

Level Systems Revisited: An Important Tool for Educating Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Abstract

Students with emotional and behavior disorders represent one of the most challenging groups for whom to provide effective educational services. For many years, level systems have been used by teachers to provide an overall structure within which to deliver educational services. In recent years, a number of researchers and practitioners have criticized level systems as outdated and overly restrictive. The authors believe that many of the concerns associated with the use of level systems can be overcome with careful planning and implementation and that level systems can still be an important and useful component in effective programs for students with E/BD. Guidelines for developing an effective level system along with suggestions for overcoming some of the problems typically encountered with implementing level systems in school settings are presented in this paper.

Keywords: Level systems, self-management, emotional and behavioral disorders

Introduction

Students who have been identified as emotionally or behaviorally disturbed are among those most difficult to teach and the least likable by those who work in educational settings (Walker, McConnell, Holmes, & Todis, Walker, & Golden, 1983). They engage in disruptive, destructive, aggressive and defiant behaviors that have been linked to teacher stress, burnout and attrition. In fact, teacher attrition is a major contributor to the special education personnel shortages. Most studies have reported survey research and attrition rates. The ability of public schools to retain qualified special education teachers is questionable. For over two decades, educators have voiced concerns about teacher attrition in special education (Boe, Cook, Bobitt, & Webber, 1995; George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). In a National survey of over 1,000 special educators recently conducted by the Council for Exceptional Children (2001) they concluded: "Poor teaching conditions contribute to a high rate of special educators leaving the field, teacher burnout, and substandard quality of education for students with special needs."

Higher attrition rates among special educators are often attributed to the stress involved in working with special education populations. It is widely accepted that special educators are greatly affected by the pressures which accompany working with students who demonstrate a wide range of social and academic problems (Council for Exceptional Children, 2001). There is no surprise that teachers of students classified as E/BD, compared to teachers of other students with disabilities, report greater job dissatisfaction, feelings of depersonalization, exhaustion, and consequently are at greater risk for dropping out of the special education profession (George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Pullis, 1992). Thus, it is not hard to understand why teachers who work with students identified as E/BD have the highest attrition rate among special education teachers (Brownell, Smith, & Miller, 1994; George, George, Gersten, & Grosenick, 1995; Singer, 1993; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

Given the difficulties associated with educating students with emotional and behavioral disorders, it is imperative that teachers are provided with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to develop the most effective programs for their students. One such set of strategies involves the development of effective classroom Level systems.

Level systems are essentially an application of the principle of shaping, where the goal is self-management (i.e., developing personal responsibility for social, emotional, and academic performance. Kanfer and Zich (1974) suggested that self-management is the final outcome of a process involving self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement, all of which are involved in level systems. A student's progress through the various levels of a Level system depends on changes in this or her measurable behavior and achievement. As the student progresses through the levels, the behavioral expectations and privileges provided for acceptable behavior are altered toward the eventual goal of self-management.

Although once very prevalent in programs for students with E/BD, Level systems have recently become less popular in school settings (Webber & Plotts (2008). Some concerns have been raised as to the appropriateness of Level systems in the context of current models of service delivery and IDEA (Scheuerman, Webber, Partin & Kneies, 1994). We believe that many of the problems that have been associated with the use of level systems can be avoided or overcome by a complete understanding of the purpose of these systems and the development of skills necessary to develop and implement effective systems with students with E/BD.

Over the past 20 years, the authors have worked extensively with students with emotional and behavioral disorders in school settings. In the following sections, we will outline the steps associated with developing an effective level system and describe the model used by the first author when he was a teacher of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. We will then discuss some of the challenges associated with implementing effective level systems in school settings and discuss some common problems we have encountered over the years. Finally, we will describe strategies for addressing each of these potential problems and integrating the use of a Level system as a component of an effective educational program for students with E/BD.

Background and origins of the use of Level systems. Although Level systems were first used in residential programs and hospital settings in the 1060's, the Engineered Classroom was one of the first documented attempts to assessment effectiveness of a level system with students with emotional and behavioral disorders in a classroom setting. Hewett (1968) used a structured system with hierarchy of seven goals associated with skills necessary for success in schools and academic learning (e.g. attention, following established rules). This basic model was expanded with the Madison School Plan (Taylor, Hewett, Artuso, Quay, Soloway, & Stillwell (1972). Student progressed through four levels with the fourth level being placement in a general education classroom. This was the first documented use of a level system in which the stated goal was self-management and the generalization of treatment gains into another setting.

With the Achievement Place model (Phillips, Phillips, Fixen, and Wolf (1974) developed a level system at a residential treatment program for youth offenders. Children in the program earned points on a point system in which different schedules of reinforcement were associated with different levels. As the participants progressed through different levels, they could use their points to purchase rewards at increasingly longer intervals of time (e.g., hourly, daily, and weekly). Many of the level systems that have been used by educators through the years have included many of the characteristics of the Engineered Classroom/Madison School Plan and the Achievement Place model (Taylor, Hewett, Artuso, Quay, Sobway, & Stillwell (1972)).

Developing and Effective Level System

Many effective programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD) implement a points and level system. These systems provide students with E/BD motivation to improve behavior by the staff awarding points to students for prosocial behavior throughout the school day. This kind of

system involves a point sheet (Figure 1), which lists a series of behaviors on an axis of the point sheets and time frame on the other axis. During each scoring period students are awarded points indicating the presence or absence of prosocial behavior. Students earn their way through a succession of levels based on demonstrating consistent prosocial behavior. As students move through these levels the expectations for appropriate behavior increases. In addition, students can access desired privileges associated with each level.

Score Sheet Level 1											
Student:					Week of:						
Target Behavior:											
Subject	Handling Conflict		Positive Attitude		Appropriate Language		Academic Work		Target Behavior From IEP		Bonus
Prompt & Ready											
Prompt & Ready											
Prompt & Ready											
Prompt & Ready											
Prompt & Ready											
Prompt & Ready											
Prompt & Ready											

Figure 1: Score Sheet Level 1

Creating a Point and Level System

Rationale for developing a Level system. Point and level systems are used to provide fair and consistent order in programs for students with E/BD. They provide teachers and staff with a clear structure for effectively reinforcing and utilizing descriptive instructional praise and corrective teaching. They also are used to generalize behaviors from special education settings to inclusive settings. The reintegration process is one of the most critical aspects of self-contained programs for students with E/BD and is one of the weakest links of E/BD programs (Callahan, Gustafson, & Cancio, 1993). Level systems enhance generalization by increasing expectations as students move through the system and by simulating a regular education setting before reintegration is initiated (e.g., lowering reinforcement schedules, utilizing regular education materials when appropriate).

Point and level systems can restore a student's lost hope or expectations for success. Shores and Wehby (1999) indicate that research has been consistent in its reports of (a) low rates of positive interactions between students with E/BD and their teachers and (b) the inconsistency of these interactions (p. 196-197). Point and level systems can provide opportunities for teachers to evaluate student behavior more frequently and will allow teachers to increase their rate of praise. The development of positive therapeutic relationships between teachers and students is essential for the success of any educational program; this is especially true for programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Points and level systems enable students to see a cause and effect relationship between their prosocial behavior and the consequences they receive. When students make poor choices in the context of a well designed level system, they can see that their choices, not the actions of adults were the cause of the consequences they received. When students are able to attribute successes and failures to factors they can control they often report feelings of competence and a willingness to focus on specific strategies they can use to become successful (Ames, 1992).

Another positive aspect of point and Level systems is that if effectively developed they have built in accountability for both social and academic behavior. The point sheets can function as a monitoring tool for teachers and a self-monitoring tool for students. For example, a teacher can use the data on the point sheets to chart average points earned per week. As students progress to more advanced levels, they can take more responsibility for monitoring their own behavior.

Steps in developing an effective level system.

Developing an effective point level system takes planning and precision and involves the following major components: (a) identifying target behaviors that the point level system will include and developing point sheets to monitor these behaviors; (b) developing a time frame for providing feedback; (c) determining the point value for each target behavior; (d) developing a continuum of levels to indicate progress students are making through the system and setting criteria for moving up and down the levels; (e) selecting the reinforcers and privileges associated with each level; (f) determining when students have access to back up reinforcers; (g) deciding how to keep track of points earned or spent; and (h) developing a procedure to monitor students progress and system evaluation.

Identify target behaviors and develop point sheets to monitor the target behavior. It is critical to select observable and measurable target behaviors to be included on the point sheets. Everyone involved with the system (staff, students, and parents) should be clear regarding the behaviors being monitored and reinforced, and consequences associated with inappropriate behavior. The target behaviors will usually include general categories related to social and academic behaviors (e.g., demonstrate appropriate behaviors, stay on-task, use appropriate language). As well as general behaviors that are included in the students IEP's. Jones, Dohrn and Dunn (2004) have found that monitoring five behaviors for elementary students and seven for students at the secondary level is most effective.

The target behaviors of point and level systems should be understandable to the students and staff in the classroom. As mentioned earlier they must be observable and measurable. Some teachers have the target behaviors on individual posters displayed around the room. These posters include a description and examples of the behaviors. Table 1 provides the behavioral descriptions of the target behaviors of one such system.

Table 1. Behavioral descriptions of the target behaviors of a point and level system.

Target Behavior	Behavior	Examples
Prompt & Ready	- Student must be prepared for class	- Having all materials ready (pen/pencil, paper, book) - Show up for class on time - Be ready to learn
Appropriate Language	- Interact with staff and peers appropriately - Using appropriate language at all times	- Talking with a positive tone & respect in your voice - Refraining from teasing, swearing, name calling, & derogatory remarks
Handling Conflict	- Compliance - Ignore negative behaviors - Accepting constructive criticism - Compromising - Staying out of fights - Using anger control - Displaying appropriate interactions - Respecting individual differences	- Listen to & follow directions - Ignore peers acting out - Accepting corrections from staff - Coming to an agreement over a situation - Both verbal & physical - Approaching a difficult situation constructively - With staff & peers - Age, race, religion, appearance, etc.
Positive Attitude	- Cooperative behavior - Accepting responsibility - Appropriate statements about self & others - Being helpful & assisting others	- Throughout the entire school - For actions & reactions - Verbally, non-verbally, & body language - Both staff & peers throughout the entire school
Academic Work	- Quality - Quantity - On-task - Homework	- Putting forth an honest effort with every assignment - All classroom assignments completed in allotted time - Using classroom time effectively & appropriately - Turned in on time and completed
Target Behavior	- A target behavior is a specific positive behavior that meets students individual needs	- The target behavior must come from the students IEP

Develop a time frame for providing feedback. It is well accepted that students benefit from timely positive and corrective feedback regarding behavior Jones et al., (2004). The decision as to how often to provide feedback on point sheets is complicated and deserves reflection. It is the first author's experience that students with E/BD require frequent and consistent feedback regarding their behavior, especially in the initial levels of the level system. It has been observed that many E/BD programs provide feedback

only once per hour. This can be problematic if a student initially is non-compliant when the class starts and loses all his or her points. In this situation, the student has nothing to work toward for the rest of the hour. Consequently, the student may continue to be non-compliant and may even escalate as the hour continues because there is no incentive to exhibit prosocial behavior. A more effective strategy would be to break the hour into intervals and provide behavioral feedback more often (four times or twice a period). Therefore, if the same scenario took place the student would have something to work toward during the next interval for providing behavioral feedback. Even though there is no empirical evidence, the authors feel that by providing behavioral feedback more often students can change their challenging behavior at a more rapid rate.

In a four level system, behavioral feedback can be provided at different intervals in each level to enable programs to fade reinforcement schedules and program for generalization. A teacher could provide behavioral feedback four times a class period for level one, three times during level two, twice for level three, and once for level four. The criteria for advancing students from one level to the next is extremely important and should be given careful consideration. We often see teachers make the mistake of setting this criteria at a level that does not allow students to experience enough success on each of the levels in the system. If a student is moved to a subsequent level too quickly, the schedule of reinforcement may be faded too quickly and the student's behavior could deteriorate. When this occurs, many teachers conclude that level systems are ineffective.

Determine the point value for each target behavior. Each target behavior in the points and level system should be associated with a point value. Without awarding points students may not buy into the system and be motivated to exhibit prosocial behavior. The points can then be exchanged for backup reinforcers (e.g., activity reinforcers, edibles, and tangible rewards). The highly preferred reinforcers should have the highest point values and should be difficult to attain. It will be necessary to have students fill out reinforcer preference surveys. These surveys can assist the teacher in developing a reinforcer menu to post in the classroom. Students can refer to the menus when they are given access to reinforcement.

Develop a continuum of levels to indicate progress students are making through the system and develop criteria for moving up and down levels. Most points and levels systems that the authors have encountered contain a minimum of four levels. Students start at level one and progress up or down the system based on the student's ability to earn a specified number of points per week (usually a specified percentage of possible points a student can earn per week). Based on the assumption that the more behavioral feedback you provide students the faster they change their behavior. A program can provide feedback on different reinforcement schedules within each level. Thinning reinforcement schedules will help with generalization training, which will assist in the reintegration process.

Effective point and level systems indicate how a student can move up the levels. These systems provide access to privileges associated with each level (Jones et al., 2004). Students must earn a percentage of points each week for a prescribed amount of time to move into the next higher level (e.g., 70% of possible points earned per week for six weeks, three of these weeks being consecutive). In addition, effective point and level systems outline how a student can move down one level if the student's behavior consistently regresses or a significant behavioral event occurs (e.g., a student strikes a teacher). Movement down levels can be effective if associated with a student moving back up to his or her previous level once the student's behavior has recovered. Students should never be moved more than one level at a time. Doing so may very well undermine the motivation students might have to move from one level to the next. In addition, movement down levels should never be the sole intervention for significant rule violations.

Determine the reinforcers and privileges associated with each level. Each level in the points and level system should be associated with specific privileges for higher level status. Teachers can use reinforcer surveys to assist in selecting appropriate reinforcers and privileges for each level. However, teachers can have reinforcers in mind as well (e.g., activity reinforcers). External reinforcers can provide students with the motivation for demonstrating prosocial behavior. Researchers suggest that when students are directly involved in selecting the privileges and reinforcers associated with each level, they often select highly practical and useful reinforcers and they are more likely to find the privileges and reinforcers more meaningful (Jones et al., 2004). More preferred reinforcers and privileges should be associated with higher levels (see table 2). In addition, a reinforcer menu should be developed and be posted in the classroom so students can see what reinforcers are accessible to them (see table 3). Students must pay for back-up reinforcers with points earned from the level system and should not have access to any of the back-up reinforcers through any other means. Sometimes teachers allow students access to back-up reinforcers through other means and this eliminates the students' motivation to work for the back-up reinforcers through the points and level system.

Table 2. Reinforcers associated with each level

Level System Privileges	
Level	Privileges
Level 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break time between classes • Free time at desk • The student needs permission to leave desk area • Student must eat lunch in the classroom
Level 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break time between classes • Lunch outside E/BD classroom • Free-time within the classroom • Listen to music during Free-time • Work on computer • The student can use points earned at the school store
Level 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All level two privileges • Buy a homework pass • Buy one can of soda per week • The student is eligible to earn points/credit for work in school (e.g., assisting custodian, cook, or secretary)
Level 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All level three privileges • Play board game • Listen to music while working • The student can buy an off-campus lunch with teacher or principal

Table 3. Sample reinforcer menu

Activity	Points
Read a book	450
Go to the library to select a book	450
Computer time	600
Board Game	600
Card Game	600
Drawing	600
Teacher Helper	750
Homework Pass	1000
Play Board game with Teacher	1000
Go to Lunch with Teacher Off-Campus	2000

Determine when students have access to back up reinforcers. It must be determined when students can have access to back-up reinforcers in order to motivate them to exhibit prosocial behavior. Access to rewards should be based on student needs. Some students can save their points for highly preferred items or activities while others need to access rewards hourly or daily (typically activity reinforcers). The rewards associated with a point and level system are one aspect of providing a positive environment at school and one over which students feel they have some control.

Determine how to keep track of points earned or spent. A record system must be put in place to keep track of points earned and spent. This activity can take place at the end of the day. This process can double as a math activity. Some programs use spread sheets on a computer, while, others document points earned and spent in a savings book. This would be an opportune time to appraise the student's day before they go home.

Develop a procedure to monitor student's progress and system evaluation. It is critical for staff to frequently monitor the data associated with the points earned on the level system to determine the success of each student. Without data collection and data-based decision making it is difficult to make adjustments in a student's program and to determine the impact the point and level system is having on the student. In addition, these data can serve as a vehicle to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the program design.

Challenges to Effective Implementation

Teacher/staff perception and attitudes. In our work with teachers of students with EDB, we often encounter individuals who hold a negative view of levels systems and perceive this model as outdated and incompatible with current philosophies and trends in education. In most instances, we believe these views are a result of an incomplete or faulty understanding of the intended purpose levels systems and a lack of the necessary skills to successfully develop and implement an effective system. One argument against the use of levels systems that we frequently encounter is that such a model focuses on segregating students with EDB in self-contained classrooms and is counter to the inclusion of students with EDB. Another argument is that interventions such as levels systems emphasize teacher control and do not result in students taking responsibility for their own behavior or learning self-regulation. Some individuals suggest that levels systems and other group-oriented systems are not individualized and therefore counter to IDEA and the philosophy of individualized interventions.

Levels systems are designed for segregated settings and are counter to the philosophy of inclusion. While levels system are indeed implemented almost exclusively in self-contained classrooms, the goal of a well designed levels system is the development of the skills and competencies necessary for success in school and in life in general. As students progress through the different levels, the standards and expectations more closely approximate those of a general education classroom. In fact, the final level in many systems requires students to demonstrate success with the level of feedback and support that is usually available in general education classrooms. However, the educational placement of any student must always be a team-based decision.

Levels systems emphasis teacher control rather than student control and self-regulation. While teacher control is very prevalent in the highly structured initial stages of most level systems, the goal of a well designed system should be to gradually shift responsibility from the teacher to the student. Most effective levels systems include the development of specific self-management skills that are taught over the course of many months as the students progress through subsequent levels. Students are taught to become aware of their own behavior initially through frequent teacher feedback, and later through self-monitoring and self recording as the teachers feedback becomes less frequent and expectations gradually shift to include more choices, more responsibility, and opportunities for self-management. A related argument is that structured reinforcement systems undermine the intrinsic motivation students should experience through their successful completion of academic work and participation in school. We suggest that many students with EDB have experienced limited success in educational settings are not likely to become intrinsically motivated unless they are able to experience success. Overtime, success itself can become a powerful generalized reinforcer. By better learning to manage their own behavior, students with E/BD can reduce their dependence on external sources of control and increase their level of self-determination and self-regulation (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughs, 2000). If students learn to associate the experience of school with success, the classroom environment can become a generalized reinforce for appropriate prosocial behavior.

Learning to delay gratification and work for long-term goals has been identified as a critical component of the self-regulation process (Bandura & Perloff, 1967). Children with emotional and behavioral disorders often have difficulty controlling their emotions, interpreting social situations, and adjusting to outside expectations and demands. They have often learned very limited ways of responding to stressful or provocative situations and react by becoming physically aggressive, impulsive, or displaying other inappropriate behavior. These behaviors have an immediate pay off the students that usually involves terminating an aversive event or the removal of a demand or expectations. In the long run however, these patterns of behavior often lead to academic failure, social isolation and rejection, and lost or restricted opportunities. A critical role of an effective teacher or therapist is to teach students alternative skills, strategies and way of responding that will prepare them to exercise their full potential outside of the school setting. A level system can provide an overall structure and context in which students can learn self-management and self-control strategies (Kazdin & Weisz, 2003).

Levels systems are not individualized and therefore counter to IDEA. A well designed levels system should be only one component of an effective program for students with EBD. A levels system can provide a basic structure and context in which a variety of interventions can be implemented. Other essential components of an effective program include, a) an appropriate curriculum and sound empirically-based instructional practices, b) the use of appropriate assessment techniques and data to make behavioral and instructional decisions, c) the use of functional behavioral assessment strategies to identify the antecedents and consequences of problem behavior and develop individualized interventions based on behavioral function, d) social skills training that includes direct instruction of critical social skills along with procedures to facilitate maintenance and generalization. In other words, individualized interventions are an essential part of any effective educational program for students with EBD. A levels system can provide a basic structure in which a variety of interventions can take place. As stated

previously, the most appropriate educational placement for a student should always be determined by a team. Placement in a general education classroom should not be viewed as a privilege to be earned.

Lack of administrative support. Many school administrators are not trained in sound behavioral principles and are not aware of the advantages of levels systems for students with EBD. Sometimes such administrators are not in a position to provide the necessary level of support to teachers or are not supportive of their efforts. They are not able to provide feedback or suggestions to teachers and are sometimes reluctant to invest limited school resources in consultation, training, workshops and other types of support that would help teachers be more successful in developing and implementing levels systems.

Misuses and misapplications of level systems. In our work in school settings, we frequently encounter situations in which teachers have encountered problems with developing and implementing level system. In this section, we will list some of the problems we have encountered and some strategies for addressing the problem.

Over use of punishment and negative consequences. One of the most frequent problems we encounter in schools is an over reliance on punishment or behavior reduction strategies such as response cost. We are surprised by the number of teachers who employ response cost exclusively in their systems. For example, the second author recently visited a classroom in which the teacher used a levels system in which students were taught to self-manage by keeping track of their points. However, rather than earning points for appropriate behavior, each student started out the day with a set number of points and lost points for infractions committed throughout the day. While some of the students were able to be successful under this system, a number of the students lost all of their points early in the day. When this happened, they sometimes ended the day with a point deficit that was subtracted from the total points they received the following day! As a result, the point system was no longer motivating for these students. It was stressed to the teacher that response cost, like other punishment-based interventions, can only decrease behavior. We believe that the focus of a classroom management system should be on increasing appropriate behavior. The model described above was used by the first author when he was a teacher of students with EBD. Although this model initially included a response cost component it was later abandoned in favor of frequent feedback for appropriate behavior.

Implementation in the absence of positive therapeutic teacher-student relationships. Implementing an effective level system in the absence of therapeutic relationships with students with E/BD will be ineffective and will not meet the needs of the students. In a meta-analysis of more than 100 studies, Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003) found that the quality of teacher-student relationships is the foundation for all other aspects of classroom management. In their research they also found that teachers who had high-quality relationships with their students had 31% fewer discipline problems and rule violations. While conducting a series of interviews with teachers who were regarded by their peers as effective in working with students from culturally and linguistically diverse populations, Garcia (1999) noted that most of these educators stressed the importance of a caring positive relationship between teachers and students. Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of positive therapeutic relationships with students, many teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders have interactions with their students that are characterized by an emphasis on control, a reactive approach to responding to disruptive behavior, and frequent use of punishment or aversive consequences. In a review of research of the use of praise statements delivered by E/BD teachers, Shores and Wehby (1999) found that teachers gave very little positive praise to their students. In fact, the average rate of positive interactions was 2.5 per hour. Most of the statements the teachers made to students were in the form of neutral commands. When students complied with these commands, teachers usually gave another directive rather than praise or reinforcement. They also found that teachers responded inconsistently to students negative behaviors. In one of the studies they reviewed, teachers only responded to every fifth

problem behavior incident. High rates of teachers praise has been shown to increase the effectiveness of educational programs for students with E/BD. Consistent use of descriptive praise has been shown to increase intrinsic motivation in students (Cameron & Pierce, 1994) and facilitate the development of positive relationships between teachers and students. Sutherland, Copeland, and Wehby (2001) state,

“Through the use of praise, a positive classroom environment is established and sustained, and relationships between teachers and students are improved and maintained. The teacher who uses praise is seen by students as a fair, caring, trustworthy adult”(p. 47).

Sutherland (2000) suggests that teachers use self-evaluation to help increase their use of praise in the classroom. By videotaping themselves during instructional situations, teachers can monitor the rate at which they deliver instructional mands or directives, praise statements, and attention to disruptive behavior.

In addition to high rates of praise, teachers of students with E/BD must develop other therapeutic skills in order to establish positive relationships with students. These teachers need to be aware of indicators of positive relationships and how to avoid escalating student behavior into a crisis situation.

Students with E/BD are often angry, frustrated, sad, and fearful. These students consistently have difficulties controlling their emotions. In addition, they frequently exhibit behavior that is maladaptive, inconsistent, and self-defeating. Consequently, teachers must be able to create an environment that meets the academic and social needs of their students. Teacher attitudes towards students are critical in developing a therapeutic environment. Therapeutic teachers understand students with E/BD, help students experience success, have realistic expectations of what their students can do, and create a positive classroom climate. Therapeutic teachers are able to communicate effectively with their students (e.g., they are calm when they give their students corrective feedback), and they help their students manage stress (Abrams, 2005). In addition, therapeutic teachers do not escalate conflict situations. They know and understand the conflict cycle (Long, Wood, Fecser, 2001) and how their own behavior can influence the behavioral and emotional reactions of their students in a difficult situation. The conflict cycle is a paradigm in which the student experiences a stressful event, which transpires into an observable behavior (this behavior typically is maladaptive), which results in a reaction by a staff member. If teachers are not aware of the conflict cycle they can escalate the cycle into a crisis. During crisis situations therapeutic teachers stay calm, keep interactions brief, do not get involved in power struggles, understand the stages of agitation and intervene appropriately (Colvin, Nelson, etc., 1997; Long et al., 2001).

Therapeutic teachers meet students' psychological needs, while showing their students dignity and respect. Consequently, therapeutic teachers build strong personal relationships with their students. Building relationships with students with E/BD is critical because they often do not have meaningful relationships with peers and adults due to their maladaptive behaviors. When teachers make concerted efforts to know their students as individuals, they communicate to their students that they value them. There are many ways teachers can foster positive relationships with their students. These may include: talking to students about their interests, talking to students about the teacher's interests, utilizing effective praise at a high rate, bringing students interests and background into lessons and class activities, advocating for students, communicating caring and support, practicing fairness and having high expectations of students (Marzano et al., 2003; Jones & Jones, 2007).

Implementation in the absence of skill development. As we stated above, a levels system is only one component of an effective program for students with EBD. Such a system can serve as an overall structure and context for the development of critical skills that are directly taught. Students with EBD need systematic instruction in areas such as a) learning strategies and academic skill development

(Epstein, Kinder, & Bursuck (1989), b) social skills (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs 1998; Sheridan, 1995; Walker, Ramey, & Gresham, 2004)) c) self-management and coping skills (Peterson, Young, Salzberg, & Hill, 2006). Instruction in these areas must be incorporated into the daily schedule and taught systematically. These skills should be reflected in the classroom standards and expectations and integrated into the levels system. Once students have received instruction on these skills in the context of more structured lessons, teacher can prompt the students to use alternative skills when conflicts arise.

Progressing students through levels too rapidly and the effects of schedule strain. We frequently encounter teachers who have developed level systems in which students progress through levels at a very fast rate. One such teacher implemented a system in which the number of points a student earned on one day determined the level to which she or he would be assigned on the subsequent day. Consequently, it was possible for a student to progress through all four levels of her system in one week. As a result, many students would do well on the first two levels when opportunities for reinforcement were frequent, but they did not maintain these treatment gains when they were assigned to the higher levels when reinforcement was less frequent. The view of this teacher was that placement on lower levels was punitive and that she wanted to reward good behavior by advancing her students to higher levels as quickly as possible. In fact, her students were showing the signs of schedule strain; the schedule of reinforcement had been thinned too quickly and the motivation system had lost its effectiveness. The behavior of her students improved when the criteria for advancing from one level to the next was changed so that students had to earn a relatively high percentage of their points for two consecutive weeks before progressing to the next level. The variable nature of the behavior of some students with EBD might even require a more stringent criterion for level advancement. The first author employed a system in his classroom by which students were required to stay at a level for a minimum of three weeks prior to advancing to the next.

Use of unclear or inappropriate target behaviors. Sometimes teachers establish classroom expectations or target behaviors that are not operationally defined and do not instruct the students on the meaning of the expectations associated with the system. Classroom behavioral expectations must be positively stated in such a way as to be clear to the students. When possible, the students should be directly involved in developing the expectations. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher should take time to review the rules and expectations and systematically and directly teach them to all students. The use of clear classroom rules, expectations, and behavioral routines allows teachers to manage predictable classroom behavior and facilitates the development of a positive classroom environment.

Students who are difficult to motivate. Sometimes teachers express frustration in identifying effective reinforcers for some of their students. We often suggest that teachers complete reinforcement surveys with their students. In addition, reinforcement sampling can be an effective way to identify activities that can motivate students. Several years ago, one of my students was a teacher at a correctional facility for youth who had been incarcerated. Although these students rarely identified activities for which they were willing to work, one of the most effective reinforcers he used was a class activity at the end of the week. Students who had not earned the activity went to a different room to study while the class had a party. He saw an increase in peers supporting one another in difficult situations so that everyone could participate.

Although functional behavior assessment is used primarily to identify the motivation behind problem behavior in order to develop the most effective intervention. However, once the function of a behavior has been identified, the teacher can use this information when determining effective reinforcers. In other words, the student has demonstrated what he or she is willing to work for when exhibiting the motivation to engage in problem behavior. In some cases, teachers can use this information to identify effective reinforcers for appropriate social and academic behavior. For example, if a student is found to

be motivated by escape from academic demands, the opportunity to “buy” himself or herself out of work might function as a powerful reinforcer (Doyle, Jenson, Clark, & Gates, 1998).

Inconsistent program implementation. In order to be effective, a level system must be implemented consistently across time and across people. The best way to ensure consistency is to have a clearly defined and well documented plan that is communicated across all the people responsible for implementation. Communication is extremely important in the successful implementation of a levels system. The teachers in charge of the system should decide on the communication system that will be used among educators, staff, parents and students. A successful levels program requires frequent, positive communication. Communication may be facilitated by class meetings, staff meetings, written notes, and forms.

Conclusion

A carefully developed levels system has the advantage of offering security, structure, and routine to students with emotional disorders. Such a system can serve as a basic structure within which to implement a comprehensive program for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Level systems encourages teachers to respect the strengths and abilities of students and can allow students to learn that improvements in their behavior results in earned privileges. Level systems can also provide a structure and procedures that facilitate self-management and self-regulation. Although level systems have recently been criticized as being overly restrictive and outdated in the context of current trends in education, many of the problems associated with level systems can be overcome by a thorough understanding of sound behavioral principles and the knowledge and skills necessary to develop effective systems.

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