

Behavior, Language & Cultural Diversity



Would you like to write an article on English Language Learners and behavior?" Cheryl asked. "Sure," I said. It seemed such a simple, reasonable request at the outset. As I started to think it through and do some research, I realized it is a very complicated and challenging issue.

So, I started from the basics. Behavior always has a function, a purpose. Behavior is, after all, communication. So, starting with the obvious, when a student who is starting to learn English engages in some behavior that catches the teacher's eye, we must determine what the student is trying to say. Much of the behavior that might be labeled inappropriate is likely a result of the frustration of not being able to communicate with peers and adults in the school setting. An appropriate approach for the school team is to conduct a functional behavior analysis. By looking at the antecedents of the behavior, the teaching staff can change the student's environment to encourage replacement behaviors that will improve his communication with others.

Certainly there are increasing numbers of students entering Utah schools with a primary home language other than English. But we cannot discuss the effects of linguistic diversity without also talking about cultural diversity. Language is part of any group's culture, and culture, in turn, influences language development. Often students fail in school because adults and peers do not recognize the cultural, social or linguistic characteristics of the English Language Learner. This situation often leads to behavior problems as the student struggles to learn a new language and a new social order in a strange place.

Students from cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from U.S. English may exhibit what is described as too much or too little behavior. Some of this is more accurately labeled cultural expectations. Children from certain American Indian groups may not look at the teacher when instruction begins, a cultural norm that is preferred in their social milieu. Students from some Asian countries are subject to the "model minority myth." Expected to do well at all the tasks the teacher assigns and be very compliant, these students have a high rate of depression, partly due to cultural conflict in their new setting. In another instance, two African-American male students might be "playing the dozens" and a European American teacher might label it verbal aggression.



Accurate assessment and diagnosis are critical to the development of an appropriate treatment plan for students with emotional or behavior disorders. Yet the social skills checklists used in IDEA eligibility determination do not accurately reflect the social competence of these students. School staff may misinterpret some culturally based behaviors and view them as disorders. A student with a different cultural and linguistic background may be thought to be withdrawn or depressed, when the real issue is the lack of English fluency or a perspective on assertiveness different from the U.S. definition. School staff may misinterpret some culturally based behaviors and view them as disorders. We must take care not to make culture account for everything, and not to ignore its effects either.

The varied communication style of diverse ethnic groups may be misinterpreted when teachers do not share the same social protocols or relational styles as students. But culturally different behaviors do not equal social-skill deficits or emotional disturbances.

When a family's culture clashes with the dominant culture of the school and community, the child's self concept, self efficacy, and adaptive responses may degenerate. And culture plays a key role in how behavior and mental health problems are viewed. Some culturally and racially diverse groups who stay close to their traditions are unlikely to seek outside help for family members with behavior or emotional problems. Along with cultural taboos and reluctance to expose family problem to outsiders, language barriers are a common reason that families

give for avoiding interventions suggested by the school. Self-disclosure and an intense examination of behavior may be experienced as crossing the line of personal and family privacy. School personnel may find themselves discussing how a particular family will not help with the child's behavior problems. The reality may be that the parents cannot speak the language of the school and that their culture does not allow discussion of emotional difficulties. Adding a language difference to the consultation model that uses lots of behavior-speak, and the possibility of misunderstanding and hostility multiplies.

When using a multicultural consultation model to address behavior concerns in the school, it is critical to have a team member who understands the language and the culture of the student and parents. This model raises issues of culture and adjusts the consultation process to better fit the family's cultural and linguistic needs. As school psychologists, special education teachers, counselors, and others who work with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds we need to attend simultaneously to our own perspective and that of the family, and try to build links between those perspectives. In this way we can help students who are English Language Learners be successful in social and emotional development as well as academics. ■

