Separate and Better: A Special Public School Class for Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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A current controversy is whether special education is basically sound and needs incremental improvement in practices or needs radical restructuring for inclusion. The rationale for inclusion is summarized. Subsequently, the conceptual orientation underlying a special class for students with emotional or behavioral disorders is articulated, and the implementation of this philosophy in a special class is described. The separate, special class was structured to meet the special needs of students whose behavior made them unwelcome in general education classes. Interviews with school personnel suggested that the class provided an invaluable service that could not be provided in more inclusive arrangements.

A current controversy about special education is whether it is best improved through radical restructuring or incremental improvement of its practices (Andrews et al., 2000). The first point of view typically includes the recommendation that children with disabilities be fully included in general education. The second point of view typically includes the reaffirmation of the wisdom of a full continuum of placement options. Both points of view have typically been presented without clear descriptions of actual classroom practices. Our purpose is to contrast the two ideas and then illustrate our own view—that special education is basically a sound idea that needs incremental improvement—by describing one special class for students with emotional and behavioral disorders.

SPECIAL EDUCATION IS DEEPLY FLAWED AND NEEDS RADICAL RESTRUCTURING

One point of view, which we detail in this section, is that special education is defective in concept and structure (for elaboration, see Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Gartner...
& Lipsky, 1987, 1989; Lipsky & Gartner, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1996, 1997; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996; S. Stainback & W. Stainback, 1984, 1987, 1992; S. Stainback, W. Stainback, & Forest, 1989; W. Stainback & S. Stainback, 1991). It is defective in concept for this reason: Because it is seen as “special” or “different,” it inevitably results in identifying and stigmatizing children and segregating them from their peers without disabilities. It is defective in structure because it is a separate system. As a separate system, it can deliver only second-class services and inferior status to students. The solution to special education’s inherent defects is to reconceptualize and restructure it in radical ways.

First, special education needs to be reconceptualized as a service, not a place, and as an integral part of a flexible, supple, responsive part of general education that does not require singling children out for special services. All children should be entitled to whatever services they need, and this kind of education should not require highlighting children’s differences. Children must be seen as more alike than different, all entitled to the same high-quality education. What we now see as difference or special must become routine, accepted as part of the normal such that the stigmatization and separation of children is avoided. The needs of all children should be met through the collaboration of general and special education teachers and administrative staff so that there is no need for separate programs for “exceptional” children.

Second, the radical restructuring of special education must result in the fusion of general and special education so that they become a single entity. This fusion will obviate the need for separate, special schools and separate classes. All students will become the responsibility of the regular classroom teacher, and all students will be included in all the aspects and activities of the school community, regardless of their characteristics. Because separate structures and programs are inherently unequal, the only way to guarantee equality for children with disabilities is to include them in the same structures, programs, schools, and classes as those used by children without disabilities.

The rationale for restructuring for inclusion is based on moral values, not research data showing that one model is superior to another in outcomes. Inclusion is motivated by the observation that an equitable society demands equal access—including the equal access of children with disabilities to schools, classrooms, and curricula. This equal access can be achieved only when all children, including those with disabilities, are included in neighborhood schools and regular classes, taking their rightful places alongside their neighbors and peers who have not been identified as having disabilities.

SPECIAL EDUCATION IS BASICALLY SOUND BUT NEEDS INCREMENTAL IMPROVEMENT OF ITS PRACTICES

An alternative view, and that from which we have written the remainder of this article, is that special education does not need to be radically restructured or reconceptualized, but its basic structure and concepts need to be reaffirmed if it is to become what
it should be for students with disabilities (for elaboration, see Crockett & Kauffman, 1999, 2001; D. Fuchs & L. S. Fuchs, 1994; Hockenbury, Kauffman, & Hallahan, 1999–2000; Kauffman, 1989, 1993, 1994, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2001; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1993, 1997; Kavale & Forness, 2000; MacMillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996). The success of special education in providing appropriate schooling for students with disabilities is not as dependent on the collaboration of general and special educators as it is on incremental improvement of the quality of academic and social instruction provided by special educators (i.e., on better implementation of special instruction, such that students with disabilities are exposed to more competent, intensive, and sustained instruction). At the heart of the current controversy about special education is the observation and interpretation of human differences, and special educators must understand the meanings and appropriate responses to these differences. Our contention is that some children’s differences require distinctive (and, therefore, separate) places for instruction if their educational needs are to be met and, consequently, that separate placements can be superior to inclusive placements for these children. Thus, we begin by addressing issues of difference and our responses to it. Subsequently, we describe a special education program in which our views of difference were implemented.

The Nature and Meanings of Differences Among Children

The basic question posed by science and other forms of inquiry is the question of difference. With regard to children’s exceptionalities and the consequences of what we do about them, the observation of, meaning of, and responses to difference are the substance of special education and related disciplines. Understanding the meaning of difference is the first requirement of our science and our advocacy as special educators, as Hungerford (1950) noted long ago. Science and advocacy are both related to culture. Consequently, we preface further remarks about exceptionality with a statement about cultural contexts.

Anyone who responds to questions about children’s exceptionalities does so from a point of view grounded in a cultural context. These viewpoints may be called biases, but judgments or values cannot be made without them. We recognize that our biases or views will not be shared by all persons, and we understand that we may sometimes need to revise some of our views. Again, we assume that this is true of all people, regardless of their culture. Our “we” is not inclusive of every individual, although our “we” might be taken to represent the opinions of many, or perhaps even most, people in some cases. We see the danger in being blunt about our views. Nevertheless, the failure to be straightforward for fear of offending others is often the beginning of the end of communication. We hope to be clear but not offensive or needlessly contentious in communicating our views.

Cultural differences are important, and they are exhibited in great variety. Our American society has come to understand the value of many types of cultural differences and the necessity of honoring many cultural traditions if our society is to be truly free and humane. Thus, many cultural differences that were previously rejected,
prohibited, or treated with contempt by some members of our society are now recognized as not just harmless or tolerable, but helpful, honorable, and worthy of perpetuation. Many of these cultural differences are associated with ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or multiculturalism. What has come to be known as cultural competence demands that these differences be honored.

Nevertheless, the fact that something is “cultural” does not justify or sanctify it. Every culture has its flaws, its dark side, its ways of treating others that are unacceptable in or inimical to a just and free society. After all, human slavery and the social rules or traditions known as Jim Crow were claimed as cultural traditions, as have been many other degradations of human beings based on their ethnicity, tribal affiliation, gender, color, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. Moreover, behavior that is “cultural” is sometimes confused with behavior that represents a disorder; cultural difference is sometimes mistakenly identified as a disorder, and vice versa. Therefore, it is critically important to recognize that cultural identification and justification taken to the extreme become destructive ideologies and that “there are actions between nations, as between individuals, which cannot be tolerated” (Conquest, 2000, p. 68; see also Shattuck, 1999).

The Nature of Differences Called Emotional or Behavioral Disorders

We have chosen to focus on emotional or behavioral disorders because our task is to explain how the theory, philosophy, or principles we embrace might be implemented in an educational program for children with these disorders. Rather than dealing only in generalities about exceptionality, difference, and special education, we include specifics of how a special class was organized and taught in ways that illustrate best practices within our framework of thinking about broader theoretical, philosophical issues. For elaboration of that framework, see the works by Kauffman or Kauffman and colleagues cited previously (much of this introductory discussion of difference follows the ideas of Kauffman, 1999c).

To us, some of the views expressed about the differences called emotional or behavioral disorders are disquieting. The idea that these differences should be viewed as normal or tolerable, if not completely acceptable, strikes us as disingenuous at best and incompatible with prevention and encouraging of social maladjustment at worst (see Kauffman, 1999b). Behavior that is a disorder cannot be tolerated without serious risk, either to others in the environment, to the child himself, or to herself, or to both. Emotional or behavioral disorders are differences that threaten or foreclose the child’s options for self-fulfillment, including the establishment of mutually positive relationships with others.

Sometimes our efforts to help students with emotional or behavioral disorders fall short of our intentions and hopes. Our failures are often extremely discouraging. Perhaps it is predictable that some people would rather ignore such disorders or explain them away than persist in confronting them for what they are and take preventive action. At present—and we believe this will be true for a long time to come—we have imperfect understanding and limited ability to change children whose behavior is persistently
problematic. The problems of these children convince some people that we should abandon questions about how such children differ behaviorally from what is normal and how we can change them. Yet, recognizing the psychosocial characteristics of these children as abnormal and changing these characteristics is our business. We recognize that we need to change both the children and their environments, but if our efforts produce no changes in the children we serve, then we will not be successful. We understand also that we do not want to change everything about these children, but whenever we can, we want to change the characteristics that limit the child’s options in life.

Changing children’s behavioral characteristics is now seen as trivial or inappropriate by some educators. Some deny the reality or significance of behavioral differences. The denial that behavioral differences are real and important may be expressed by the opinion that the child with an emotional or a behavioral disorder is just another kid or that similarities among children are more important than differences (see W. Stainback & S. Stainback, 1991). Some persons also note that emotional and behavioral disorders are social constructs, as if this fact destroys the reality or importance of these disorders (see Biklen, 1989; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997). Never mind that all virtues, vices, arts, and languages—even childhood itself—are social constructions and that children are now often tried and imprisoned as adults, in part because the concept of childhood itself is questioned as a social construction (see Talbot, 2000).

Other educators suggest that all behavioral differences are enriching and enlivening, as if all such differences are of equal value, none to be desired over another and none to be avoided or eliminated, even if doing so is possible (see Council for Exceptional Children, 1997). Still other persons maintain that no behavioral difference should be seen as a deficit, that such differences should be welcomed as bonuses, that we should speak not of the risk of failure but only of the promise of development. These individuals may complain of “deficit thinking.” The implication seems to be that behavioral deficiencies can be turned into strengths simply by refusing to think of differences as deficits or by altering the social policies in which certain differences are defined as deficits (see Valencia, 1997).

The people who deny difference seem to value it without discrimination. Some of these people urge us to see difference as ordinary, to assume that exceptionality is the rule (e.g., Biklen, 1989). However, thinking about difference in this way is either self-contradictory or an expression of equal value for all differences. Some people reject the idea that emotional or behavioral disorders exist in individuals and support “a philosophy that opposes and subverts the disability construct” (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997, p. 357), as if deconstruction eliminates disability. Their assumption seems to be that reality can be constructed in nearly any way we want. To us, these ideas are associated with helplessness and hopelessness, resignation and depression. If we adopt this view, then we see little reason to do anything but ignore emotional or behavioral disorders, deny them, or, because they are only in the eye of the beholder, just “get over” them. At best, we will begin to view ourselves as the problem rather than recognizing that the child’s behavior is the problem, which does not augur well for the child. This view suggests that data do not matter (Landrum, 1997), that they are merely a pretext for any convenient narrative, or that truth is no better apprehended by scientific investigation than by any other means, and that education cannot be based on reliable scientific
evidence (see Carnine, 2000; Koertge, 1998; Sagan, 1996). Deconstructivism and related “postmodern” philosophies may appear to promote equality among ideas, but ultimately they create intolerance and tribalism by pitting individuals and groups against each other because there are no universal truths that grant power—except, ironically, the absence of universal truth (see Kauffman, 1999a; Koertge, 1998; Shattuck, 1999; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998). Thus, what may be dissembled is not merely the construct of disability but the possibility of tolerance of differences that cannot be changed and of effective treatment of emotional and behavioral differences that are debilitating.

Some people have suggested that a disability is a gift or a blessing (Council for Exceptional Children, 1997). One Virginia gubernatorial candidate referred in his political campaign to “my sister Kathy, who is blessed with a mental retardation disability” (Beyer, 1997, p. 1). Such language may be mere gibberish, or it could be used to justify bestowing the “blessings” or “gifts” of disabilities on others or to justify failure to offer effective intervention in disabilities when doing so is possible. In any case, we find referral to disabilities as “gifts” or “blessings” a chilling use of language, especially in light of Gelernter’s (1997) statement that “When you are trying to figure out how a society thinks and feels, words are the surest route to the truth” (p. 10).

To us, there is a profound difference between seeing a person with a disability as a gift or a blessing and seeing his or her disability as a blessing. We are reminded of the scripture “What man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?” (Matthew 7:9–10; King James Version). Some people seem to confuse good things and bad, seem to be willing to let others eat stones and pretend they are bread. We do not want to be so confused that we would as soon celebrate the gift of disability as give the gift of teaching. We want to see clearly the difference between the stone of “being there” and the bread of learning critical skills. Failure to make the distinction is a moral catastrophe.

We start with this proposition: Special educators are in the business of measuring and then changing children. This means enhancing their development. If we do not measure and change the children we serve, then we are truly derelict in our duty. We realize that some special educators may reject this premise, perhaps suggesting that to measure children is to label and categorize them, that we do not want to change children but social ecologies, especially our own view of disabilities as undesirable differences. However, the idea that we can change children without changing ourselves is as simpleminded as the view that changing the social ecology does not change the children.

To be successful in educating children with emotional and behavioral disorders, we have to change two things at once: ourselves and the children with whom we work. We ourselves must become more competent in instruction and more understanding of the lives of children in and out of school. We must also become more tolerant of undesirable differences that cannot be changed and more nurturing of children’s culture and uniqueness, so long as these characteristics do not shorten children’s developmental horizons. We want the children we work with to become more typical, more normal in their social behavior and their academic abilities. Otherwise, we consign our students to greater handicaps.
Eventually, we have to question why we value human beings. Clearly, we do not want a child’s worth to be measured only by what he or she can do, but neither is what a child can do a trivial matter. In a just and humane society, people are not valued for what they can do, but their ability to do certain things is valued. After all, if we do not value what people can do, then we have no reason to teach anyone anything. We value what people can do because of what accomplishment does for them, the additional opportunities it brings them. Being able to do certain things does not make our students better people, but it does make them people who are better off.

At the dawn of the 21st century, our society is infatuated with diversity, unwilling to tell the difference between what matters and what does not for a particular social purpose (see Gelernter, 1997; Glazer, 1997). Although as a consequence of our views we may reap the scorn or hostility of some people, we who work with children who have emotional or behavioral disorders must not tolerate all differences gladly. We hope to make a difference in the lives of children and their families in ways that contradict the conventional wisdom of many of our contemporaries, who claim to value diversity indiscriminately and reject as false or trivial the normative measures and expectations of behavior that is adaptive in the broader American culture. We suggest that teachers should love and foster some differences, but not all differences. Some differences teachers should not be concerned about; still others they should try to reduce or eliminate. They should value children’s acquiring the skills that typical children acquire, the social and academic abilities that make children with emotional or behavioral disorders less easily distinguishable from the norm. This is to say that teachers should value students’ learning adaptive behavior and the reduction of maladaptive behavior. Teachers should value faster positive changes, more than slower growth, in adaptive behavior and academic skills.

Of course, the question for practice is this: How can these ideas be put into practice? In the next section, we provide an example of one special class in which these foundational ideas were put into practice. We do not claim that this one example is a full and complete explanation of all the philosophical positions that we have articulated. However, the operation of the class is consistent with what we have said to this point.

An ongoing debate in special education has revolved around the “least restrictive environment” provisions of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The law requires school districts to educate students with disabilities as closely as possible with students without disabilities (Yell, 1998b). From this requirement has emerged the philosophy of inclusion, which is essentially considered a movement to merge general and special education, so that all students are taught in general education classrooms (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1995). Proponents of full inclusion assert that the least restrictive environment for all children must be the general education classroom within the neighborhood school (e.g., Lipsky & Gartner, 1987; W. Stainback & S. Stainback, 1991; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1988) and that separate placements—ranging from part-time “pullout” programs to self-contained classes and separate schools—are clearly unjust, if not illegal. Often, the ideological basis for this argument stems from the comparison of educational grouping on any basis to the morally repudiated and long-outlawed American policy of segregation by race in public schooling. As Kauffman and Hallahan (1993) noted, the idea that separate education is
inherently unequal is used “to justify [wrongly] the conclusion that grouping children for instruction based on their performance is . . . inherently unequal, particularly when children differing in performance are instructed in different classrooms” (p. 79).

Indeed, “the educational rights of exceptional children and those of ethnic minorities rest on the same foundation, namely, that children’s characteristics must not be used as justification for unfair treatment” (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1993, p. 79). However, the difference between these two types of segregation lies in the fact that ethnicity (a group identity) is a variable presumably irrelevant to the instructional needs of a student, whereas academic ability and performance are variables directly related to the selection and delivery of appropriate instruction (Kauffman, 1989). Educational decision making for students with disabilities must be based on the principles of individualization and appropriateness, not on group identity (Yell, 1998b). Moreover, full inclusion is indefensible conceptually and legally (IDEA; Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). According to Yell (1998b), “To make a placement decision that all students will be in the general education classroom is just as illegal as placing all students with disabilities in special schools” (p. 73).

In fact, separate education may be unequal in some sense, but the education offered in a separate setting may address the needs of students with disabilities better than any that can be offered in general education (see Carpenter & Bovair, 1996; Milloy, 2001). General education—not the place of education—is by definition inappropriate and inferior for some students with disabilities, even on a legal basis (Dupre, 1997). Special education, to which students with disabilities are entitled by law, can sometimes but not always be delivered in the context of a general education classroom. Indeed, the question of which educational services are required must precede questions of where they should be required (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999; Yell, 1998a).

**A CASE IN POINT**

We next describe a program designed for a self-contained special education classroom for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. The second author developed this program during her 12 years of teaching and adapted it, with the help of the third author, for use in this setting. We explain how and why this classroom was not merely a separate place but a better place for these students, for whom general education had failed. First, we describe in detail the major operational features of the program and their empirical basis. Second, we provide student outcome information and interview data indicative of the program’s benefits to the students. We conclude with reflections on some of the contextual factors that facilitated the program’s success, as well as goals for improving and enhancing the program in the future.

**Description of the Program**

*Students and teachers.* Students in the self-contained special education classroom for the 1997–1998 school year were fifth and sixth graders ranging in age from 10 years, 10 months to 13 years, 4 months. The school in which the class was housed
was a public upper elementary school (fifth and sixth grades only) in a medium-sized town in the southeastern United States. Most of these students had been receiving special education services from very early in their school careers, and all the students participated in the free-lunch program, which typically indicates low socioeconomic status. Three students had been diagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and used medication (Ritalin). Student achievement levels varied widely as indicated by standardized test scores. Of the 12 students, 9 were African American and 3 were White. Student demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

For the second consecutive year, the previously separate fifth- and sixth-grade self-contained special education teachers had agreed to combine their classes and implement a team-teaching model for instruction. The special self-contained class would therefore consist of 12 students taught by two special education teachers with the help of two educational assistants, an adult-per-child ratio that is not typical but may be required to provide the education such children need. This arrangement allowed greater flexibility for instructional grouping, readily available adult assistance in crisis situations, opportunities for observation and discussion of one another’s instructional and behavior management decisions, sharing of classroom facilities and resources, and the ability to foster a sense of group cohesiveness.

Program philosophy of lead teacher. The lead teacher was strongly influenced during her early years of teaching by the philosophy of Nicholas Hobbs (e.g., Hobbs, 1982). Hobbs’s emphasis on five factors—the adult–child relationship; the importance of

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Note. WIAT = Wechsler Individual Achievement Test; Sp. Ed. = special education; W = White; AA = African American; SED = seriously emotionally disturbed; OHI = other health impaired; LD = learning disabled; SLI = speech/language impaired.

aAge as of April 1998 (years, months). bGrade in which student was first identified as eligible for special education services.
of success and competence for children; the powerful influence of the group; the necessity of order, routine, and ceremony; and the value of joy in the classroom—inspired her to incorporate these elements into her personal teaching philosophy. In addition, her powerful stance against violence and for compassion toward all living things has influenced her teaching. In an effort to teach students the foundation on which the classroom was built and to involve them in formulating some of the rules, routines, and policies that would allow building on that foundation, the teachers started each school year by developing a class creed expressing a shared vision of the ideal classroom environment. Recent authors who have done extensive research in classrooms have supported this idea (e.g., Curwin & Mendler, 2000; Van Acker, 2000). Depending on the age and maturity of the students, the teachers either developed the creed with the students or presented it to stimulate discussion of the principles it expressed. In the upper elementary school where the lead teacher taught in 1997–1998, her self-contained room’s class creed was eventually adopted by the entire school and taught in all classrooms. The class creed that year read as follows:

As a member of this class, I promise to respect all people, even though they may be different from me; to take learning seriously, and to allow others to learn; to solve problems without violence; to be honest and to earn the trust of others; to accept responsibility for the choices that I make. When I do these things, I will help to make our classroom a place where people feel safe, respected, and challenged to learn.

This statement was not only displayed prominently in the classroom but also actively taught—through having discussions, modeling, presenting examples and nonexamples, using role playing, engaging in cooperative activities, and implementing strategy instruction—and used as a common language in mediation and problem solving and as the basis for establishing new rules and classroom policies. The use of direct-teaching, practice, and generalization activities such as these is strongly supported in the social skills training literature (e.g., Goldstein, 1988; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1984; Walker et al., 1983; Walker, Todis, Holmes, & Horton, 1988).

For example, in efforts to create a nonviolent environment, the teachers established the policy that violence, even in its mildest forms, would not be permitted. Therefore, talking, drawing, or writing about guns, fights, violent movies or games, killing (even as it pertained to animals), violent sports (like professional wrestling), or anything else that contained elements of violence were not permitted at school. The teachers did not tolerate nonverbal threats, such as “bucking up” (jutting chin, chest thrust forward) or tones of voice suggesting intimidation, even if the verbal content was acceptable (e.g., “What did you say?” spoken in an intimidating way). Even seemingly innocuous cartoon decals on T-shirts were banned if the message could be considered potentially threatening (e.g., a Sylvester and Tweety shirt with the wording “You better get out of my face, or else!”). Recently, early intervention and elimination of low-level violence has gained increasing attention in response to the highly publicized school shootings in this country (e.g., Goldstein, 2000; Johns, 2000). According to Johns, “Within our classroom and our school we can no longer turn a blind eye to any form of aggression…. [Therefore], we must model a no-tolerance approach for aggression, eliminating violence in its earliest stages” (p. 30).
Instruction. According to Kauffman, Mostert, Trent, and Hallahan (1998), when a teacher is experiencing behavior problems in the classroom, the first question he or she should ask in an attempt to find the source of the problem is, “Could this problem be a result of inappropriate curriculum or teaching strategies?” (p. 5). Well aware of the importance of using empirically based methods like teacher-directed instruction (Engelmann & Carnine, 1991; Nelson, Johnson, & Marchand-Martella, 1996; Porter & Brophy, 1988; Wehby, Symons, Canale, & Go, 1998; White, 1988) and cognitive strategy instruction (Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996; Wood, Woloshyn, & Willoughby, 1995), the teachers employed these methods consistently in all subject areas. The team-teaching arrangement allowed as many as four instructional groups to be operating simultaneously under the direction of one of the adults. Independent worksheet activities were kept to a minimum and used only as a means for practicing already-learned skills, as suggested by the literature (see Gunter, Hummel, & Conroy, 1998). In addition, hard-to-measure qualities like teacher energy, enthusiasm, affect, sense of humor, and creativity in creating lessons undoubtedly enhanced the academic engagement and investment of the students. The atmosphere in the room was one of serious learning, just as the class creed emphasized. Indeed, to the best of their abilities, the teachers provided instruction that was “more urgent, more intensive, more relentless, more precisely delivered, more highly structured and direct, and more carefully monitored for procedural fidelity and effects” (Kauffman, 1996, p. 206) than that which would have been available to these students in general education.

Classroom management. The keys to the success of the management systems used in the classroom were (a) the abundance of positive interactions and opportunities that far outweighed the need for reprimands or punishment, (b) the “catch-it-early” approach that facilitated the prevention of problem behaviors before they escalated, and (c) the teachers’ efforts to address not only inappropriate behavior but also the context and culture that serves to maintain it (see Kauffman, 1999b; Manno, Bantz, & Kauffman, 2000, for elaboration).

No individual can complete a teacher preparation program or attend a professional conference without hearing about the importance of positive reinforcement in the classroom. Yet, research suggests that most teachers use far more reprimands and reductive strategies than praise and positive procedures (Gunter, Denny, Jack, Shores, & Nelson, 1993; Gunter, Jack, DePaepe, Reed, & Harrison, 1994; Jack et al., 1996; Shores et al., 1993; Wehby et al., 1998). The effective instruction literature recommends that positive teacher–student interactions outnumber those that are negative by a ratio of at least 3:1 (see Gunter et al., 1998). In the special classroom, students were given frequent opportunities for correct academic responding, appropriate behavior was consistently recognized, and students were engaged in numerous enjoyable activities that precluded the need for escape, avoidance, and acting-out behaviors.

Reductive procedures such as time-out or disciplinary referrals to the office are necessarily predicated on the fact that the classroom is a reinforcing place to be; thus, removal from it is unpleasant. The area in which most teachers fall short in trying to use these techniques is in creating a positive classroom environment that causes students to want to be there. Students in the self-contained class frequently told the teachers that
they loved coming to school, and parents often reported noticing significant changes in their children’s attitudes toward school. One parent noted that for years she had battled her son every morning about going to school, but for the first time, he left the house willingly and came home to report enthusiastically on the day’s events. Comments and perceptions such as these indicated that the special class was a positive environment.

In a global sense, schools in this country have established and maintained a reactive and punitive approach to discipline problems. Office referrals, suspension, and expulsion remain the predominant means of dealing with serious misbehavior (Bear, 1998), even though these strategies may actually exacerbate the problem and increase student misbehavior (Lewis & Garrison-Harrell, 1999; Mayer, 1995; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). The teachers knew that their students needed to be at school—away from the environment that, more often than not, contributed to their antisocial behavior—and immersed in a supportive and carefully monitored environment, where the skills they needed to avoid repeating problem behaviors were actively being taught, modeled, practiced, and reinforced. Therefore, the teachers did not use office referrals or suspensions as consequences for misbehavior; instead, they chose to handle behavior problems within the classroom, where they could administer appropriate and meaningful consequences, engage the student in problem solving and reflection, and teach replacement behaviors to avoid recurrences. Furthermore, because the strength of the school social bond is an important factor in avoiding delinquency, the teachers’ goal was to reinforce this bond and steer clear of exclusionary practices that would serve only to weaken it (Jenkins, 1997).

Another key to the smooth operation of the special classroom was the teachers’ commitment to catching misbehavior at its earliest stages, avoiding escalation, and reducing the need for more intrusive interventions. Research suggests that a systematic response to low levels of misbehavior can effectively reduce coercive interactions and maintain appropriate behavior by intervening early in the chain of events (see Cypress Group, 1996; Kauffman, 1999b; Nelson, 1996). The teachers’ three-tiered cooldown system (see Table 2) was consistent with this model. The lowest level, or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>2 min</td>
<td>Self- or teacher-directed. Taken at cooldown desk. May return to group immediately.</td>
<td>Self-directed = no point loss; teacher-directed = –1 point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>Teacher-directed if green is unsuccessful. Taken at cooldown desk. Automatic yellow after two greens in the same period. May return to group with permission.</td>
<td>–2 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>10 min</td>
<td>Teacher-directed if yellow is unsuccessful. Taken in cooldown room. Automatic red after two yellows in the same period. Automatic red for a serious offense. May return to group after mediation.</td>
<td>Minus all 5 points for period. Must make reparations if needed. Must make up all work missed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
green cooldown, was used liberally as a means of interrupting a behavior chain that could potentially escalate. Students were taught to initiate green cooldowns themselves when they were able to recognize their own agitation or anticipate a problem in the making. Cooldown was presented as a tool that even adults use when they need to remove themselves from a stressful situation. A green cooldown consisted of 2 min at a desk away from the group, where the student was still able to observe classroom activities. The higher levels of cooldown, yellow and red, were used when a green cooldown was not successful. Cooldowns always (with one exception, to be explained in the next paragraph) began at the green level and increased in length, degree of separation from the group, and significance of the consequence that followed as the level increased from green to yellow to red. In other words, students had much to gain by resolving their problem immediately, without argument, and before their misbehavior became serious. Again, because the students wanted to be a part of the class and were motivated to participate in group activities, removal from the group was sufficiently unpleasant to serve as a deterrent to misbehavior. Often, students would encourage another student to take a hassle-free cooldown and would remind him or her that he or she would be able to return more quickly if he or she cooperated.

The only exception to the progressive nature of the cooldown system was when the misbehavior was considered a serious offense. Serious offenses, which resulted in an automatic red cooldown, included being physically aggressive, making threats, destroying property, and leaving the classroom without permission. These behaviors were clearly defined, with very distinct lines drawn between occurrence and nonoccurrence. For example, physical aggression included hitting, pushing and shoving, throwing an object (even a pencil), and more intense displays of aggressive behavior. Threats could be verbal (e.g., “How about if I show you what I mean?”) or gestural (e.g., “bucking up” or punching the air). Destruction of property included any attempt to damage or destroy (e.g., intentionally knocking over a chair or kicking a wall). These very concrete definitions for potentially serious misbehaviors allowed the teachers to avoid arguing over details, as well as to “catch [aggression] low to prevent it high” (Goldstein, 2000). Most red cooldowns resulted in 10 min away from the group and a substantial point or privilege loss for the student, but did not escalate further. Although there were times when the teachers were unable to intervene early enough or to de-escalate student behavior, the frequency of such events requiring more intrusive interventions decreased steadily throughout the school year.

Although the proactive cooldown procedures were especially effective in reducing classroom behavior problems and in increasing students’ use of prosocial problem-solving strategies, they were by no means the only classroom management strategies used. Classroom management is referred to as a system because the combination of and interaction among various research-supported practices and procedures are essential to their effectiveness. For example, use of the Premack principle (Premack, 1959) to design the class schedule, a response–cost point system (Rhode, Jenson, & Reavis, 1992) to determine access to privileges, and a classroom level system (Kerr & Nelson, 1998) to monitor long-term progress each played a role in the success of the program. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to explain in detail the application of all these principles and approaches.
An important point to note is that none of the strategies discussed previously would have been effective if implemented haphazardly. Ongoing training, continuous communication and evaluation of decisions, and consistent adherence to the management systems by all members of the team were essential. Furthermore, because students were able to learn and to understand the procedures used, they were better able to anticipate the consequences (positive or negative) of their actions—a necessary condition for teaching students self-control and responsible decision making.

**Context and culture.** For many years, professionals who work with antisocial youth believed that most of these students experienced peer rejection because of their deviant behaviors. However, recent research into the social dynamics of classrooms and schools suggests that many of these students tend to associate with similarly deviant peers, who help support and maintain one another’s antisocial tendencies (see Farmer, Farmer, & Gut, 1999; Kamps, Kravits, Stolze, & Swaggart, 1999). Therefore, intervention efforts with these youth require attention not only to specific problem behaviors but also to the social context of these behaviors, which may be supporting them (Kauffman & Burbach, 1997). For many students with behavior problems, their acting-out behaviors may be the mechanisms through which they gain power and status, especially among their deviant peers (Farmer et al., 1999). A self-contained classroom for students with emotional and behavioral problems, then, is particularly at risk for becoming a microculture in which inappropriate behavior is reinforced; alternatively, a special, separate environment can be structured, as Hobbs (1982) suggested, to support positive behavioral change. One of the most difficult but, at the same time, most important tasks the teachers faced was finding ways to alter the beliefs and values of the entire classroom social context so that problem behavior was not valued and so that students who engaged in it did not hold high status.

Dismantling the existing social context of the classroom and transforming it into one that values and maintains prosocial behavior required a tremendous amount of effort. First, the teachers focused on creating a richly reinforcing environment where students saw and learned that appropriate behavior consistently brought desirable outcomes for them. The students learned that life was good when they behaved appropriately. Recognition of appropriate behavior and hard work was an important part of many of the classroom ceremonies, such as advancement on the level system or daily “positives” time, when students and teachers exchanged positive comments about themselves and other members of the group.

Second, by using a catch-it-early philosophy to stop teasing, put-downs, and other disrespectful behavior instantly, the teachers consistently conveyed the message that these behaviors would be actively addressed in the classroom, not simply ignored by adults and reinforced by peers, as is typically the case in general education settings. This tactic had the additional effect of creating an environment where students truly felt safe and were more likely to take good risks and to experiment with newly learned prosocial behaviors. Simultaneously, the teachers invested a great deal of time and energy into teaching children to ignore a student (in cooldown) who was not acting appropriately and not to join in and contribute to the problem. Teachers were always prepared with backup lessons that were flexible enough to allow relocating or combining smaller
instructional groups to allow instruction to continue despite serious disruption from another student.

Third, the teachers incorporated into their program a wide array of alternative sources of reinforcement to counter the reinforcement that the students were accustomed to receiving by engaging in antisocial activities. Mattaini, Twyman, Chin, and Lee (1996) noted that without rich alternative sources of reinforcement for productive behavior, an intervention designed to reduce misbehavior is likely to fail. The lives of many students outside school provided few, if any, opportunities to gain reinforcement from activities other than antisocial or violent behavior, which in turn increased the value of the only reinforcement available. Therefore, a vital component of the program was providing these alternative sources, both in and out of school. For example, the teachers planned monthly field trips for the entire class, as well as after-school outings, which were accessible to only higher level students. Outings consisted of social and recreational activities, like bowling, swimming, go-cart racing, and college basketball games. In the spring, the teachers established a class running club, members of which had the opportunity to run (or walk) 1 mile before school started every morning. As students accumulated miles with time, they earned items like water bottles, personal hygiene kits, team T-shirts, and individual trophies. In addition, the group went “camping” together twice each year. The first “trip” was actually an overnight stay at school. The teachers and students cooked and served their own meals, set up tents in the classroom, and participated in various activities, some of which included guest appearances by teachers and school administrators or other members of the community. An end-of-year camping trip was held at the lead teacher’s house, which was situated on the side of a mountain. It began with a hike in the Blue Ridge Mountains, a pretend campfire, and a variety of cooperative games. The event culminated the next morning with swimming at a nearby lake. After each special event, each student received several photographs to be kept in an album of school memories. All these activities represent only a sample of the numerous ways the teachers attempted to enrich students’ lives and expose them to alternative sources of enjoyment and reinforcement for positive behaviors and hard work.

Student Outcomes

An overwhelming challenge the teachers faced while they were implementing and maintaining this intense intervention program was the accurate collection of academic and behavioral data. Although the staff kept consistent records for each student on (a) attendance, (b) daily points earned, (c) advancement on the level system, (d) frequencies of red cooldowns and serious offenses, and (e) formal and informal academic assessments, they were never able to compile these data and analyze them regularly in a meaningful way. However, certain apparent trends are worth mentioning.

First, and probably foremost, all students in the special class maintained school attendance either at a high level or a significantly improved level. A major factor in improving attendance outcomes was that the teachers did not use office referrals as a consequence for misbehavior; therefore, students in the class were not suspended or
otherwise excluded from school for behaviors that occurred in the classroom. In fact, the small number of disciplinary referrals that the students in the special class did receive (six for the entire year) were the result of behavior on the bus or possession of weapons, for which the school administration believed that a more publicly visible consequence was necessary.

Second, students’ use of the cooldown system was evident by a tendency for red cooldowns and serious incidents to decrease with time. This finding suggests that students were using the lower tiers of the cooldown system to interrupt their acting-out behavior before it escalated to the level of a serious offense.

Third, the level system appeared to provide a strong incentive for the students to maintain appropriate and responsible behavior with time, because all students in the class advanced steadily, if not quickly, through the levels. Because greater freedom and improved privileges awaited students at the higher levels, the level system helped create a status system in the classroom—one that afforded benefits to students who engaged in prosocial behavior and strived for academic improvement.

Perceptions of School Personnel

Because the teachers had a very different kind of class within a regular public school, they were also interested in how others viewed the program and its value to the school and to the students. With the help of a graduate student from the University of Virginia, the teachers obtained interviews from school personnel—other teachers, administrators, and support staff—to obtain their perceptions. Twelve members of the school volunteered to participate in the semistructured interviews that lasted an average of 20 min and were tape-recorded. The interviews contained open-ended, exploratory questions and a few categorical questions.

The transcriptions were analyzed by first identifying categories by using a method of qualitative analysis suggested by Erikson (1986). The categories emerged from the participants’ responses and typically used participant language. After each interview was coded for categories, assertions were developed and verified by systematically checking for disconfirming evidence. In some cases, not all the participants specifically addressed the assertion, but they did not provide conflicting statements, either, so these assertions were considered valid. A summary of the interviewees’ responses is provided in Table 3.

Contextual Factors

As we reflect on the special class program at this particular school, we realize that the context in which the teachers worked contributed greatly to its success. The support that the teachers received from both the building-level and the district-level administrations enabled them to carry out their program as they had conceptualized it. At the building level, administrators remained open to the use of alternatives to suspension and expulsion as disciplinary procedures. In addition, they offered flexibility in student scheduling and
in carrying out important school practices. For example, the building administration allowed the teachers to substitute periodic home visits for parent conferences at school, which thereby increased parental participation. At the district level, administrators also facilitated the success of the program by modifying physical facilities to meet needs (e.g., building a safe time-out room, providing an outside telephone line in the classroom) and by recognizing the need for training support staff (educational assistants, counselors and psychologists, nearby teachers) to deal effectively with students, especially in crisis situations. Moreover, taking into consideration the intensity of the behavior and learning problems of the students placed in the class, the special education administration made every effort to maintain small class sizes well below state maximums. Without this

TABLE 3
Summary of Interviews With School Personnel

| 1. | All participants noted anger management or lack of self-control as the differentiating factor between students in this class and the general education population. |
| 2. | All participants were familiar with the program. One third of the participants were very familiar. |
| 3. | The participants stated that the self-contained environment allowed the teachers to provide a highly structured, individualized education that addressed the unusual needs of the students. In addition, the participants believed that the self-contained setting provided an internal support system for the teachers and staff. |
| 4. | Most respondents thought that without this placement these students would not be able to learn, nor would their specific emotional and behavioral needs be met. Further, the amount of time, energy, and resources these students demanded would place an excessive burden on the general educator and ultimately affect the education of students in the mainstream classes. |
| 5. | None of the respondents thought that these students could be served in the general education setting. Seven of 12 believed that the students would end up in an alternative setting. The other 5 believed that even if the students were placed in a general education setting, they would spend their time out of the classroom or not learning. About half the respondents stated that the learning that occurs in the self-contained class could not be replicated in another setting. |
| 6. | When questioned about their perceptions of the academic abilities of these students, none of the respondents assumed the students would necessarily be having great academic difficulty. Those who were familiar with the students believed there was a wide range of reading and math ability levels in the class. More of the respondents believed that writing was especially difficult for these students. However, behavioral needs were not assumed by the general education teachers to be related to academic needs. |
| 7. | Although most respondents thought that these students had a lot of trouble getting along with others—a typical characteristic of students with emotional and behavioral disorders—a few believed that the intense focus in this class on remediating those deficits left the students better equipped to deal with others. |
| 8. | Most respondents indicated that “taking care of themselves” was difficult for these students. However, some of the respondents believed that because of the challenging home environments of many of the students, they were often “forced” to take on more responsibilities than those taken on by children of the same age without emotional and behavioral disorders. |
| 9. | The respondents overwhelmingly identified consistency, structure, individualization, and strong educational practices (both academic and behavioral) as the backbone of this successful class. In addition, they noted that the unique dynamic of the teachers and paraprofessionals enhanced the effectiveness of these characteristics. |

Note. The 12 participants consisted of 6 general and 2 special education teachers who interacted with these students regularly, the school principal, the school’s curriculum coordinator, the school librarian, and the clinical psychologist who provided services to the students identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders.
administrative confidence in the program—combined with a willingness to invest time and money into it—the teachers would surely have been less successful.

Many parents of students in the program had become accustomed to associating school with failure, often for themselves as well as for their children. Perhaps for this reason, many remained extremely reluctant to become involved with the school. Even though the teachers made significant efforts to establish positive working relationships with all the parents of their students, teachers were only minimally successful in this area. Before school began, the teachers sent postcards to incoming or returning students and brief letters of welcome to every parent or guardian. If possible, they arranged a home visit during the weeks just before school started to allow parents to meet them personally and to ask questions. As school events occurred throughout the year, the teachers conveyed a great deal of enthusiasm to the students and made efforts to ensure that every student would be represented by some important adult in his or her life at these important school functions. The teachers offered transportation, babysitting, and refreshments whenever possible to remove some of the barriers often encountered by parents who want to become involved in their child’s school life. For the first half of the school year, the teachers also held monthly parent group meetings to create a support system for parents and to gain insight into what the parents needed from the school. Nevertheless, parent attendance at school events rarely exceeded 50%, and the teachers grew frustrated with the minimal returns from their efforts. Perhaps it is important to request assistance from other school personnel (administrators, counselors, psychologists) and possibly other community agencies (social services, parent–teacher associations) to find and carry out ways of increasing parental involvement at school.

Another aspect of the program that could be improved is the use of ongoing academic assessments. Having learned a great deal in graduate studies about formative assessments like curriculum-based measurement (L. S. Fuchs & D. Fuchs, 1996; Overton, 2000), the teachers were anxious to add this component to the program. In addition to providing the teachers with accurate data to inform instructional decision making, this approach allows for students to take an active role in charting their progress and setting goals for academic achievement. As we suggested previously, teachers must foster change, and the only way to know that children have changed is to assess their behavior carefully and frequently.

CONCLUSION

The special class described in this article bolsters the argument for preservation of the continuum of alternative placements available to students with disabilities, including separate classes and special schools. If our goal as a society is to provide equal access to an appropriate education, then some students with disabilities may truly need something that is unequal to the general education classroom—a more supportive, more individualized, and more carefully monitored classroom environment (Brigham & Kauffman, 1998). The differences we know as emotional or behavioral disorders are particularly likely to require special environments to meet students’ needs.
We caution that a special class or a special school is not better than general education simply because it is separate. Separate can be worse than not separate. Separation from general education is never sufficient in itself to make an environment better. The program's components—teaching, providing emotional support, providing structure, and offering systematic rewards—make a place better than an alternative. However, we believe that separation from the mainstream of education is sometimes necessary for educators to develop and maintain the nature and intensity of instruction and support needed by some students.

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REFERENCES


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