

Elements of an Effective Re-EDucation Program for the 21st Century

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Nearly ten years ago, the key ingredients of an effective Re-ED classroom were outlined in "A Model Re-ED Classroom for Troubled Students," (Fecser, 1993). This article draws on recent research and best practices to update that statement of the principles of effective re-education.

The National Agenda to Improve Results for Children and Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbances reiterated the need for evolution in the field of special education and mental health. Professionals who serve troubled children and their families are challenged to keep abreast of developments in the field and implement best practices (Osher & Hanley, 1996). Nicholas Hobbs (1982), the founder of Project Re-ED, recognized that practice is dynamic and is always in a state of "becoming." As Re-Education enters the 21st century, it is appropriate to examine current research and implications for practice.

Effective Re-ED classrooms integrate diverse strategies and approaches into a comprehensive and dynamic therapeutic learning environment. This article identifies four critical areas of best practice in successful classrooms: (1) program foundation and philosophy, (2) structure and predictability, (3) classroom climate, and (4) individual programming. Figure 1 diagrams these elements and their components. By organizing essential elements in this way, we can provide a template to assist in program self-assessment. When considering the extent to which these elements and best practices are present in a setting, it may be helpful to imagine what a program visitor might find if he or she were to walk in tomorrow unannounced.

Element 1: Program Foundation and Philosophy

Ecology means the study of the complex interaction of energies in natural systems. It seems an apt term to express our concerns for children in settings and for mobilizing the natural resources of a system in the service of a child or an adolescent. (Hobbs, 1982, p. 189)

Values, Beliefs, and Goals

The foundation of any program lies in its orienting philosophy. Re-Education believes in the importance of work within the child's ecology. Re-ED focuses on the strengths inherent in each child, employing a variety of perspectives and approaches to problem solving. Staff, students, and families involved in a program must have a common understanding of its purpose and goals in order to be able to fulfill them everyday. As Fecser (1993) summarized, "A clearly stated values system is the foundation of any community, be it an entire school or a single classroom. Our values system establishes the ethics of good practice and provides a standard against which our actions and decisions can be measured." (p. 15). When a program's mission statement, vision, and objectives are evident throughout the program, they serve as a solid base for decision making and program planning.

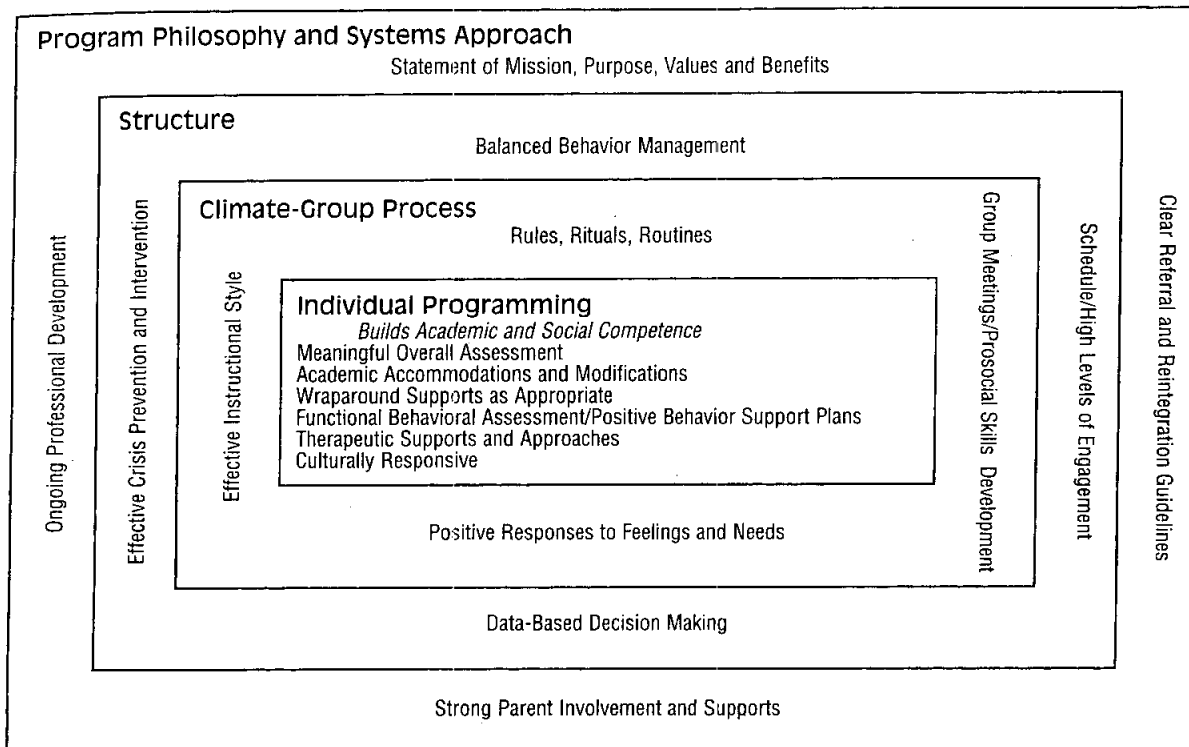
Purposes Served

Another critical feature is clear delineation of when and how children and families enter a particular program, as well as when and how they are supported in reintegrating into other settings or services. Clear referral and reintegration processes address such questions as: (a) What challenges are these programs designed to address? (b) How do we know if we are effectively meeting a child's needs? (c) How do we help a child reintegrate into another school and/or community setting? With these issues understood, staff and families have a clear sense of role, direction, and purpose, lending a significant positive momentum to day-to-day experiences.

Child and Family Focus

Meaningful involvement of parents and caregivers is fundamental to making a positive impact on the natural ecol-

Figure 1. Elements of an Effective Re-Education Program for the 21st Century



ogy of each child. "In Re-ED," Hobbs (1982) said, "parents are no longer viewed as sources of contagion, but as responsible collaborators in making the system work" (p. 28). Programs encourage greater involvement by recognizing parents and caregivers as essential partners in supporting and serving each child. Parents and caregivers are moving from the role of passive consumer into active roles as advocates or trainers, establishing networks of support for other families facing similar challenges. This network of support transcends the "formal" setting of the program, reaching families in their homes and communities and resulting in positive changes for the family as well as the individual child (Cheney & Osher, 1997).

Investing in Staff

Serving troubled children and their families is highly challenging and demanding, and staff need access to abundant professional development opportunities to promote skills and morale. Unfortunately, the realities of tight budgets and full schedules often result in sacrificing staff training. Inadequate training then contributes to a cycle of decreasing morale and effectiveness, burnout, and high turnover, leading to increased error and risk. Skilled and motivated staff are a program's most valuable resource, deserving of continued investment.

Element 2: Program Structure

Learning occurs in the context of well-planned, purposeful, and meaningful days. (Cantrell, Cantrell, Valore, Jones, & Fecser, 1999, p.16)

Children with emotional or behavioral problems require a structured and predictable environment. They respond best when expectations are clear and consistent with changes in routine kept to a minimum. However, interpreting the optimal degree of structure is tricky business. Well-meaning staff may create a rigid structure, overly concerned with external control and reduction of behaviors at all costs, thereby losing the natural reinforcement inherent in a dynamic and interactive learning community. Steinberg and Knitzer (1992) refer to this tendency as the "curriculum of control." They found that overly controlled settings tended to produce poor academic and behavioral outcomes. Responsiveness to emerging student needs and interests is just as essential as consistency. Skilled teacher/counselors understand that consistent classroom structure can and should evolve to encourage the emergent development of the child.

Building Positive Structure

Effective behavior management is fundamental. Ideally, adults can consistently develop a clear system of both positive and negative consequences. Perhaps most importantly, they must provide much higher rates of positive reinforcement than negative consequences in their interactions with students. Well-designed point systems, level systems, and token economies can be helpful management tools. However, staff who readily use social reinforcement such as praise, proximity, and attention, rather than relying primarily on external types of reinforcement, tend to have fewer behavior problems and see greater academic and social gains in their students.

Limit Setting

Strong behavior management also includes the ability to use effective limit setting when necessary, intervening early in emerging problems, rather than waiting to react when the problem behavior has become a crisis. The front-line staff should handle most behavior problems. External administration or agencies (such as police) become involved only in connection with serious offenses, and then, as part of a planned strategy, rather than as a reactive response to a significant disruption. This assures that students understand that they remain accountable and connected to their front-line staff, even under the most difficult circumstances.

Planning the Day

Scheduling and pacing activities to promote active student involvement and success throughout the day reduces opportunity for bored students to get into trouble. High levels of positive interactions between staff and students and well-planned "unstructured" time can do much to keep everyone on track. A consistent daily schedule lends a sense of order and stability. More difficult or less interesting tasks are followed by activities of higher interest. For example, if a challenging academic task is followed by a group game or other interactive activity, this naturally motivates students to maintain positive behaviors.

Using Data for Decision Making

To determine if the program is generating desired outcomes, effective data collection techniques need to be used to drive program planning, evaluate student progress, and monitor daily functioning. Daily individual student data and aggregated classroom data may reveal trends and patterns that suggest adjustments in level of structure and behavioral supports. In order to be useful, any data collection system needs to be efficient, easy to maintain, and meaningful to staff, students, and families. Keeping parents and caregivers informed about a child's progress through daily notes, home/school passports, report cards, or other means helps them become more effective members of the child's team.

Preventing and Managing Crises

Even in a well-managed environment, students with emotional or behavior problems are still likely to display behavior problems. Thus, teacher/counselors use effective crisis prevention and early intervention strategies. This includes a clear process for addressing the early emergence of problem behavior, as well as for responding to the various levels of escalating behaviors with appropriate intervention strategies (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Staff who are competent in crisis intervention strategies, verbal de-escalation techniques, and therapeutic physical interventions are best prepared to turn a student's crisis into an opportunity for teaching and learning. An understanding of the Conflict Cycle (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001), which describes how adults can be unintentionally drawn into power struggles with students, is a critical skill. The physical layout can hin-

der or support effective crisis intervention. The setting should provide a safe, private area away from the center of activity for students to regain control, talk privately with helping adults, and solve problems effectively.

Debriefing Crises

Supportive post-crisis intervention techniques such as debriefing, problem solving, and reintegration discussions maintain student dignity and repair staff/student relationships. Since crisis situations provide powerful teaching moments, teacher/counselors must be prepared to take advantage of these opportunities. Strategies such as Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001) help staff understand the hidden or disguised issues driving a child's problem behavior. The goal is to help the student gain insight into and accountability for self-defeating patterns of behavior. To assure that crisis interventions are utilized effectively, safely, and consistently, it is also important that staff routinely debrief crisis situations. This relieves staff stress and suggests adjustments in management strategies.

Element 3:

Program Climate and Group Process

The constant challenge in a Re-ED program is to help groups build cultures that sustain children and adolescents in their efforts to manage their lives in ways satisfying to themselves and satisfactory to others. (Hobbs, 1982, p. 332)

A healthy program climate provides its members a sense of belonging, identity, and cohesion, encouraging more appropriate behavior and facilitating success. A program where the overall climate is not well-developed often experiences a higher level of disruption, sees less cooperation, and requires more external controls.

Group Development

A positive group climate does not emerge spontaneously. This requires an understanding of the stages of group development, the nature of group functioning, and a great deal of planning. Staff must employ the dynamics of effective group management as the group progresses through its formative stages. Establishing a group identity (perhaps by selecting a name and mascot), contributing productively to the group, determining group goals, and developing group strategies for accomplishing those goals all help bring the group together and establish a sense of belonging, interdependence, and mutual interest.

Rules, Rituals, and Routines

Positive group process is maintained through the use of meaningful rules, rituals, and routines. These are integrated into the schedule and environment in a way that promotes student success, minimizes opportunities for disruptive behavior, and builds group identity and cohesion. Rules that are developed with input from every group member have

greater meaning and power to influence student behavior. Rules are most effective when they are visibly posted, positively stated, easily understood, consistently enforced, and clearly identify behaviors for success.

Meaningful routines are "essentially good habits" (Fecser, 1993, p. 17) that are established and practiced to facilitate transitions and classroom activities, handle disruptive behaviors, and manage emergencies such as fire and earthquake drills. Consistent signals and cues, such as "give me five" or "take a quiet minute," are used by staff and students for communication. These promote a sense of predictability and order, as well as personal involvement and responsibility.

In a positive group climate, rituals involving both staff and students mark significant events, such as acknowledging student progress, birthdays, or a staff or student joining or leaving the group. Rituals help students establish a sense of group membership and acknowledge the many expectations and responsibilities that come with being a part of the community.

Group Meetings

Prosocial skill development is enhanced when staff and students participate together in well-managed group meetings. Such meetings focus on problem solving, goal setting, group business, or positive feedback. Students are taught the steps and elements of effective group meetings and participate in facilitating meetings. When a student or staff member joins the group, experienced members orient the newcomer about the operation of and expectations for a meeting. Group meetings allow students to experience the impact they can have when they contribute as a member of a community.

Prosocial Practice

Targeted, direct instruction on prosocial skills, such as self-management, effective communication, making and keeping friends, is also necessary. This includes opportunities for students to practice new skills in realistic but supported social situations. Students learn to give and receive feedback. For example, in a daily "goal meeting" students identify and discuss their progress towards a specific goal for their day, receiving feedback on their successes from other students in the group. Although many excellent social skills or curriculums are available, these are most effective when integrated into ongoing teaching in natural day-to-day situations.

Staff Responsiveness

A healthy program climate imparts an overall sense of positive responses to feelings and needs. This is one of the most important features in an effective Re-ED program because "trust between child and adult is essential" (Hobbs, 1982, p. 245). Teacher/counselors are sensitive to student needs and aware of the importance of their interactions.

They respond to feelings and issues that may underlie the eruption of a particular behavior, not just to the surface behavior itself.

For example, if a student arrives one day visibly distracted and noncompliant, a sensitive staff member would talk with the student in an attempt to understand what might be driving the behavior, rather than simply relying on consequences. As students find words to express what they feel, the adult gains a window on their world outside the classroom. Staff look for "teachable moments," which link the student's feelings with the problem behaviors. Together they generate more appropriate ways to manage feelings and behavior. These interactions build positive relationships between students and staff and provide a series of real life, in-the-moment lessons in interpersonal skills.

Communication Enhancement

Children need to learn interpersonal communication strategies, such as active listening, conflict mediation, and "I" statements. Staff provide cues and reinforcement until these strategies become a more natural part of the student's behavior. To create a tone of mutual respect within the group, students listen to the perspectives and opinions of others and acknowledge the contributions of others within the group. These are not just "hot-house" skills but will serve students well throughout their lives. To enhance generalization, teacher/counselors also continuously model respectful communication with one another and when interacting with students and family members. Children learn what they live.

Effective Instruction

Success is a powerful change agent for children with a history of academic failure. Effective teacher/counselors support student success in academic, vocational, behavioral, and social learning. In the spirit of the true teacher/counselor, each staff member needs to understand the basic components of effective instruction and use them successfully in a variety of activities from outdoor education experiences or social skill groups to regular math lessons.

Implementing a variety of instructional strategies throughout the day (varying cooperative or experiential learning, direct instruction, group and individualized instruction) creates a rich and naturally rewarding learning climate. Lessons and activities are developmentally and cognitively appropriate, keyed to individual interests to provide frequent success and foster intrinsic motivation. Creative, alternative activities teach academic skills without focusing narrowly on traditional paper and pencil tasks. For example, when a class plans and builds a small greenhouse, grows plants and sells them in order to buy new equipment for the gym, such projects teach science, math, and interpersonal skills. A student who is unfamiliar with academic success is led "step by step to a successful encounter with learning" (Hobbs, 1982, p. 255). In turn, students who are

actively involved in learning and experiencing success tend to exhibit far fewer behavior problems.

Integrated Programming

Blending academic and therapeutic modalities is analogous to a pianist playing a lovely piece of music. The movement of each hand across the keyboard is critical to the expression of the piece. At times the notes and chords of one hand may sound with more emphasis. Moments later those played by the other hand may do so, but it is this ongoing interplay of notes, sounds, and cadence played by each that comes together to express the melody beautifully. To the listener, the different movements of each hand are unimportant, because they blend together to create a powerful musical experience. So also a seamless blend of meaningful learning and therapeutic experiences in a Re-ED classroom creates a powerful climate supporting change and growth for children and families.

This blending also creates some of the most significant systematic challenges for Re-ED programs. Because of funding and regulatory issues for educational and mental health services, many barriers to meshing these services exist. Returning to the analogy of the pianist, many state and federal funding systems are structured so that the pianist is required to play with each hand on a separate piano, and never to play with both hands at the same time—even though they want to hear the same piece of music performed. As a result, those involved in effective Re-ED programs must constantly work to educate and inform regional, state, and federal agencies on the critical importance and the effectiveness of integrating learning and therapeutic approaches to meet the needs of troubled children and their families.

Element 4: Individualized Programming

Important helper strength in the education and treatment process lies in decoding, reframing, and pulling out the dormant potential and searching for strengths where some might see only weakness. (Cantrell, Cantrell, Valore, Jones, & Fecser, 1999, p. 20)

Educational and Behavioral Assessment

While the first three components of best practices address the ecology within which the child is served, the core of every program lies in meeting the individualized needs of each child. The first step in individualizing a program involves a thorough assessment of strengths and needs. This includes identifying a student's unique learning styles, along with social/emotional and developmental needs.

Ecological Assessment and Programming

An ecological assessment identifies the roles and involvement of family members, other care providers, and relevant community connections. In many areas today ecological

planning is referred to as a "wraparound model." Most commonly the wraparound process is used to support the child whose needs are so significant that they impede multiple life domains and/or require the involvement of other agencies (Eber & Nelson, 1997; Eber, Nelson, & Miles, 1997). In order for teacher/counselors to contribute to ecological planning, they must be familiar with available options and develop contacts with other agencies that can provide specific types of support for the student and/or family (such as public health, child care, or employment services). Staff must also have a schedule that allows them time to make contact or attend necessary meetings.

Many Re-ED programs address ecological needs through the role of the liaison teacher/counselor, whose primary responsibility is providing support to the home and community agents involved. Some programs allow flexible scheduling and extra duty pay to compensate staff for attending evening meetings. However this need is met, effecting positive change throughout the ecology of the child must extend beyond the traditional program boundaries and the hours of the school day.

Functional Behavioral Assessment and Planning

New expectations about assessment have been thrust into the spotlight as a result of the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is used to understand the purpose of problem behaviors and build an individualized Positive Behavior Support (PBS) plan. A PBS plan emphasizes strategies to support the academic and social success of a child by directly addressing skill deficits and other needs that interfere with appropriate behavior (O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Sprague, Storey, & Newton, 1997). Professionals and families have become increasingly aware of the need to utilize the FBA/PBS process when shaping a student's individualized program, although there are many questions about how it should be implemented and supported. Resources to assist professionals and family members in understanding and implementing the FBA and PBS process include: The Center for Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports at the University of Oregon; the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (www.cecp.org); the BEACONS Project at the University of Washington; and the Kentucky Behavior Homepage (www.state.ky.us/agencies/behave/bi/fba.html).

Social/Emotional Development

Just as with education, the therapeutic portion of a child's program is individualized as well. Intervention does not usually involve psychotherapy, but instead focuses on techniques and modalities that strengthen the child's social and cognitive development, such as teaching problem solving, increasing social awareness, and enhancing self-control. The goal of these strategies is to help children come to understand how their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions may be contributing to problem behaviors.

Just as effective instructional techniques are used in all classroom activities, therapeutic intervention is infused in all daily activities, including academics. Play, art, drama, and music offer opportunities for therapeutic expression and growth. Cognitive behavior modification strategies can become integrated into a child's daily program in both group and individual experiences. For example, exploring and expressing feelings can be incorporated into a language arts unit on poetry in which students are introduced to a variety of feeling words and expressive poetry, then supported in writing and publishing their own poetry, utilizing their favorite feeling words. In this manner, academic, therapeutic, and behavioral goals can be met within a single engaging learning experience.

The goal of therapeutic support is not for the child to gain deep personal insight into the origin of their difficulties, but rather that they "learn that they can think about their behavior, about their relationships with other people, about their future. They learn that they do not need to be the victims of impulse or the persuasion of others—in sum, that they can take thought and control their behavior here and now" (Hobbs, 1982, p. 266).

Cultural Responsiveness

All aspects of the child's program should be culturally responsive. Staff members, volunteers, and family members need to have ongoing training in multicultural issues and awareness, and access to information, curriculum resources, and materials related to a variety of cultural perspectives. Additionally, a climate of mutual respect must be developed within the program that supports a meaningful ongoing dialogue between program staff, students, family, and community members regarding diversity issues and needs. In this way, existing or emerging problems can be identified and addressed before they interfere with the success of a child's program.

In Conclusion

The many competencies acquired in the Re-ED experience may permit a child or adolescent to accurately say, "I am a competent person." (Hobbs, 1982, p. 257)

The challenge of meeting the needs of our troubled and troubling children is formidable. Thankfully, our profession continues to benefit from the research, advocacy, and the practical experience of committed professionals, community, and family members throughout the world. Because of their efforts, we continue to come to a better understanding of which strategies and approaches can make a difference in the lives of children in need.

Through the balanced implementation of the elements outlined in this article, a dynamic and effective program can be developed that meets the needs of troubled children and their families, while creating a reasonable working en-

vironment for staff members and volunteers. By regularly reviewing a program's progress in all four critical areas, administrators and staff can assure that they are creating a strong and viable program that has the potential to make a significant impact for years to come in the lives of the troubled children and youth whom they serve.

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