Quality Program Indicators for Children with Emotional and Behavior Disorders

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Special education professionals today find themselves challenged in new ways as they strive to provide effective programming for children with emotional and behavior disorders (EBD) in public schools. Factors contributing to this situation include changes in I.D.E.A., increased use of functional assessments; school wide positive support programs, and the ubiquitous concern for school and community safety. In response, school programs for EBD are undergoing substantial revisions across the nation.

Many states have contributed to this boiling cauldron of change by passing academic performance standards and putting statewide assessments systems in place. These legislative initiatives typically require schools to increase the content of their curricula and improve the effectiveness of their instruction for all children. This movement will only be amplified as No Child Left Behind moves into implementation. The revived focus on academic achievement has in many cases been accompanied with a decrease in tolerance for student behaviors that interrupt or threaten the general education process, creating a need for a comprehensive approach to individual and collective support for appropriate students behaviors (Sugai & Horner, 1997).

Special education teachers, their principals and special education administrators are questioning what is necessary to provide a quality program for children with EBD. In an effort to shed some light on programming concerns, this article focuses on a set of indicators that Colorado has been using statewide over the past several years. The indicators have been used to help schools assess their current programs, sort through the complexities of program implementation, and design professional development opportunities that are strategic and individualized to various program and staff needs. These indicators are based on and reflect integration of best practices into an assessment system that can help educators discover current strengths and identify problems areas in need of attention. We view this as a work in progress, and offer it here as one tool to use in program improvement.

The authors have advocated the need for an expanded curriculum for children with EBD (Neel & Cessna, 1993). An expanded curriculum should include: (a) relevant academics with necessary accommodation and modifications to meet the needs of the student; (b) formal and informal instruction in what we have called life skills, those skills necessary to negotiate home, school, and work environments; and (c) direct instruction in the areas of disability. In the case of children with EBD, the "area of disability" involves teaching social skills formally, followed by intentional processes that help the child personalize and internalize the lessons s/he has learned in the more formal settings (see Adams & Cessna, 1993, for a more detailed treatment of these curricular areas.

Quality Program Indicators

The EBD Program Indicators include six elements of effective programming. Each area is treated separately, although in practice they form an interactive whole. Each area is briefly described, followed by a discussion of some issues that impact each area, and suggestions for how teachers and administrators might use them to develop new programs and/or improve existing ones.

- Environmental management
- Behavior management
- Affective education
- Individuation and personalization
- Academic
- Career/life skills/transition

Environmental Management

Each type of setting is assessed in the Environmental Management section in terms of classroom organization, adequacy of resources, physical space and layout, emotional climate, scheduling, and communication systems. For example, the physical layout of a school and classroom can impact program success in both direct and indirect ways. It is important to have set spaces that reflect positive students outcomes and signal expectations.

Behavior Management

Effective behavior management systems focus on supervision rather than total control and involve specialized instruction around students' social needs. This section assesses individual, classroom, and schoolwide systems that teach and encourage appropriate behavior. Effective behavior management includes clear rules and routines, an integrated system of discipline that is coordinated with the whole school system, specific modifications that address individual's needs, and crisis plans to minimize the negative effect of problem events.

Affective Education

This area includes programs designed to provide information and experiences that will help children with EBD learn appropriate social skills, individual and collective expectations, and strategies used to "read" situations, develop action plans, and evaluate interactions. We chose the term "affective education" to signal a more comprehensive approach that formal social skills training, although such instruction is a critical part of affective education. Affective education provides information about personal and relationship success and pitfalls.

Individuation and Personalization

This component reflects that activities that are used to individualize and internalize the lessons learned in affective education. Some programs call this processing or "working through" situation. In some cases this might involve an intervention in response to a crisis, in other situations it might involve planned cognitive restructuring or similar approaches.

Academics

Engaging, quality academic instruction is another critical element of an effective program. This element assesses the breadth of the curricular offerings, the degree to which they reflect essential understandings and skills needed to operate successfully in post-school environments, as well as the quality of instruction provided.

Career/Life Skills Transitions

The final section of the Quality Indicators focuses on the connection between what is taught in classes and what is needed for life outside of school. That is, careful attention to the link between the skills a student gains in his/her school experiences and application of those skills in the nonacademic settings is reviewed for every grade.

Using the Indicators
The Quality Program Indicators outlined in this article can act as a roadmap for applying current best practices to a variety of delivery options. Careful attention to each element, along with thoughtful integration of these elements into an effective whole, will enable EBD programs to continue to improve. Each component embodies a critical element of good programming. The expression of each element will differ from program to program, but no element can be absent or ignored if children with EBD are to be adequately served.

References


