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Trending Emotional Disturbance: Strategies through the Years

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Abstract

Teaching strategies and supports provided for students with emotional disturbance have evolved over the years. These changes are observed throughout three descriptive studies focused on specific writing strategies spanning three decades from the 1970s until the 1990s. Multiple changes are observed. For instance, terms other than the current “emotional disturbance” have been used over the years. The approach to schooling children with emotional disturbance has also shifted, from an emphasis on functional goals to focusing on academic progress. Additional changes include a more practical approach to implementing these writing strategies and an increased involvement throughout for these students. These changes present an overall positive step toward better implementing instruction and aid to children with emotional disturbance.

Trending Emotional Disturbance: Strategies through the Years

I chose to find articles from the '70s, '80s and '90s in the journal *Teaching Exceptional Children* to compare trends throughout the decades related to strategies for children with emotional disturbance. After finding a 1979 descriptive study on writing as a form of therapy and easier communication, I was able to find the same author in the 1980s this time publish an article on writing stories more specifically to solving problems. I then found a different study in the 1990s that used stories as both an emotional therapy and as an educational tool to help students in writing sub-skills such as vocabulary and oral language. After briefly summarizing these articles, I will touch on how special education has progressed through the decades.

Dr. Ellen Dehouske is a former high school English teacher, special education teacher, and past early childhood professor at Carlos University, is currently a retired professor at the University of Pittsburg. Dehouske's 1979 description of "original writing" sets a tone that should be made when implementing the method. The writing strategy was based on Dehouske's observation that students should be scaffolded into writing stories by using methods such as drawing with captions until they find their own method of writing that they feel they can best express themselves. Throughout their writing, students were told to write a moral to their story so that they were not misinterpreted. When interpreted correctly, these writings quite often gave insight into the students' thoughts. In this way, the writing products demonstrated a progression that could be seen as later stories continued to be written and problems were sometimes progressively better resolved with teacher help and insight. The teacher would respond to students' journaling, and if they so chose the conversation could continue. In one example a student was advised to try to socialize and allow others to be trusted to gain friendships, and he did. Dehouske concluded this was a therapeutic approach to writing.

This same author in 1982 wrote a descriptive study on students with emotional disturbance that practiced problem solving by creating their own fictional stories. An argument was made that those who fantasize more can better concentrate, facilitate aggression verbally in place of physical expression, and they are found to display a greater varied set of fantasy writing. In order to scaffold writing for students intimidated with a blank sheet of paper, the author advised dividing it into 4-6 squares, each one for a different purpose. These squares can be used for the typical beginning, middle, end of a story or some squares can be reserved for switching with classmates to come up with different alternatives to a problem. These documents could be used to evaluate meaning behind the students' text and possibly give the students awareness of their own response patterns in the sense that these writings were often tied to their own life conflicts. They could then see better alternatives to respond to conflict.

In 1995, Martha Bauer, a member of the Council for Exceptional Children at the time this article was written as well as Fredrick County, MD schools language arts curriculum specialist wrote this particular descriptive study with the coordinator of the special education and treatment program at an elementary school. It comes as no surprise that underlying the promotion of storytelling for academic and emotional improvement, the authors are essentially promoting their special education and treatment program in how they implement this practice. The program has taken positively researched practices and implemented them to promote emotional and academic success through mental health and special education services working together with families. The program promotes bibliotherapy where students solve problems within their own state by noticing similarities and relating with characters during storytelling and eventually noticing their own motives to become more self-aware. Academically students strengthen their verbal expression when retelling, vocabulary, better listening skills, and eventually writing their

thoughts. These written responses from higher order thinking questions can be used to document what and how the student is thinking emotionally and cognitively.

When viewing trends throughout the years, it is interesting to simply see the fluctuating identification terms. In the 1979 article, the term “emotional disturbance” is not used. Instead, the term “disturbed adolescents” (Dehouske, 1979, p. 66) is used. The 1982 article is still quite similar in saying “emotionally troubles students” while the 1995 uses the more familiar term to special education, “serious emotional disturbances” (Dehouske, p. 13 & Bauer & Balias, p. 24). Also due to the first two articles being written by the same author, similar tactics such as using one’s fingerprint to illustrate a scene are utilized with the students in both studies. For this reason, many differences are found more in the recent article compared to the two older articles than in comparing both of Dehouske’s findings. I found it interesting in the 1982 article versus the 1995 writing that the grammar is not utilized in journal writings. Both older articles definitely emphasize an emotional tactic rather than an academic strategy in writing. In Bauer and Balias’s (1995), there is an obvious recognition and push for the connection between academic and emotional downfalls, and how they can be improved hand-in-hand. This leads to the next change in that the special education teacher was the only support brought up in both 1979 and 1982 article, whereas the newer article emphasized much more support with integrating family, an entire multidisciplinary team for emotional support alone such as a psychiatrist, family therapist, psychologist, and even a nurse into this program. The special education teacher was to work beside the therapist with both integrating the same storytelling but emphasizing appropriate categories for their purpose. For instance, the teacher would promote oral expression whereas the therapist would look for conflict resolution appropriate for their age.

I also noticed the shift from a way of teaching and facilitating into a more practical, step-by-step strategy explanation to implement. The first article was mostly based on examples of how certain students reacted to this therapy. The next one gave examples of tips on how to subdue anxiety on writing such as dividing the sheet into smaller tasks. The most recent one included the process of storytelling into three practical steps and provided exact questions a therapist could ask during a session and a special education teacher could follow up with after attending this session. At the end of the 1979 article, the author states that in order to implement original writing, a teacher must be prepared to give lots of time and energy into their students. Yet when looking at the 1995 article, across the board this seems to be much more involved.

Overall, I found these articles to shift from general to specific, less to more involved, simply emotional to academic with emotional involvement, and a general better clarity in what it is that is being targeted and how to implement that. I definitely think overall these are positive trends. The overall impression is a greater urgency and care to greater impact the student with as many supports as needed. However, it also seems like the ideal may not equal reality. For a special educator to attend every therapy session every student of theirs may have on top of collaborating with the therapist and completing everything else a special educator must do in today's world on top of overall content, it seems a bit much. In summary though, it is encouraging to notice the realization of how much everything is connected and remind ourselves children are complex creatures with needs that effect other aspects of their lives. As special educators, we need to remember there is more going on than we see at face value, and collaborating with other specialists is a great way to obtain a bigger picture of the child at hand.

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