepared and supported in working with these students. There are many social services that embrace this need, but collaboration with teachers is essential. Additionally, when teachers' mistake lowered expectations academically for survival within a "mainstream" district, the negative consequences for students are dramatic. That being said, when high academic standards are held, and practiced alongside social supports, these students have endless potential. The placement which best supports the need of students with ED is a self-contained classroom within a 'mainstream' district. In these places, students with ED can access academic rigor among mainstream classes, social support through one-on-one intervention of a special educator, and feel a sense of connectivity with their home districts. It is time to bring our students with ED home.

Implications

Future research

For students with ED to continue to be successful, continued research needs to be conducted for educating teachers. That is not to say that all teachers must be experts in working with the population of students with ED, but rather that they must know how to access those experts. Additionally, if the conclusions of this review result in more self-contained classrooms in mainstream districts, administrators must consider which academic interventions are acceptable in that district. Methods mentioned in this review such as the "push-in" method would need to be closely monitored and adjusted per the needs of the students and teachers.

Student learning

When students with ED are placed in a self-contained setting inside of a mainstream building, students have the greatest opportunity to succeed. Teachers of self-contained classrooms enable these opportunities to occur by keeping a balance of social supports in conjunction with academic rigor. Alongside this balance, the teacher also has the flexibility to consider the cyclic nature of behavior in students with ED. This recognition allows consistent and cohesive teaching practices within this setting.

Myself as a Teacher

In terms of my positionality and growth as a researcher, this project as shown the potential for my current setting in 8:1:1. I have gained the confidence to know that although this job is incredibly challenging, that I am helping students in the best way I know how—both in practice and research. Additionally, it has empowered me to embrace my fellow teacher. I have

found myself braver in seeking those "mainstream" opportunities for my students, and have

forgiven the overwhelmed teachers who they face. There is not a teacher that will be the only

expert. I have found through this project that sharing expertise, and owning the challenges that

each of us face is the way to meet the needs of this expanding population.

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