

# An Eclectic Approach to Education for the Emotionally Disturbed

*Phyllis Rash Stern*

The major function of school personnel is to provide the best possible education for children — all children. Techniques and methodology used in achieving this goal vary according to the unique needs of the child being served.

In the area of education for emotionally disturbed children, the teacher (or teacher-therapist) does well to adopt an eclectic approach, drawing from different theoretical views those which are applicable to a classroom situation. These views are then integrated into a sound, systematic approach with which an educational program for the emotionally disturbed child is developed.

Like the good novelist who has one foot in the literary bucket and one foot in the active world, the truly effective teacher must never completely leave the world of theory, nor must the theoretician ignore the world of the practitioner. The lines of communication between theoretician and practitioner must remain open to enable both disciplines to contribute most effectively. Frequently the theoretician observes the teacher and is able to categorize and classify that which is being done in a more systematic way than was previously recognized. On the other hand, the teacher holds the unique position of implementing theoretical views and discovering how much of these findings are applicable to a particular situation. Occasionally the teacher finds herself in a position where she must work intuitively. This is understandable and frequently beneficial

to all concerned. However, the teacher must take the time to evaluate what was done and why. This would eliminate repetition of undesired actions as well as serve to make the teacher cognizant of a favorable practice.

### **The Therapist Teacher**

The teacher-therapist, as the name implies, is one expected to possess the usual teacher competencies plus an understanding and working knowledge of child therapy. The teacher-therapist's goal is primarily educational, but the emotionally disturbed child frequently requires considerably more than the usual teacher-student relationship. Understanding that success in learning is emotionally therapeutic and growth promoting, she continually strives to help achieve this end. Occasionally the teacher-therapist must use the tools of the therapist to help bring the child to the point where he can participate in the scholastic world again.

One of the most needed attributes of the teacher-therapist is a high degree of sensitivity. Since the emotionally disturbed child frequently camouflages his communication, the teacher-therapist must hear that which is often unsaid, see through devious distortions, interpret and respond to the plea for help in an involved but professionally objective manner. The teacher-therapist must also have sufficient training in related disciplines to enable her to take part effectively in the desirable team approach.

### **Effective Rapport**

Educational programs for the emotionally disturbed child, supposedly based on Freudian psychology, are usually characterized by warmth, permissiveness, acceptance of almost any kind of behavior and an extremely informal-incident academic program. Nonsense! An examination of the often abused generalization concerning acceptance is in order. Yes, the teacher-therapist must fully accept the child. This does not mean that she indiscriminately condones inappropriate behavior. It does mean that the *child* is always unconditionally accepted but opportunities are taken whenever and wherever possible to effect favorable changes in behavior. The following examples are taken from the author's experience in a classroom for emotionally disturbed children.

A six year old seriously disturbed child, who will be referred to as Susan, masturbated in class almost all

day, every day. Despite her inept attempts to camouflage her activities, other students were aware of her behavior and began making derogatory remarks about her. As the other youngsters rejected her, a circular pattern evolved with Susan increasing the behavior that was responsible for further rejection. The teacher-therapist spoke to her alone about her actions explaining that there was nothing wrong or bad about her behavior but that it could not continue in the classroom. They discussed the problem and in response to Susan's question of where this was permissible, the privacy of her own bedroom was suggested. Thereafter, only occasional reminders were necessary as her masturbating in class was almost completely extinguished.

Another case involving acceptance of the child, but modification of inappropriate behavior, concerned an adolescent boy and his use of obscene language in school.

Again, after rapport had been established between student and teacher-therapist, the teacher-therapist spoke to the boy about using obscene language in the classroom. The topic was opened with the teacher revealing to the child that she understood why one would, at times, want to use such language, but she also explained why such language could not be tolerated in the classroom. She suggested the child write these words rather than say them aloud and, if so desired, give them to the teacher. When necessary, even help was extended in the proper spelling of the not so proper words. Thus, the child was afforded a means of releasing his hostilities without seriously interfering with classroom procedures.

Again the desired results were achieved, and more important, the child was always accepted, but inappropriate behavior was altered to benefit the child as well as the group. Lest one mistakenly get the impression that this improvement was achieved with the ease and rapidity required to write and read this brief account, it should be noted that frequently the writing of curses overflowed from paper to desk and even the walls were decorated with messages such as "God go to hell" and an assortment of obscenities. But these, too, eventually ceased.

### **Individual Program Manipulation**

What about the informal academic program for the emotionally disturbed child? If such a program is always followed, it is obviously based on a superficial view of Freudian psychology. One of the basic needs of most emotionally disturbed youngsters, regardless of pathology, is a need for security. In a completely permissive unstructured atmosphere, how can one feel any degree of security? The classroom structure, however, must not be arbitrarily set. Careful consideration of each child's unique needs, abilities, and goals should guide the selection of the structure to be used. This does not imply rigid rules are to be followed without deviation. It does suggest the development of a solid framework upon which a flexible program can be based. This represents an intentional intrusion into the child's world — environmental manipulation. This is in keeping with the Lewinian theory which encourages individualized diagnosis and remediation. It also allows for the use of the classroom and the academic program as a therapeutic tool to restructure the child's life space. An example of individualized program manipulation to benefit the child in question can be seen in the following example which the author classifies as a "controlled crisis."

A very generously intellectually endowed boy was unable to accept anything less than a perfect performance from himself. Along with other activities planned to aid in self-acceptance, he was occasionally presented with academic exercises containing insured success experiences, but this also included graduated challenges. Fully aware of the response likely to result, the teacher-therapist scheduled these activities at a time when she would be in a position to offer most help. The contagious effect of the teacher's acceptance of the child allowed the child to gradually view himself more favorably. He was constantly exposed to more and more situations which offered an opportunity for continued growth encouraged under controlled crises. These also included built-in failure experiences, enabling the child to learn to handle these situations too.

It has often been noted that children in the special class often experience a kind of teacher-mother-teacher name calling cycle. This situation is usually resolved without interference from the teacher. Occasionally a little sensitive assistance is required as is demonstrated in the following example.

During the first few months in the special class Jennie always referred to the teacher as Mrs. Stern. As the child became more comfortable in the special class and with the teacher, Jennie increasingly addressed the teacher as mother. When this did not appear to decrease within a reasonable length of time, the teacher approached Jennie with what could probably be classified as accurate empathy. The teacher told Jennie she understood Jennie would like Mrs. Stern to be her mother, and Mrs. Stern would like to be her mother, but she must understand that she (the teacher) is Mrs. Stern and preferred to be called by her own name. Jennie responded with a compromise which revealed some anger, some humor, but more important, an understanding and acceptance of the real situation. In response to the teacher's explanation and request Jennie said, "O.K. Mrs. Mother!" This, however, soon after subsided and Mrs. Stern became the accepted name thereafter.

Some learning theorists explain the use of a symptomatic approach by the fact that we don't know the reasons for the child's disturbance and even if we did we could do little, if anything, about it. This is possibly true to a degree, but through multi-disciplinary endeavour the reasons for a child's difficulties may be uncovered. Can anything constructive then be done in the classroom? Not always, but very often school personnel can be of considerable help. Take, for example, the boy whose major problem as diagnosed by the consulting psychiatrist was primarily his mother, aptly described as a "cold cookie." The teacher-therapist could not be expected to transform this cold cookie into a loving mother, nor should the teacher-therapist become a mother-surrogate. But she could provide a corrective relationship by exposing the child to an accepting-giving adult personality.

Learning theory suggests greater control of environment in school by reducing stimuli impinging upon the activity and group participation of the children. This is well founded, particularly in the case of the hyperactive emotionally disturbed child. Extreme caution must be exercised here, however, so as to avoid an adaptive program which actually hampers the child's eventual adjustment to a regular situation. With this in mind, this writer designed a classroom for emotionally disturbed children with booths as suggested by others in the field, but with important additions and

modifications. First of all, furniture offering flexible arrangements was included to enable the youngsters to participate in group-like activities resembling those in a regular classroom. (See photo #1).

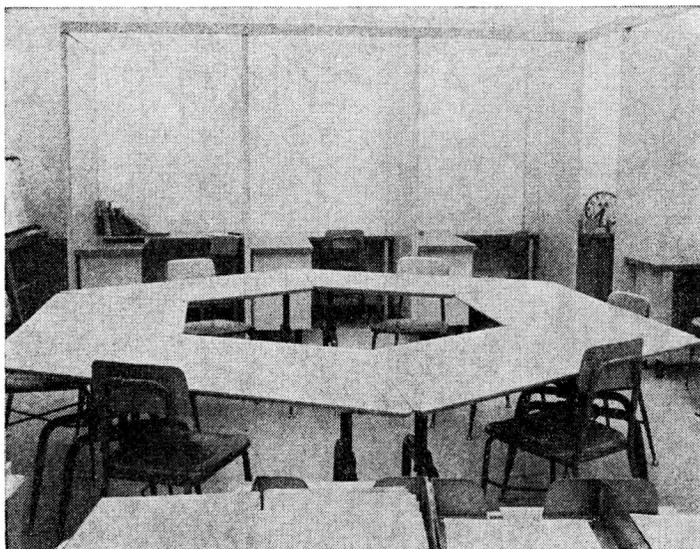


Photo 1 — Movable furniture provides maximum program flexibility

The booths in the room contained an original feature (see photo #2) of a side extension on the desk. This discouraged complete isolation and allowed for gradual movement back to the group. The side extension also enabled the child to participate in assignments from the board which would be very difficult with the usual back desk alone. The booths, or "private offices," were used as needed. Occasionally an aggressive, "acting-out" youngster went into the private office of his own accord. At times, to prevent unnecessary friction, the teacher suggested a child should use the office. On the other hand, extreme caution was exercised to avoid having a severely withdrawn child use the private office for this would be an unwise reinforcement of the very condition to be alleviated. Sometimes the offices were used as teaching machine booths or places where a couple of children could help each other without disturbing the rest of the class.

Recognized methods of conditioning and reinforcement were used but with emphasis somewhat different from the usual ones. Rewards for appropriate responses were designed with an aware-

ness of modifying existing behavior patterns as well as using the rewards themselves as conditioners toward changing undesirable attitudes. In other words, a defiant "acting-out" youngster might have a history of extreme dislike for the academic world and all related personnel and activities. A reward system for such a child might include materials which are designed to develop a liking and desire for school-like materials. This approach was used repeatedly with gratifying results. The following serves well to illustrate one such example.

Joey, a preadolescent with a history of defiance and hatred of school, entered the special class where he revealed all the expected distaste for the academic world. In the regular class he was known to destroy school materials regularly. Therefore, he was given only single assignment sheets with a great deal of insured success experiences. Among his first rewards was the opportunity to work in books which he could keep when completed. The alternative left open to him was to sit idly in his private office with nothing to do. When in the office, he received minimum or no attention from peers or teacher. On the other hand, he re-

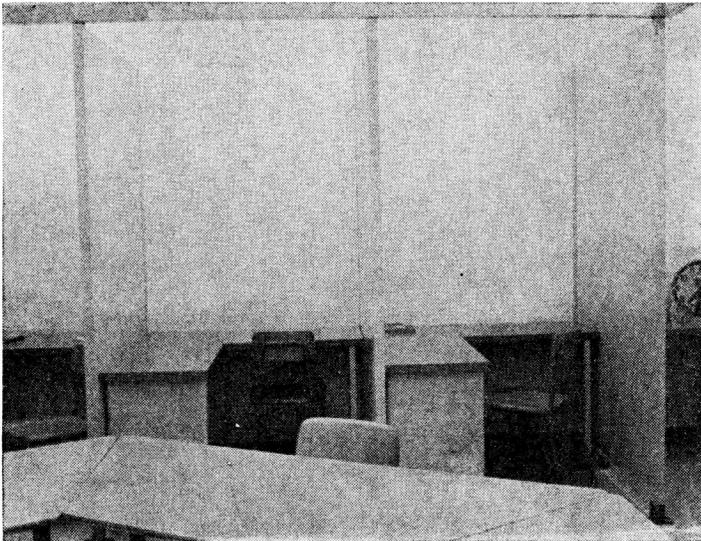


Photo 2 — Private work area has side desk added

ceived a great deal of positive attention when able to work with the school materials as directed. Other uses of academic materials as rewards included his own looseleaf binder, box for his papers, magazines, crossword puzzles, etc. After several months of this kind of treatment, Joey's attitude and performance were noticeably altered in a positive direction.

### **Conclusion**

The teacher's personality and philosophy of education are deciding factors in the success of any given program for emotionally disturbed children. Among the most important ingredients essential to such a program would be the teacher's ability to establish a genuine trusting relationship with her students. A warm, human, understanding personality is not enough. The teacher today must be objectively aware of what interaction is taking place and why. It is only with such understanding that she can effectively guide the emotionally unstable youngster toward more sure footing in the real world.