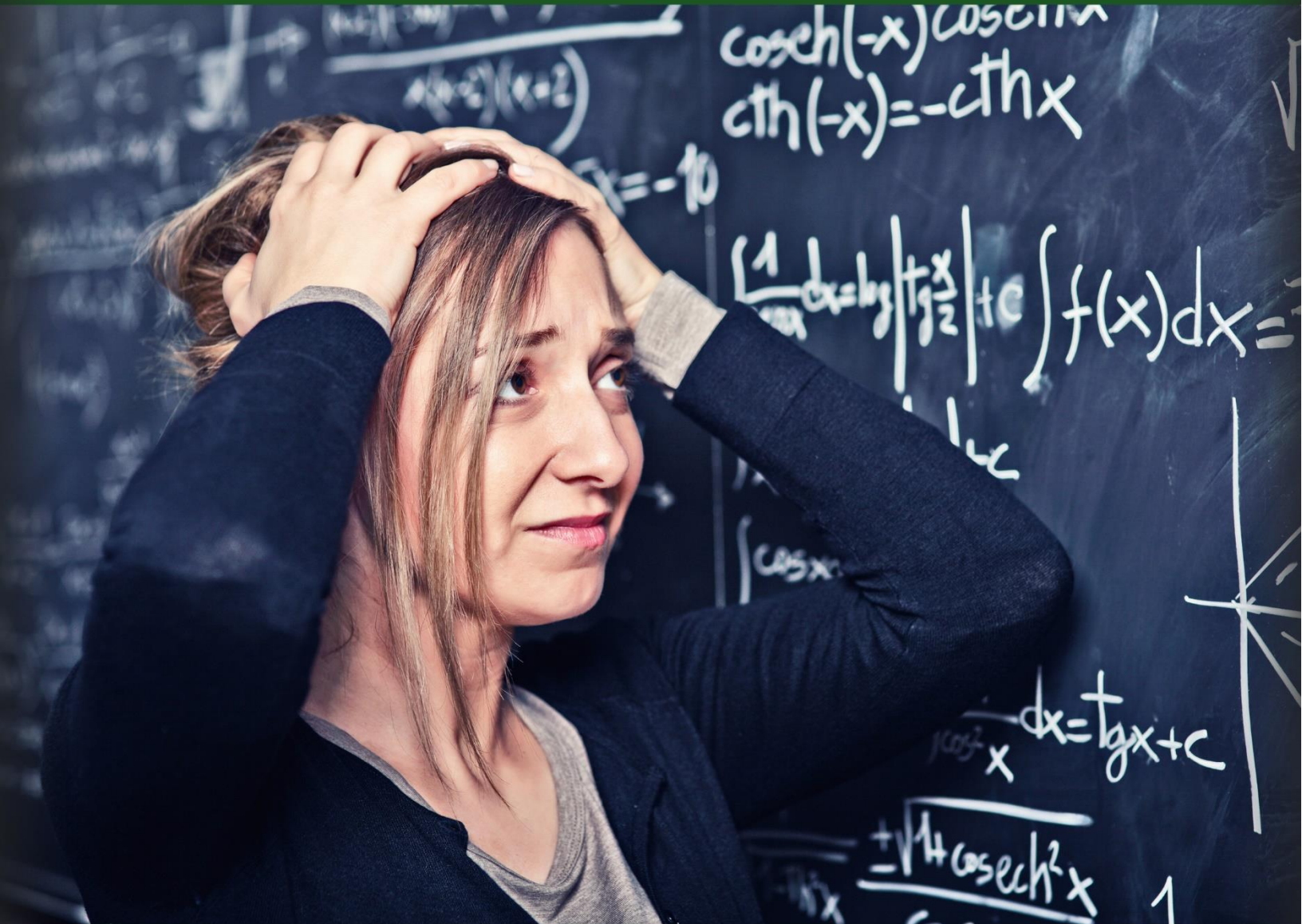


The Life of a Special Education Teacher



by Suzie Dalien, M.Ed

At the beginning of my teaching career, I taught out of an old converted church building located in a run down area of town. The neighboring structures were mostly abandoned, dilapidated and waiting for their day with the wrecking ball. Drug deals were common place both in our parking lot and in the lot of the last standing gas station located next door. The sight of police cars with lights and sirens were a daily, sometimes hourly occurrence.

The majority of the students sent to this school were kicked out of the public system for inappropriate behaviors. Some of these behaviors included hitting the teacher, using or selling drugs and bringing weapons to school. These children were from all walks of life, from sons of high-powered attorneys to daughters of unemployed single mothers. They came from the families of great wealth to the financially struggling and even some living on the streets. These kids were misunderstood by society; they had been forced into a learning environment that didn't fit their needs. Cheated by shrinking budgets and growing class sizes, the public school system could not afford to teach these kids in the way they needed to be taught. If we were unsuccessful in helping these children, they would continue on a path that most certainly led to jail, some type of mental hospital or worse, dead.

This particular year, I was scheduled to have a total of 11 junior high students in my room. Ranging from students with ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder), Autism, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and other forms of special needs. A combination that would most certainly be a great challenge for even the most tenured teacher, let alone a brand new teacher like myself.

The start of the year is completely different when working with students who in a lot of cases act out as a primary mode of communication. In most schools, children start off the new school year talking about summer break and writing reports on summer travel or activities they participated in. Instead, I found myself spending the first day trying to calm kids down and get them back into a routine.



That year there was one particular student who we will call Jordan. He was a bright child who excelled in science and math, but his way of learning and needs were different than his peers. Instead of asking a question, he got upset and acted out in class as his coping mechanism. He seemed to have a lack of respect for anyone who attempted to have a conversation with him and it was evident that he was scared to let anyone in. These are all very common characteristics and behaviors for children with an emotional disability.

The first day I met Jordan, I could tell his defenses were high. As I made my way around the room letting everyone introduce themselves, Jordan was last. The questions I had everyone answer were simple; what's your name? How was your summer? What's your favorite memory? The first phrase out of Jordan's mouth was "F%*k you @itch, I don't have to answer that."

Aside from being caught off guard by his response, I was forced to spend the next 30 minutes calming down the remainder of the class. Luckily, in this case I had read Jordan's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) and knew that a common response he had in public settings was to act out.

He had an emotional disability of which resulted in an inability to control his anger and consistent disrespect of adults. A common sign of children with emotional disabilities is a defense wall; a sense of feeling insecure about the situation and acting out is a natural response.

I was determined to help him. I knew the place to start was breaking down the defense barrier Jordan had become accustomed to. Over the next few weeks, I tirelessly worked to gain his trust by spending extra time with him. Every morning I would greet him when he got off the bus and spent as much time as possible engaging in positive conversations about his life and outside interests. He seemed to enjoy talking to me. After the first three weeks of class and with consistent work and engagement, we finally had our first breakthrough; he stopped referring to me as a @itch.

After about a month of conversation, constant interaction and watching him with his classmates I realized Jordan was desperately seeking positivity. Part of my teaching style is to praise students for most everything, even the smallest acts from raising their hand before talking, helping their peers and saying nice things to others. One of the underlying causes of Jordan's behavior was that he needed positive reinforcement in his life. It seems odd to most people, but the reason children act out is an expression of a deeper issue. It's rare as an example, that a child will throw a temper tantrum because you took one of their toys away. It's usually a deeper issue they are having trouble communicating and the toy was simply the straw that broke the camels back. Since most adolescents are still developing their communication skills, many of them revert back to what they know will get attention. They act out instead of formulating the words to express their true feelings or needs.

As the school year progressed, a good amount of time was spent helping Jordan. It wasn't easy balancing his needs with that of the other 10 students in the class, but somehow it worked. During the first few months, while showing improvement, Jordan would still act out several times a day causing disturbances in the classroom. My teaching assistants and I would constantly praise Jordan for his accomplishments and redirect him when he lost focus. Bottom line, he WAS improving!



A few months into the school year, I stumbled across another massive breakthrough regarding Jordan's behavior. While tracking his IEP goals and the progress he was making, it dawned on me that he was only showing success when he was in a highly structured setting. At that point most of his behaviors were displayed only during PE and lunch where there was more freedom and less structure. The environment in the classroom was much different. I had the rules and expectations posted all over the walls along with the daily schedule. From that moment on, my teaching assistants and I created and enforced structure around PE and lunch specifically. The results were incredible; not only did Jordan's behaviors decrease dramatically, but also ALL behaviors of ALL of my students rapidly decreased within only a few short days! So successful was this newfound structure that years later these expectations and rules still apply to PE and lunch and that school.

Toward the end of the school year, Jordan was excelling in most areas of his school day. At one point, he even told me that he felt important because I understood him. The simple truth is; all I did was give him the 3 things he needed the most; structure, time and praise. By the end of that school year, Jordan was starting to meet his behavior goals on his IEP, which was a massive milestone! At his annual meeting we started talking about the possibility of him transitioning back to the school he previously attended.

Jordan needed to be taught in a way that was different from the norm. In order for him to be successful, he needed structure, time (smaller group, one on one teaching) and positive reinforcements. It wasn't that the information he was taught needed to be different; in Jordan's case it was simply the environment and deliverability of that content that made a world of difference.

The following school year, Jordan met his exit criteria and behavior goals on his IEP. He wasn't perfect (but who is?), there were a few bumps in the road along the way but he pushed himself and did his best. He ended up returning to his previous school and excelled. I guess you could say that Jordan was the first of the success stories I've been fortunate enough to be a part of.