

Challenging Behavior in Students with an Intellectual Disability: Promoting Understanding and Compassionate Educational Practice

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Abstract

Students with an Intellectual Disability (ID) have complex learning and behavioral needs that can complicate educational programming and compete with their ability to fully participate in their education. This work aims to provide a conceptual understanding of the behavioral complexities involved in instructing students with intellectual disability through a review of the traditional evidence base as well as through the integration of more contemporary models of compassionate educational service delivery. Implications for teacher development, pre-service programming, and future research directions are also provided.

Keywords: Intellectual Disability, challenging behavior, compassionate education, behavior analysis, PBIS

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Schools have a responsibility to thoughtfully and meaningfully plan for the integration of students with special needs in all aspects of school community and life. Students with an Intellectual Disability (ID) are no exception. National and state legislative movements continue to favor inclusive educational settings and maximize instruction time of students with special needs with their general education peers (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2004; IDEIA, 2004). This notion is emphasized in the most recent revision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, P.L. 108-446 (2004) which continues to uphold that instruction takes place in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students.

Students with an Intellectual Disability (ID) represent a special subpopulation of the school community that may experience difficulty assimilating into inclusive classrooms and other aspects of school life due to their unique learning, physical, behavioral, and socio-emotional needs. The landmark settlement of the P.J. et al. (Plaintiffs) v. the State of Connecticut, Board of Education, et al. (2002) case brought to light the need for quality and equitable programming efforts for students with an Intellectual Disability. Specifically, educational systems became mandated to demonstrate accountability in their ability to meet the diverse needs of children with an Intellectual Disability in least restrictive learning environments, especially the regular education classroom.

Educational research, however, suggests that students with an Intellectual Disability are at an increased risk for developing a diagnosable psychiatric (comorbid) condition and/or exhibiting challenging behavior (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Emerson, 2003). Trends in children's mental health statistics show that, in general, there is an increased number of children and adolescents with mental health issues in schools. Findings of a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) entitled, "Mental Health Surveillance Among Children—United States 2005-2011" indicates that millions of American children live with depression, anxiety, autism spectrum disorders, disruptive disorders, or a host of other mental health issues. This brief further denotes that a total of 13-20% of children living in the United States experience a mental disorder in a given year. To this degree children with an Intellectual Disability are but a subset of this larger school population and from a mental health perspective should be viewed within that context. However, the presence of challenging behavior, in conjunction with the increased clinical vulnerability to mental health difficulties adds a unique layer to the academic and behavioral support planning process for these students. Challenging behavior can compete with the success at which these students integrate into their educational settings, learn, and be active members of the school community.

This work provides a conceptual synthesis of the literature for managing challenging behavior in students with an Intellectual Disability within a traditional behavioral psychology framework while simultaneously advocating for the consideration of a more encompassing mental health framework like compassionate schooling. This manuscript further aims to provide an understanding of the complexities involved in properly planning for and supporting these students in order to enable environments that rightfully meet their needs.

Understanding Challenging Behavior

Challenging behavior is often the overarching term used to describe behaviors of individuals with developmental disabilities that create problems and limit their abilities to lead rich lives that reflect their interests and values (Biersdorf, 2002). Challenging behavior, in the research, is often defined as a deviant level of emotional or behavioral issues. When referring to individuals with an Intellectual Disability this type of challenging behavior has been found to be three to seven times higher than displayed by their typically developing peers (Dworschak, Ratz, & Wagner, 2016). Furthermore, the definition of challenging behaviors by Einfeld and Tonge for the Developmental Behavior Checklist (DBC) continues to be widely used and accepted: where behavior and emotions are abnormal by virtue of their qualitative or quantitative deviance, and cannot be explained on the basis of developmental delay alone and cause significant distress to the child carers or the community, as well as significant added impairment, then these behaviors and emotions are regarded as disordered (Einfeld & Tonge, 1995; p. 87). Occurrences of challenging behavior, such as aggression, destruction, and self-injury, among others, are evidenced in 10-15% of individuals with an Intellectual Disability (Emerson, 2003).

Challenging behavior can vary in degree from one individual with an Intellectual Disability to the next. Challenging behavior can encompass mildly interfering tendencies that make inclusion into the community difficult to behaviors that can have legal ramifications (Biersdorf, 2002). Rowland & Treece (2000) postulated that challenging behavior among individuals with an Intellectual Disability may serve to fulfill both a function of attention-seeking and also a

communication mechanism, i.e., an outlet for expressing boredom, frustration, lack of personal control, and/or the desire to change the current situation. In the classroom, challenging behavior can translate into behaviors that can interrupt the learning process and pose management issues.

Comorbidity. Educational and psychological research has consistently suggested that students with an Intellectual Disability are at an increased risk for developing psychological difficulties and, hence, comorbidity of an Intellectual Disability with other types of psychological disorders and health conditions is not uncommon. It is estimated that children with an Intellectual Disability are three to seven times more likely to develop a mental health condition than children without an Intellectual Disability (Borwith-Duffy, 1994; Dekker, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2002; Koller, Richardsron., Katz; & McLaren, 1982; Linna, Miolanen, & Ebeling, 1999). For example, it is reported that children with an Intellectual Disability are more likely to experience anxiety disorders (8.7% vs. 3.6%) and meet criteria for conduct disorders (25.0% vs. 4.2%) than children without an Intellectual Disability (Emerson, 2003). Again, these statistics need to be examined within the current context of the status of student mental health in schools today. A secondary analysis study examining the prevalence of psychiatric disorders of British children revealed that 36% of children with an Intellectual Disability also have a diagnosable psychiatric condition as opposed to 8% prevalence among children without an Intellectual Disability (Emerson & Hatton, 2007).

Findings of Emerson and Hatton (2007) further revealed that a significant portion of the elevated risk for clinical diagnoses for children with an Intellectual Disability may be due to their increased rate of psychosocial disadvantage (poverty, less than optimal parenting, etc.). These authors lastly recommend that approaches to reducing the personal, social, and economic costs associated with psychiatric conditions of children with an Intellectual Disability includes focusing on both limiting exposure to adverse psychosocial conditions while also building resiliency in this population. This latter point is one that has implications for educators, particularly with respect to creative inclusive school climates.

Research Based Practices Supporting Challenging Behavior

Educating students with complex learning needs is a difficult task for all educators, including those who are specially trained to work with such special populations. The integrity of instruction for students exhibiting challenging behavior, like any other student exhibiting behavioral difficulties, may take a back seat to the management of the behavior that imposes on the instructional delivery. Hence, the climate of the classroom environment along with the competence, confidence, and compassion of the classroom teacher becomes pivotal in the quest to provide students with an Intellectual Disability rightful learning opportunities.

Literature on inclusive practices suggests that teacher knowledge about the term challenging behavior is relatively limited as are management strategies for challenging behavior (Rae & Murray, 2011). Likewise, findings of Rae and Murray (2011) further reveal that educator self-efficacy and teacher confidence in working with students with an Intellectual Disability are also relatively low. These findings have significant implications for educational practice particularly because research has identified evidenced based practices that have been empirically demonstrated to help manage challenging behavior and support learning, as well as, adaptive behavioral functioning. These strategies, three of which include the use of behavior analysis,

functional assessment based behavioral interventions, and the implementation of 3-tiered preventative school-wide behavioral paradigms are discussed in further detail below.

Behavior Analysis. Promoting systematic understanding of the function of challenging behavior is indispensable to the instructional planning and behavioral management process. Systematic understanding of challenging behavior involves careful and ongoing assessment of the child within the learning ecology. Challenging behavior can serve as a communicative function for all students, but this function is even more prominent in the learner with an Intellectual Disability. Speech and language difficulties and weakened executive functions that can accompany an Intellectual Disability make the act of appropriately expressing feelings, making requests, and/or verbalizing concerns much more taxing on their cognitive and emotional resolve. Aggressive tendencies may offer a quick alternative to communication that provides both sensory and emotional release of frustration. Likewise, internally maladaptive tendencies may also seek relief through acts of self-stimulation and even self-injury.

Learning to identify and support behavioral precursors is one way teachers can assist children who exhibit challenging behavior. Precursors to problem behavior are innocuous behaviors that reliably precede the occurrence of problem behavior (Landon, Carr, & Owen-De Scryver, 2008). Research has suggested that mild problem behaviors often serve as precursors to more severe problem behavior and are maintained by the same reinforcers (Smith & Chruchill, 2002). Such behaviors are hierarchical in their sequence of manifestation (Harding, et. al, 2001) implying that milder problem behavior typically precedes more severe behavior. Research further supports that offering students with opportunities to secure alternate yet functionally equivalent responses to triggers of problem behaviors, particularly opportunities that cue appropriate communication at the precursor-level, can be effective in alleviating the manifestation of more severe behavior (Langdon et. al, 2008). Such findings speak to the importance of teacher skill in identifying precursors to problem behavior and intervening with adaptive alternatives that meet an equivalent reinforcer in order to prevent more severe outbursts from occurring.

Functional Assessment-Based Interventions. The intensive and/or disruptive nature of challenging behavior calls for intervention planning that identifies and addresses the root of the undesired behavior. Like the manifestation of other intensive behaviors, behavioral interventions addressing challenging behavior need to be implemented to the best degree possible within natural settings, using natural change agents, and linked to and logically derived from functional behavioral assessment (Dunlap & Fox, 2011). Functional assessment-based interventions are directly informed by the outcomes of functional behavioral assessments (FBA). FBA's serve to identify the function and purpose of the behavior by uncovering the reinforcer that is maintaining the behavior given the social context. As noted by Lane, Oaks, and Cox (2007), functional assessment-based interventions that are derived from systematic behavioral analysis are more likely to produce behavior change by addressing the unique needs of the student in context. This notion of understanding the learner in context is especially indispensable for students with an Intellectual Disability whose clinical picture is sensitive to the level of cognitive and adaptive functioning present, degree of language processing, as well as, possible underlying comorbidity with other mental health issues. The educational community

needs to understand the broad context of intricacies that can envelop the student with an Intellectual Disability in order to create proper context for inclusion.

Research provides guidance as to how educators can create interventions stemming from FBA data. Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, and Lane (2007) identify several decision pathways that educators can employ once the function of the challenging behavior is deduced and the replacement behaviors have been selected. The pathway outcomes include: (1) teach the replacement behavior; (2) teach the replacement behavior and improve the environment; (3) improve the environment; or (4) adjust the contingency. Umbreit and colleagues (2007) developed a decision tree that helps to determine the proper decision pathway based on the student's ability to perform the replacement behavior and an assessment as to whether the antecedent conditions represent effective practice. This decision tree process is further detailed in Lane, Oaks, and Cox (2011) and serves as a tangible resource for educators looking to implement individualized interventions that are functionally based. The use of functional based behavioral assessment techniques and interventions, however, are enhanced within a school context where there is a culture of school-wide practices that identify, teach, uphold, and reinforce pro-social and adaptive behavior for all children. Thus, this discussion would be remiss without tying it within the larger thread of school-wide behavioral support practices and the school climate reform efforts.

School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS). Booth (2011) denotes, "The development of inclusion within the school is as much about the school as an institution, its' cultures and organizations and the relationships it encounters, as much as about what happens in lessons (p. 306)." Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports (PBIS) is a three-tiered service delivery model that aims to provide a framework for dispensing positive behavioral strategies to support all learners in a school environment. PBIS rests on the basis that students exhibit a continuum of behavioral and academic needs and that such needs should correspond with a school's continuum of supports and interventions (Sugai, Horner, et al., 2000). This continuum ranges from universal levels of behavioral support that serve as the foundation for school-wide behavioral practices to more individualized interventions and/or programs that are driven by student need.

The systematic implementation of PBIS at the universal, whole-school level (Tier 1) involves the development, teaching, and reinforcing of school-wide expectations for all students. The universal tier of support is one that establishes the climate and routine of a school in classroom and non-classroom settings (i.e. hallway, bathrooms, cafeteria, buses, etc.) and offers incentives for adaptive behavior that aligns with school-wide expectations. Further, behavioral expectations are posted throughout the school and teaching matrixes aid to support the explicit instruction of the desired behaviors in each setting for all students.

One critical consideration when planning for universal behavioral supports is that these supports be accessible to all students. Students with an Intellectual Disability may require that behavioral expectations and the content of teaching matrixes be adapted and/or modified in order to make the learning of their content accessible. The use of pictures, modified language, and consistent skill reinforcement may assist these learners in internalizing these expectations that make for a more inclusive paradigm in meeting the needs of a diverse study body. This simple practice

would not only benefit students with an Intellectual Disability, but also students who are second language learners, students with language-based learning disabilities, and visual learners. Maintaining this level of conscientiousness would support students with an Intellectual Disability, among others, to be able to more fully participate in and benefit from the behavioral and learning expectations that underpin their schools.

Taking Understanding One Step Further: Finding a Seat for Compassion in the Classroom

The construct of compassion, as it is defined in the positive psychological literature involves a two-part dynamic: (1) the emotional response elicited when one perceives suffering of another coupled with (2) an authentic desire and willingness to help that individual (Sepaala, 2013). At its core compassion involves an awareness of one's surroundings and the personal responsibility to act on behalf of another who is in need of attention or support.

The *Compassionate Schools Project*, a collaboration between the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), Metro Louisville's school district, and the University of Virginia, is an example of one paradigm that captures this consciousness in schools. The *Compassionate Schools Project* is a comprehensive six-year study that is presently in its pilot year (Year 2) with the project being implemented fully in 3 schools with 3 additional schools serving as control groups. The *Compassionate Schools Project* offers an integrative curriculum that interweaves support in academic achievement, mental fitness, health, and compassionate character.

The project lessons espoused by this model integrate a host of learning and wellness skills: social and emotional learning, deep self-understanding, stress resiliency skills, mental fitness training, physical regulation and exercise, and nutrition education. The above is achieved within a contemplative and compassionate framework based on recent scientific advancements in the understanding of brain function and the body, child and family health, child development, and academic and social functioning. It's mission focuses on the premise that, "when schools help students develop self-awareness and caring for others, they are more likely to succeed" (<http://www.compassionschools.org/program>).

Additionally, educational literature recognizes the benefits of trauma informed approaches and is looking to extend the delivery of such practices in school based contexts (Chafouleas, Johnson, Overstreet, & Santos, 2016). Trauma informed practices recognize the widespread impact of trauma in addition to its features and the tools needed to promote recovery and resilience (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), 2014). Systems that adopt a trauma-informed lense aim to create learning milieus that are marked by a level of awareness and mindful deliberation in identifying and meeting the unique learning objectives of such students. In this way, the system itself becomes vigilant of the needs of others with a particular sensitivity to student mental health and wellness issues (Walkley & Cox, 2013). This commitment then creates a class-level consciousness that is developed and maintained through the active commitment of students and teachers alike.

Literature has yet to test this model extensively. Students with an Intellectual Disability are a population whose educational needs are intertwined with physical, mental, adaptive, and cognitive health needs. School-wide commitments to compassionate schooling may certainly

benefit these students, supporting their behavior both in the classroom, as well as, school-wide. It would be a laudable effort to develop a compassionate teaching paradigm, borrowing from a trauma-informed paradigm as a basis for serving all students, those with and without identified disabilities. And through this channel promote inclusive efforts that are based in both equity and compassion. Such a model can be relatively easily folded into comprehensive 3-tiered preventative service delivery paradigms like PBIS (Chafouleas et al., 2016) and would supplement any positive school climate reform initiative.

Implications for Practice and Future Directions

The present educational era is one that is marked by the need for differentiated instructional strategies, layered curriculums, three-tiered service delivery models for student learning and behavioral supports. Educator training programs further emphasize instructional diversity as a prerequisite for teacher training. The rationale for such efforts rests on the notion that general education teachers are becoming more and more responsible for the instruction of students with exceptionalities in their classrooms (Jorgenson, Schuh, & Nisbet, 2006).

Forlin (2001) suggested that inclusion of students with a moderate to severe Intellectual Disability in regular classrooms was not perceived as overly stressful for teachers; but, more importantly, that perceived stressors corresponded to a teacher's professional competence and the behavior of the child with the Intellectual Disability. It is this behavioral piece that warrants tremendous attention when attempting to make inclusive efforts successful and manageable for all stakeholders. Hence, with proper training and support, teachers can learn to understand the function of challenging behavior at the individual student level and develop repertoires of tailored behavioral supports. Ideally, this would lend itself readily in a school that is working diligently to adopt a PBIS framework--where the promotion of a positive school climate is held a priority and school-wide expectations for behavior and learning are clear, visible, taught, modeled, and reinforced and where adaptive behavior is supported for all students including those who need modifications in its delivery.

Forlin (2001) further draws awareness to teacher self-efficacy and the need for schools to provide ample professional development for teachers in techniques that support diversity in instructional delivery and behavior management for this special student population. Differentiated instruction for the student with an Intellectual Disability thus involves the skillful delivery of adapted curriculums as well as access to durable behavioral repertoires to support challenging behavior.

Positive Behavioral Support Planning. Educational planning for students with an Intellectual Disability needs to be embedded with opportunities for the ongoing and intensive review of behavioral supports that enable learning for all students. These efforts need to be systematically evaluated for accessibility from their onset and modifications need to be created so that all learners can benefit from the structures in place. In this vein, 3-tiered models of prevention like PBIS need to keep student accessibility in mind when establishing expectations for behavior and learning at the school-wide level. This means that language, instruction, and reinforcement of these behavioral foundations be presented in a manner that reaches and supports all students.

It also becomes imperative that general and special educators and pupil personnel support faculty consult time with school leadership and their school PBIS teams (if applicable) in order to advocate for and support inclusive and tailored professional development opportunities that target such areas. Creating more inclusive school climates should always begin with keeping the needs of all students in mind and in order to do so with integrity, educators need to feel equipped and competent in their ability to provide students with the academic, behavioral, and/or socio-emotional harnessing that will allow them to participate in and prosper from school life.

Professional development. Further, educational leaders need to be attentive to the needs of the adults servicing this unique population and provide them with meaningful training, supervision, and collaborative planning time so that they may feel competent in instructing and supporting multiple facets of learning. Teacher development efforts should focus on increasing the understanding of problem behavior through skills training in conducting and/or assisting in functional behavioral analyses for these students. These efforts should not preclude direct skill instruction in identifying precursors to challenging behaviors and designing positive behavioral support systems accordingly. In this way, systematic behavioral techniques should not be reserved for specialists and can be explicitly taught to all educators to assist in the prevention and management of problem behavior in the classroom. With practice and training, teachers can learn to examine and identify the precursors of challenging behavior and dispense behavioral interventions when problem behavior is still mild (Langdin et al., 2008) so that the learning environment can be adequately manipulated to facilitate positive behavior and learning.

Professional development agendas also need to include thoughtful plans that foster teacher self-efficacy in instructing and managing students with intricate behavioral and learning needs given the compelling findings of Rae and Murray (2011). Such agendas are pivotal to the success of facilitating safe and inclusive learning environments for all students. Teacher development trajectories should thus include thoughtful training sequences for supporting students with an Intellectual Disability in the general classroom and non-classroom settings. Such professional development needs to be made available to all who share in the responsibility of supporting the intricate needs of these learners in and outside the classroom.

Pre-Service Programs & Teacher Training. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) have provided students with an Intellectual Disability access to the general education curriculum and classroom. While the law provides excellent educational opportunities for students with an Intellectual Disability, it places significantly more responsibility upon the general education classroom teacher to attempt to meet those needs (Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010). Classroom and behavior management skills are required for general teachers to be effective in inclusive classrooms. However, teachers in general education classroom settings have been provided with only limited training and exposure to students with disabilities, as well as, evidence based classroom and behavior management techniques. Teachers are often left feeling ill-equipped and lacking support to handle challenging behaviors in their classroom settings (Butler & Monda-Amaya, 2016). As a result, teachers often resort to punitive and/or exclusionary practices to address the challenging issues that arise with students with disabilities. Therefore, it is necessary for pre-service teacher training programs to include theory and practice focusing on classroom and behavior management in response to IDEA and ESSA (Harvey, et al., 2016).

Effective evidence based classroom and behavior management practices such as, PBIS, are critical factors to be included in teacher preparation programs. These skills are important for new teachers to successfully implement an inclusive classroom model (Freeman, Simonsen, Briere, & Macsuga-Gage, 2014). When PBIS is infused into pre-service teacher courses, beginning teachers are more prepared to collaboratively design interventions to prevent problem behaviors and concurrently teach appropriate behaviors resulting in a positive change for an individual child, in addition to a positive learning environment for the entire classroom (Safran & Oswald, 2003). Since the expectation implicit in IDEA (2004), is that teachers and other professionals in the field should be competent to conduct functional assessments and develop hypotheses and interventions from the results of these assessments, then providing training for this technology must become standardized in pre-service programs (Butler & Monda-Amaya, 2016, Hill & Flores, 2014). When pre-service teacher training does not provide the practical knowledge to recognize and implement effective positive behavioral intervention plans, the practice of inclusive education will continue to struggle to become effective. Until teachers are trained in effective employment of PBIS across the tiers of service delivery, students with an Intellectual Disability will reap the negative consequences of punishment and humiliation while other students in general education settings experience loss of classroom instructional time; all resultant of inadequate pre-service teacher training.

Additionally, critical components to be included in pre-service teacher training programs are evidence based classroom and behavior management skills paired with effective inclusion practices for students with an Intellectual Disability. Current data indicate that pre-service, as well as, beginning teachers feel unprepared to successfully manage the challenging behaviors that can occur in inclusive classroom settings. Teachers who are trained in the use of PBIS and other research based behavior management practices demonstrated fewer behavioral disruptions in their inclusive classrooms. Therefore, it is imperative for teacher training programs to adequately prepare pre-service educators to implement proactive techniques to manage challenging behaviors (Butler & Monda-Amaya, 2016).

All of the above efforts should optimally exist within a larger school-wide commitment to foster academic and socio-emotional resiliency of all learners. Dispensing behavioral supports within a climate of compassion would benefit a wide array of students from students with disabilities, to those with mental health struggles, to second language learners, to anyone coping with a situational occurrence that limits their ability to participate in their education. And for students whose learning and behavioral needs intersect more than one profile, such an approach could prove to be very fruitful as a supplement to or embedded within an expanded comprehensive 3-tiered service delivery model like SW-PBIS. Future research may wish to investigate such variables explicitly.

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Alyson Martin, Ed.D., is the Co-Director/Assistant Professor of Special Education in the Department of Educational Studies and Teacher Preparation in the Graduate School of Education & Allied Professions. She received her Ed.D. in Special Education with a specialization in ID/Autism from Teachers College, Columbia University. Additionally, she graduated with an M.S. in Special Education from Southern CT State University and she is alumni of Fairfield University, graduating with a B.A. in Psychology. Alyson is a certified Special Education teacher and has taught for over 13 years in local public-school districts. At Fairfield University she teaches introduction courses in Autism, Intellectual Disabilities and Individualized Education Plans (IEPS), as well as, Special Education Methods and Curriculum and Student Teaching Seminar/Supervision. Her research interests include special education teacher burnout and stress, working with families with children with disabilities, co-teaching practices in higher education, as well as, transition programs for young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders.