

## Addressing the Social/Emotional Needs of Students in a Future Without Specialized Behaviour Programs

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### Abstract

*With the current provincial government intent on making changes to education in Manitoba, teachers need to know how this will affect their classrooms. It is today's reality that programs directed at managing student behaviour are being closed. Without these programs, classroom teachers will need to use several strategies to support a greater range of student behaviour. Proactive measures can meet the needs of students with Emotional Behaviour Disorders (EBD) by minimizing conflicts and by providing routine and structure. Reactive measures are vital in establishing expectations for students re-entering mainstream classrooms and creating a plan for teachers to follow. The universal school strategies outlined below offer viable whole-school approaches to addressing the behavioural and educational concerns of students.*

When it was proposed by the Government of Manitoba, Bill 64 raised a clear concern among inclusion support staff that low-enrolment programs are on the chopping block. Such uncertainty arises from the proposed defunding of education, and the recent closures of specialized and local programs throughout Winnipeg (Sala, 2021). Despite the rescindment of Bill 64, it seems only a matter of time before these educational support programs are closed to save costs and to promote inclusion through fully integrated classrooms. Many approaches can lessen the potential hazards upon removal of support programs. Teachers can use proactive strategies to minimize potential conflict, and to maximize student participation and success in and out of learning opportunities. Within integrated classrooms, reactive planning will be essential to respond to the needs of all students. Such planning will establish a reference system for staff to respond to incidents with consistency and confidence. Universal school supports will be vital in transitioning away from specialized programming. Such supports can broaden service to students and alleviate the stress of already overloaded teachers.

### Proactive Strategies

There are many proactive strategies that teachers can employ to support the needs of newly integrated students and make them feel valued. An ideal inclusive learning environment should instill in students a sense of safety and acceptance within various social and learning opportunities (Stegemann & Jaciw, 2018). For students previously enrolled in specialized low-enrolment programs, coping in a new environment with a larger population can be daunting. Educators will need to take the time to build relationships with these students so as to find their strengths and to provide support for students who lack self-regulation skills (Savina, 2020). Once teachers know what does and does not work for their students, they can make adjustments such as minimizing needless transitions, offering more time for assignments, and minimizing the sensory output of the classroom environment. What is more, teachers can begin to determine which skills and coursework are most important for individual students (Kurth et al., 2020). Narrowing the focus of learning and skills development can help a student to achieve meaningful goals and alleviate the anxiety of trying to match the pace of the classroom.

Because of stricter scheduling and limited physical space, it will be impossible to operate a mainstream classroom as current specialized programs function. A whole-school approach can be much more efficient in managing resources to support all students (Crone et al., 2004). Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS) schools operate on a tiered system with a

primary school-wide focus and planned preventions for students deemed both at-risk and high risk (Centre on PBIS, 2021). These initiatives aim to minimize time-consuming individual strategies and modifications (Crone et al., 2004). The design is to establish clear expectations and to reward consistent behaviour and achievement rather than respond to negative performance. Having these guidelines clearly posted and practised provides all students with reminders and general limitations. The positive behaviour of students can serve to reinforce expectations for all learners, and targets individual problem behaviours only when necessary.

In low-enrolment programs, supporting students with emotional and behavioural disorders, teaching social skills, emotional regulation, and coping strategies are a priority over academics. Teachers will need to develop lessons dedicated to ensuring that all students learn these critical social and personal management skills to reduce conflict (Neale, 2019). Among younger primary students, social stories and the discussion of real-life situations, both at school and at home, can help to develop positive coping and social skills (Zimmerman et al., 2020). For intermediate students, case studies and honest discussions about emotional regulation can help students to identify their own triggers and personal strategies. Within larger class sizes, there will exist unplanned learning experiences that will help to develop social skills during ongoing interaction among peers (Kurth et al., 2019). These experiences are vital in shaping social and self-management skills by having students learn to wait patiently and to cooperate with others.

The physical and metaphysical learning environment can also have a major impact on students. A learning environment that values cooperation, civility, and respect can lead to a stronger sense of worth among students and a reduction in aggression (Neale, 2019). Teachers need to create and maintain a positive learning environment, and to be aware of the needs of their students. While it may be difficult, and even impossible, to control the sounds, lighting, or temperature of classrooms, these variables can have a great affect on a student's temperament. Students who put their heads down on a desk may appear to be frustrated, but could instead be avoiding noise or brightness (Delahooke, 2019). More than ever, teachers will need to understand that behaviour, as troublesome as it may seem, is not always intentional and can provide insight into the and feelings of struggling students. Being aware of the needs of students and having the skills to address those needs enable teachers to provide better care and avoid addressing natural coping mechanisms as negative behaviour. Over time, all students can learn to replace their instinctual and ineffective self-management strategies with more socially responsible positive coping skills.

Effective teachers try to engage students by making their classrooms and lessons more reinforcing. The first step in determining how to improve the success of students with specialized needs is to establish their learning and social goals for each term (Kurth et al., 2020). For these students, especially students with emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD), building supportive and high-interest lessons is crucial to their success in an integrated classroom. Building confidence in their own skills is a vital step before students can begin to build meaningful academic achievement (Oberle et al., 2016). Cross-curricular activities provide greater opportunity for developing specific academic skills. Using embedded instruction is one way to develop the abilities of a student who is at a lower achievement than their grade level (Kurth et al., 2020). A teacher can expand the reading opportunities of a student during a science period by assigning reading and comprehension activities based on the curricular lesson. This can be helpful because students with learning disabilities and attention deficits may not be able to practise specific skills within an allotted time.

These strategies are not instant solutions, but they can provide the teacher with the awareness required to minimize incidents, to make students feel welcome, and to maximize learning engagement. By making students feel safe and valued in the classroom, we can begin to build their social and academic confidence.

## **Reactive Strategies**

Even with the consistent use of proactive measures, students will inevitably struggle to manage themselves in their new learning environments. There are too many variables in the lives of students for a teacher to control completely. It is my experience that even in a low-enrolment program with heightened routine and structure, students become defiant and have emotional outbursts. Thus, it is essential to have plans in place to respond effectively to problematic behaviours as they occur.

Stress tools can be a useful resource to help students regulate and achieve greater focus. Teachers will need to set clear instructions and expectations for students when using stress tools, especially during work periods. The Active Response Beads -Time-Out (ARB-TO) strategy is an excellent way of not only supporting student regulation, but also enabling independence and their ability to follow instructions (Grskovic et al., 2004). For this strategy, students who are showing signs of frustration or dysregulation are asked to go and collect the active response beads from an accessible part of the classroom. These are a set of beads, usually 10 or 20, along a piece of string that is placed in a container. Once the students have collected the beads, they will place their head down at their desk and begin moving the beads from one end of the string to the other, counting off each bead. This type of strategy is considered an inclusionary time-out because the students do not have to be removed from the learning environment to regulate themselves (Ryan et al., 2007). This strategy empowers them to narrow their focus and transition themselves back into learning mode. Students prefer it because they do not have to leave the lesson or their classmates.

When students become defiant or dysregulated in the classroom, an inclusionary timeout may not always be effective. These students need an alternative space to calm their bodies and to regulate themselves. The implementation of a regulation space should be used as a temporary break to meet the needs of a student, rather than an ongoing exclusionary timeout (Manitoba Education, 2020). This should be a pre-planned collaborative measure to provide respite to overloaded students. It is an effort to avoid sending students home, by giving them a chance to manage their emotions and reset before returning to class. Support staff must accompany and supervise students in these spaces to address their emotional and sensory needs as defined in their specific planning (Manitoba Education, 2020). Schools will need to be resourceful in establishing these spaces with recommendations from clinical specialists. Without programs the opportunities will be limited. However, having support staff take struggling students for walks can provide enough of a setting change to enable the student to adjust.

Collaboration among teachers and paraprofessionals will be critical in creating and maintaining a whole-school behaviour system (Crone et al., 2004). Beyond teachers and educational assistants, clinicians and parents will need to assume an even larger role to ensure that these students have the greatest chance for success. Together, they should form support teams for each student deemed in need of individualized behaviour and educational plans. In a Positive Behaviour Intervention and Supports school, these students, whose behavioural support must be more individualized, would fall into tier 2 and 3 (Centre on PBIS, 2021). These plans provide teachers with appropriate strategies and responses (as agreed upon by clinicians and parents) to address problematic behaviours and set attainable academic goals.

## **Universal School Strategies**

It is apparent that education is evolving, especially over the past 10 years. Such evolution is necessary not only to meet the behavioural needs of all students, but also to support the vast learning styles of children today. Peter Liljedahl (2021) has done exceptional research into mathematical thinking that challenges the traditional classroom, both in the way it is arranged and in the way it functions. His research has determined that when students get out of their seat and work on vertical surfaces to solve problems with minimal support from teachers, learning

and retainment is improved. Liljedahl has suggested a break from the old standard of textbooks and worksheets by replacing them with rich problem-solving skills that require students to continue developing their skills to find success. This method of instruction can be applied to any subject where students can work within a group to cultivate multiple solutions, to appreciate perspectives, and to develop their creativity. The lessons are low floor/high ceiling, meaning that they are designed to engage all learners at all levels, and they maintain student engagement. Because of the nature of the lessons, the time students need to complete tasks and demonstrate comprehension is more flexible.

Some teachers who experiment with this method of instruction in their classrooms have found success, while others have been reluctant. The issue is that many educators “teach the way they were taught” and need to develop skills and confidence themselves before altering their instruction (Oleson & Hora, 2013). This new critical thinking and problem-solving style of classroom requires a complete shift in pedagogy and a redesign of the physical learning space. As with most shifts in education, teachers will need to be compelled to develop these new methods (as was the case with the development of technological skills during remote learning). Because of this, student-led critical thinking classrooms will inevitably become the responsibility of future generations of teachers. The success of inclusive education hinges on the effective implementation of many teaching skills, such as behaviour management, diverse instructional methods, and professional synergy at the university level (Walton & Rusznyak 2020).

One final model to support learning is a rotating resource model that is open to all students who require periodical one-on-one support. Rather than having students designated with the Inclusion Support Services (ISS) label, which follows them through grade 12, the centre should be open to all students for as much time as required. The goal here is to identify the needs of students and to set goals for them to achieve in a classroom with their peers. Rather than completely removing students from their class and placing them in a program, this model would instead facilitate students to meet with a resource teacher at scheduled times during the school day cycle. Together with the resource teacher, students could work on developing the social and academic skills needed to be “participating members” of their classroom and to “make progress in the curricula” (Kurth et al., 2020, p. 141).

The resource teacher would act as a case manager who meets with each student to debrief and to review progress. The students would remain in this model until their academic or behaviour goals (set by the classroom and resource teachers) have been achieved. This would be cost effective because all schools, big and small, already have resource teachers with the required training to support teachers and students directly. With proper scheduling, educational assistants could remain in the classroom supporting the students. As with most programs, this system could be modified to meet the needs of each school.

## **Conclusion**

The closure of specialized programming is a harsh reality that educators have to confront. As a special education teacher, I have had the threat of losing my low-enrolment program made clear to me over the past ten years. Only last year, with the amalgamation and Bill 64 looming, was I told in no uncertain terms that the 2020/2021 school year would be our last. In a perfect world, programs would continue to support students by developing their skills and preparing them to return to mainstream classrooms. Unfortunately, this is not often the case and the best we can do is to prepare ourselves for a truly integrated learning model. The strategies outlined above, if consistently used by teachers, will help to prepare staff in supporting the diverse needs of their students. These proactive measures will help to build relationships and to provide a clearer image of the strengths and challenges of each student. The systematic and reactionary planning will fortify support for both students and teachers, and ensure that fixed responses are fair and consistent. A successful integrated classroom will depend on the ability of many

professionals to depart from the traditional model of instruction and incorporate new delivery models to engage and support all students.

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## About the Author

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