Assessing and Classifying Students With Behavioral Disorders: Some Tips For Improving Practice

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One of the distinguishing features of special education is the requirement that students meet certain criteria to be eligible to receive special education and related services. That is, not all students who have learning problems are learning disabled. Not all students who have hearing impairments require special education. Similarly, not all students who have behavioral, social, and/or emotional problems can be classified behavior disordered.

Determining who is and who is not eligible to receive special education is not an easy thing to do. The assessment and classification of students who are suspected of having a Behavioral Disorder is probably one of the most difficult areas in the field of special education. A great deal of disagreement exists about definitions, assessment procedures, decision-making criteria, prevalence rates, and so on. Further, the issue of the fact that there are a number of divergent professional opinions concerning the root causes of Behavioral Disorders and preferred educational interventions for these students.

While there is no litmus test that can be used to assess and classify students with Behavioral Disorders, there are a number of assessment procedures that can be used with confidence in the assessment and classification process. Our purpose here is to review some of the key issues associated with assessing and classifying students with Behavioral Disorders, including a brief look at the definition of Behavioral Disorders.

The Definition

The federal definition of Behavioral Disorders (or, as IDEA 97 uses the label, "emotional disturbance", for this category) is as follows:

(i) The term means a condition exhibiting one more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects child's educational performance:

(a) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

(b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.

(c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.

(d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

(e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

(ii) The term includes schizophrenia.

The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.

This definition has been around for a very long time. Most state definitions of this disability category, including Utah’s, are similar to the federal definition.

Ambiguities in the Definition

On the surface, this definition seems to be rather straightforward and relatively simple to understand. However, there are areas of ambiguity in the definition that require clarification. For example, how long is a "long period of time"? Typically, if the behavior has persisted over a period of four months and if it has persisted despite appropriately designed and implemented interventions, a strong case can be made for meeting this criterion.

Another ambiguous phrase is "marked degree". What does this mean? Essentially, your task here is to provide documentation that the student’s behavior is significantly different from his/her peers. This is accomplished by collecting information through structured observation systems and standardized checklists and rating scales that the severity and intensity of the student’s behavior significantly differs from his/her peers.

The concept of "adverse effect on educational performance" is sometimes misconstrued to be limited strictly to academic achievement and grades. "Educational performance" means more than academic performance; it also includes a student’s social/behavioral competence and adjustment. Determining whether there has been an adverse effect on educational performance requires a two-pronged approach. First, if the student is not making reasonable academic progress because of his or her behavior, then an adverse effect can be claimed. Second, students who have difficulty attending school, making friends, and interacting with peers and teachers also meet this requirement. It is possible that a student can make adequate academic progress while failing to make a reasonable social adjustment; poor academic performance and poor social adjustment frequently occur together, however. Assessing poor social adjustment is best accomplished using standardized social skills assessment instruments, school attendance records, and sociometric ratings.

Keep in Mind

When you are involved in the assessment and classification process for a student who has been referred for behavior problems, keep in mind the following important points:

• All children and youth misbehave to some extent. What distinguishes students with Behavioral Disorders from their non-disabled peers is that their misbehavior is exaggerated in terms of frequency, intensity, and duration.

• It’s been said that disturbance (i.e., Behavioral Disorders), like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Our expectations and standards play a big role in ultimately determining which students are classified BD. The key concepts here are reasonable and realistic. Expectations and standards that are too high will make the task of classification more susceptible to error. Similarly, expectations and standards that are too low (i.e., or in the words of New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, when we “define deviancy down”) also increase the likelihood of passing over students who probably should be receiving special education services.

• As with assessment practices in other areas of special education, it is always a good idea to use multiple measures of performance and multiple sources of information in the decision-making process. In assessing and classifying students with Behavioral Disorders, a team of individuals, which includes the student’s parents, will always make a better decision than a single individual making the call.

The complexities associated with assessing and classifying students with Behavioral Disorders cannot be adequately covered in this space. Your school district, the USOE, ULRC, and the BEST Project all provide resources, training and expertise in this area. Don’t be reluctant to ask questions. Reliably and validly assessing and classifying students with Behavioral Disorders is an area in which we all need to work together to improve practice.