

*Management of Disruptive Behavior*

# The Importance of Teacher Self-Awareness in Working With Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Brent G. Richardson • Margery J. Shupe

What are your primary concerns in the classroom? Are you constantly involved in power struggles with some students? Do you yearn for good relationships with all your students? Are you stressed out? This article may help.

The frequency and intensity of students' emotional and behavioral disorders have increased in the past several decades (Bartollas & Miller, 1998; Knitzer, 1993; Lerner, 1995; Long, Morse, & Newman, 1996). In surveys, teachers consistently reveal that disruptive student behavior and classroom discipline are their primary educational



ize power struggles, and build more positive relationships with children with disabilities by taking proactive steps to increase their own self-awareness. Gold and Roth (1993) identified teacher self-awareness as a key component for managing stress.

Gold and Roth (1993) defined self-awareness as "a process of getting in touch with your feelings and behaviors" (p. 141). Increased self-awareness involves a more accurate understanding of how students affect our own emotional processes and behaviors and how we affect students, as well. Self-aware-

ness is particularly important for teachers who work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Seldom

---

*Our development as teachers depends on our willingness to take stock of our own behavior.*

---

are we unaffected by their behavior. Often, these students reflect the best and worst in ourselves (Richardson, 2001). Our development as teachers depends on our willingness to take risks and regularly ask ourselves which of our own behaviors are helping or hindering our personal and professional growth. "If we could allow ourselves to become students of our own extraordinary self-education, we would be very well placed to facilitate the self-education of others" (Underhill, 1991, p. 79).

This article identifies questions and strategies to help teachers become more self-aware regarding their interactions with students with behavioral and emotional disorders.

---

*Teachers revealed that disruptive student behavior and classroom discipline are their primary educational concerns.*

---

concerns (Long, 1996a). Teachers who work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders can enhance their effectiveness and job satisfaction, mini-

## Five Key Questions to Increase Teacher Self-Awareness

### 1. Am I taking proactive steps to identify and defuse my own “emotional triggers”?

Cheney and Barringer (1995) asserted: “More than any other group, students with emotional and behavioral disorders appear to present problems that affect staff members on a very personal level” (p. 181). Unfortunately, teacher education does not always highlight the connection between a teacher’s self-awareness and his or her ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Although teachers need to learn how to recognize signs of emotional distress in their students, it is equally important to acknowledge that teachers’ own personalities, learned prejudices, and individual psychological histories have helped shape their attitudes and responses to certain behaviors (Long et al., 1996). Fritz Redl, a pioneer in working with students with emotional disturbances, emphasized that self-awareness is a key ingredient for succeeding with this population:

As teachers we have a room, a group, equipment, materials, a curriculum, instructional methods, and grades, but most of all, we have ourselves. What happens to us emotionally in the process of teaching emotionally disturbed kids is the critical factor in determining our effectiveness. (cited in Long, 1996a, p. 44)

Helping youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities begins with understanding ourselves, particularly our own emotional processes that occur in the midst of conflict. Although psychological soundness and effective interpersonal skills are essential characteristics for teachers who work with this population (Kaufman, 1997; Webber, Anderson, & Otey, 1991), certain students can provoke even the most concerned, reasonable, and dedicated teachers to act in impulsive, acrimonious, and rejecting ways (Long, 1996a). Students experiencing stress have the capacity to locate and activate unresolved issues in our own personal

lives. Few of us possess the inner peace to respond in a calm and professional manner without conscious effort. Awareness of our primary emotional triggers improves our chances of making rational decisions based on conscious choice, rather than unconscious emotional conditioning.

---

*Helping youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities begins with understanding ourselves, particularly our own emotional processes that occur in the midst of conflict.*

---

Further, the psychological fit between a teacher’s need to stay in control and a youth’s inability to maintain control can lead to counterproductive power struggles (Long, 1996a). Long asserted that by taking ownership of “negative” feelings such as anger, frustration, and disdain, we are more likely to recognize the difference between having feelings and being had by our feelings. Teachers who are aware of their own emotional processes are more likely to minimize the frequency and intensity of these counterproductive power struggles (see box, “Strategy for Identifying and Defusing Emotional Triggers”).

### 2. Am I paying attention to what I need to pay attention to?

Most teachers recognize the power and necessity of using positive reinforcement (Johns & Carr, 1995). By consciously noticing and reinforcing positive behavior, the classroom becomes a more positive environment—one in which the recognition of both academic and behavioral accomplishments leads to increased student self-esteem (Fagan, 1996). In an extensive study of effective teaching behaviors for students with disabilities, Larrivee (1982) found that “giving positive feedback” to be a behavior positively correlated with student performance measures. Johns and Carr recommended that at least 70% of comments teachers give students should be positive. Although researchers have found teacher praise to be linked to improved behavioral and academic outcomes of students with emotional and behavioral disorders, the use of praise in these classrooms is often low (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001).

---

*Teachers often inadvertently neglect to recognize and build on students’ positive behaviors and strengths.*

---

Good and Brophy (1984) found that teachers’ perceptions of students can

#### Strategy for Identifying and Defusing Emotional Triggers

Take periodic “timeouts” before, during, or after both “positive” and “negative” interactions with students. Ask yourself:

- “What led me to respond this way?”
- “Is this way of responding helping or hurting this relationship?”
- “Is it helping me grow as an educator?”
- “Is it helping the youth make better choices?”

It is important to remember that we are often unaware of our primary emotional triggers. Actively seek consultation from colleagues and supervisors regarding behaviors and/or attitudes which are helping or hurting your effectiveness in the classroom.

Ask a colleague or supervisor:

- “What do you see as my biggest strength in working with students with behavioral and emotional disorders?”
- “What types of problems or student behaviors do I find the most difficult?”

affect teaching outcomes. Teachers who work with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities can become so attuned to problem behaviors and perceived weaknesses, they inadvertently neglect to recognize and build on positive behaviors and strengths. A Minnesota youth poll by Hedin, Hannes, & Saito (as cited in Braaten, 1999) revealed that two thirds of respondents believed that they were perceived negatively by the significant adults in their lives. Only 25% believed that adults held positive images of them. Furthermore, a large proportion did not believe the adults' perceptions of them to be accurate. The researchers concluded that the youths believe that adults do not value or trust them and do not treat them with respect, and this belief increases as the youths grow older. In their study of teacher behaviors, Sutherland and Wehby (2001) found that ongoing teacher self-assessment had a positive impact on teacher praise.

The Penny Transfer Technique is one strategy teachers can use to help them

---

***People often expect teachers to assume not only academic roles, but also those of instructional model, disciplinarian, surrogate parent, social worker, and counselor.***

---

shift their focus to more positive student behaviors and attributes (see box, "Strategy for Shifting Your Focus").

### **Strategy for Shifting Your Focus (The Penny Transfer Technique)**

Take five pennies and place them in your left pocket. Identify a student in your classroom who regularly needs to be redirected. Ideally, this should be a student whom you find difficult to engage. Every time you are able to verbally encourage that student for something he or she does well, transfer a penny to your right pocket. It is important to avoid phony or superficial affirmations (e.g., "I like your new jeans"). Your goal is to move all five pennies to the right pocket by the end of the day. Repeat this exercise each day for 2 weeks. (Note: You may need to use less pennies or extend the timeframe several days if you are only with the student one period.)

Richardson (2001) noted that professionals who have used the Penny Transfer Technique have found that (a) they began to automatically notice positive behaviors of problem students and (b) they were able to change their perceptions and thus improve their relationships with these youth.

### **3. Am I using effective strategies to reduce burnout and nurture my own mental health?**

Teaching students with emotional and behavioral disorders is one of the most perplexing and challenging roles in education (Cheney & Barringer, 1995). These teachers are faced with enormous pressures and simultaneous challenges (Cheney & Barringer; Pullis, 1992) and report high levels of emotional exhaustion (Male & May, 1997). They are eval-

uated primarily on their ability to help students make tangible, academic improvements (Long, 1996b); yet they are also expected to assume multiple roles, such as model, disciplinarian, surrogate parent, social worker, and counselor.

Many teachers find it difficult to perform all these roles in the midst of decreasing budgets and increasing class sizes. Teachers find themselves struggling to find time to adequately cover each of the learning objectives while also attending to the emotional needs of their students. Teacher stress can adversely affect the teachers, their students, and the classroom climate. Cheney and Barringer (1995) found that stress "can be manifested as (a) a reluc-

---

***We must develop effective strategies for regularly monitoring and managing our own stress.***

---

tance to consider factors beyond the immediately observable behavior of the student, and (b) a rigid focus on school rules as a way of coping with problematic social interactions" (p. 181).

To survive and thrive in the classroom, teachers who work with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities must develop effective strategies for regularly monitoring and managing their own stress.

Teachers need safe places to express their feelings and frustrations and recharge their emotional batteries. In a survey of special education teachers, Pullis (1992) found that talking with supportive colleagues is one of the most effective coping strategies. In fact, 96% of teachers rated collaborating and talking with special education colleagues as one of their most effective strategies for coping with stress (see box, "Strategy for Reducing Burnout and Nurturing Teacher Mental Health").

We need to recognize the difference, however, between the need to vent and a pattern of negativity and complaining. Assessing our results will help us make this distinction. Venting is only helping us if we are actually *venting* pent-up

### **Strategy for Reducing Burnout and Nurturing Teacher Mental Health**

Recognize the difference between productive venting and an unproductive pattern of negativity and complaining. Take time to assess your conversations with friends and colleagues about your classroom and students. Ask yourself whether these conversations are helping to reduce or amplify your stress level. Periodically gauge your feelings and coping skills and seek out positive models.

Stop and ask yourself, "What is your vision for the children and youth that you teach?" If necessary, explore new strategies (e.g., exercising, seeking professional help, reframing student behavior, finding humor in potentially humorous situations, commending yourself for ways you are making a difference) for managing your stress and increasing your own morale.

feelings. If this process only adds to our stress level and frustration, we might want to employ a different strategy. A pattern of “unproductive venting” in the teacher’s lounge, in the copy room, at lunch breaks, and at home is often the most foreboding precursor to burnout. We must regularly assess our coping skills and seek out positive colleagues and role models who will engage in supportive, constructive dialogue.

#### **4. Am I using an appropriate sense of humor to build relationships, diffuse conflict, engage learners, and manage my own stress?**

A number of educators have stressed that an appropriate sense of humor is absolutely essential for long-term success in working with youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (Richardson, 2001; Tobin, 1991, Webber et al., 1991). These students often are trying to make sense out of a variety of highly charged emotional stressors (e.g., poor reading skills, changing family structure, parental abuse and neglect) and will likely direct their hurt and frustration at teachers and peers. Students need to be held accountable for their behavior. If we take their actions personally or too seriously, however, we place ourselves at risk for both overreacting and burnout. Teachers want to approach their jobs diligently and sincerely; however, we need to recognize when we are taking ourselves, our students, or our jobs too seriously.

---

*An appropriate sense of humor is an effective strategy for engaging students who seem to be disengaged.*

---

While working as a high school counselor, one of the authors was informed that 80% of the disciplinary referrals to the assistant principal came from only 10% of the teachers. When asked if there were commonalities among those teachers, the assistant principal remarked,

They all seem to take themselves and their jobs too seriously. They seem unhappy when they teach. Ironically, while they have very little tolerance for “acting-out” behaviors, students tend to act out more in their classrooms.

On the other hand, “teachers with a sense of humor are usually happy, relaxed, fun-loving, and reinforcing to others” (Webber et al., 1991, p. 291). A recent study supported these observations. Talbot and Lumden (2000) found that teachers who were more likely to use humor in their classroom reported lower emotional exhaustion and a higher sense of personal accomplishment.

Also, many writers have pointed out that an appropriate sense of humor is an effective strategy for engaging students who seem to be disengaged (Johns & Carr, 1995; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1997; Webber et al., 1991). These authors also noted that humor is also one of the most effective means of de-escalating potential crisis situations. Webber et al. observed that it is difficult for a student to continue to act aggressively or destructively while he or she is laughing. Crowley (1993) interviewed students with severe behavioral disorders regarding helpful teacher attitudes and behaviors and found that these students repeatedly talked about

the relevance of humor in the classroom.

Victor Borge, the comedian, could have been talking about educators and students when he said, “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” Sultanoff (1999) asserted, “One of the greatest potential gifts we can provide for children is to present ourselves as “humor beings.” By living with a humorous perspective, we teach children to effectively manage life’s challenges with far less stress” (p. 2).

---

*Humor that heals is sensitive, is good natured, defuses difficult situations, and brings people closer together.*

---

Having a sense of humor in the classroom is less about telling jokes and more about maintaining a relaxed and upbeat attitude and outlook about our jobs and life’s bizarre twists. Teachers who have an appropriate sense of humor convey to their students that they enjoy their jobs, like their students, relish playful exchanges, and do not take themselves too seriously. Most importantly, they recognize the difference between humor that hurts and

#### **Strategies for Assessing Our Ability to Use an Appropriate Sense of Humor**

To assess whether you might be incorporating an appropriate sense of humor into your classroom, periodically ask yourself the following questions:

- “How often do I laugh as I teach?”
- “Do students seem to enjoy learning in my classroom?”
- “For the most part, do I enjoy working with students with behavioral and emotional disorders?”
- “Do I use humor as a technique to defuse difficult situations or avoid potential power struggles?”
- “Does humor used in my classroom (by me or my students) tend to bring people closer together or push them further away?”

Based on your responses to these questions, it may be helpful to seek consultation or additional resources to more effectively incorporate humor into the classroom. Also, remember that qualifying language was used in these questions (“for the most part,” “tend to”). You do not need to inject humor into every lesson plan or difficult situation. An honest self-assessment, however, will likely provide you with direction regarding areas where a change in attitude or behavior may be helpful.

humor that heals. Richardson (2001) noted that humor that hurts is sarcastic, caustic, and pushes people away from one another, whereas humor that heals is sensitive, good natured, defuses difficult situations, and brings people closer together. As educators, we need to periodically assess our use of humor in the classroom and make adjustments when warranted (see box, “Strategies for Assessing Our Ability to Use an Appropriate Sense of Humor”).

### 5. Do I regularly acknowledge significant ways I (and others) are making a difference in the lives of students?

In conducting workshops for professionals who work with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities, one of the authors shared the following story of a young boy rescuing starfish on the beach:

A young boy was walking along the beach in the middle of a sweltering, summer day. As the tide was retreating, he noticed thousands of starfish washed up on the dry sand. As the boy began throwing starfish back into the ocean, a man was passing by and said, “Son, look how many there are—you will never make a difference.” Smiling, the boy looked at the starfish in his hand, threw it into the ocean, and declared, “I’ll make a difference to that one.”

The plight of students with disabilities is analogous to starfish washed up on the dry sand. It is easy to become paralyzed by the magnitude of the task and fail to recognize ways teachers are making a difference. It is easy to allow negative television newscasts, periodic setbacks, and seemingly unappreciative students and adults to discolor our perceptions and rob us of the idealism that propelled us to be a teacher. It is also easy to become so busy attending meetings and attending to students, we fail to attend to ourselves and our colleagues. Because of professional role demands, teachers of students with behavioral and emotional disabilities are frequently isolated from interaction with colleagues and particularly suscep-

### Strategy for Recognizing Difference Makers: The Starfish Calendar

This technique is similar to the “Penny Transfer Technique”; however, the objective is to recognize the positive behavior of teachers. First, find a calendar. Draw and cut out pictures of yellow and orange starfish. When you recognize another educator making a difference (e.g., taking extra time after class, encouraging a student to talk to their counselor, using a creative intervention), communicate in some way that you appreciate their efforts.

Then, write a brief description of the behavior on a yellow starfish and paste it on the date in your Starfish Calendar. At the end of the day, identify a specific way you made a difference, and paste an orange starfish in the calendar. Make a conscious effort to find one yellow and one orange starfish each day. This should only take a few minutes. If you happen to miss a day, try to find two the following day.

tible to this symptom of burnout (Zabel, Boomer, & King, 1984).

Kaufman and Wong (1991) found that teachers who perceive themselves as having the ability to bring about desired student results are more likely to perceive their students as teachable and worthy of their attention and effort. One study defined teacher efficacy as “the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance” (Bergman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977, p. 137). These teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy were also less likely to personalize the misbehaviors of students and more likely to maintain an attitude of tolerance for difficult students. Recognizing ways that they and others are making a difference can affect the teachers’ perceived self-efficacy (see box, “Strategy for Recognizing Difference Makers”).

Although many teachers make a habit of overextending themselves, burnout is just as likely to result from a persistent feeling that they are not truly making a difference. The Starfish Calendar (see box) is one simple way to encourage ourselves and others to be proactive in acknowledging the contributions of teachers.

### Final Thoughts

Many teachers have not received adequate training to recognize how their own psychological histories and personalities affect their interactions with youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Although the success of educators to reach and teach these young people depends on many factors (e.g., frequency and intensity of student

behaviors, organizational structure, administrative support), this article focused on an important area in which teachers have more direct control—increasing their own self-awareness.

Many goals outlined here are challenging and may not be fully attainable. As vulnerable human beings, teachers will never discover all their emotional triggers, build positive relationships with every student, or completely avoid counterproductive power struggles. If teachers make conscious, ongoing efforts to increase their own self-awareness, they will likely enhance their effectiveness and their job satisfaction. Teachers who are willing to take prudent risks and try new strategies will inevitably make some mistakes. We need to view past conflict and unsuccessful interventions as helpful feedback, rather than personal failure. We must remember that the overall attitude of the teacher and the classroom climate affect students much more than most other techniques or interactions.

### References

- Bartollas, C., & Miller, S. J. (1998). *Juvenile justice in America* (2nd. ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bergman, P., McLaughlin, M., Bass, M., Pauly, E., & Zellman, G. (1977). *Federal programs supporting educational change: Vol. VII. Factors affecting implementation and continuation*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 335 341)
- Braaten, J. L. (1999). Self-concept and behavior disorders. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39(1), 218-225.
- Cheney, D., & Barringer, C. (1995). Teacher competence, student diversity, and staff training for the inclusion of middle school students with emotional and behavioral

- disorders. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 3(3), 174-182.
- Crowley, E. P. (1993). Reflections on "A qualitative analysis of mainstreamed behaviorally disordered aggressive adolescents' perceptions of helpful and unhelpful teacher attitudes and behaviors." *Exceptionality*, 4(3), 187-191.
- Fagan, S. A. (1996). Fifteen teacher intervention skills for managing classroom behavior problems. In N. Long, W. C. Morse, & R. G. Newman (Eds.), *Conflict in the classroom: The education of at-risk and troubled students* (5th ed., pp. 273-287). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Gold, Y., & Roth, R. A. (1993). *Teachers managing stress and preventing burnout: The professional health solution*. Washington, DC: The Falmer Press.
- Good, T. L., & Brophy, J. E. (1984). *Looking in classrooms* (3rd. ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Johns, B. H., & Carr, V. G. (1995). *Techniques for managing verbally and aggressive students*. Denver: Love.
- Kaufman, J. M. (1997). *Characteristics of behavior disorders of children and youth* (6th ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Kaufman, J. M., & Wong, K. L. (1991). Effective teachers of students with behavioral disorders: Are generic teaching skills enough? *Behavioral Disorders*, 16(3), 225-237.
- Knitzer, J. (1993). Children's mental health policy: Challenging the future. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 1(1), 8-16.
- Larrivee, B. (1982). Identifying effective teaching behaviors for mainstreaming. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 5, 2-6.
- Lerner, R. M. (1995). *America's youth in crisis: Challenges and options for programs and policies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Long, N. (1996a). The conflict cycle paradigm on how troubled students get teachers out of control. In N. Long, W. C. Morse, & R. G. Newman (Eds.), *Conflict in the classroom: The education of at-risk and troubled students* (5th ed., pp. 244-265). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Long, N. (1996b). Inclusion of emotionally disturbed students: Formula for failure or opportunity for new acceptance. In N. Long, W. C. Morse, & R. G. Newman (Eds.), *Conflict in the classroom: The education of at-risk and troubled students* (5th ed., pp. 116-126). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Long, N., Morse, W. C., & Newman, R. G. (Eds.). (1996). *Conflict in the classroom: The education of at-risk and troubled students* (5th ed.). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Male, D. B., & May, D. (1997). Stress, burnout and workload in teachers of children with special education needs. *British Journal of Special Education*, 24(3), 133-140.
- Pullis, M. (1992). An analysis of the occupational stress of teachers of the behaviorally disordered: Sources, effects, and strategies for coping. *Behavioral Disorders*, 17(3), 191-201.
- Richardson, B. G. (2001). *Working with challenging youth: Lessons learned along the way*. Philadelphia, PA: Brunner-Routledge.
- Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Sommers-Flanagan, R. (1997). *Tough kids, cool counseling*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Sultanoff, S. M. (1999). President's column. *Therapeutic Humor*, 13(4), 2.
- Sutherland, K. S., & Wehby, J. H. (2001). The effect of self-evaluation on teaching behavior in classrooms for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *The Journal of Special Education*, 35(3), 161-171.
- Talbot, L. A., & Lumden, D. B. (2000). On the association between humor and burnout. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 13, 419-428.
- Tobin, L. (1991). *What to do with a child like this? Inside the lives of troubled children*. Deluth, MN: Whole Person Associates.
- Underhill, A. (1991). The role of groups in developing teacher self-awareness. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 46(1), 71-80.
- Webber, J., Anderson, T., & Otey, L. (1991). Teacher mindsets for surviving in BD classrooms. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 26, 288-292.
- Zabel, R. H., Boomer, L. W., & King, T. R. (1984). A model of stress and burnout among teachers of behaviorally disordered students. *Behavioral Disorders*, 9(3), 215-221.

**Brent G. Richardson**, Associate Professor; and **Margery J. Shupe**, Assistant Professor, Education Department, Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Address correspondence to Brent G. Richardson, Education Department, Xavier University, Cincinnati, OH 45207-6612 (e-mail: Richardb@xu.edu).

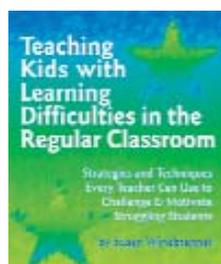
TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 8-13.

Copyright 2003 CEC.

## Available from CEC

### Teaching Kids With Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom Strategies and Techniques Every Teacher Can Use to Challenge and Motivate Struggling Students

Susan Winebrenner

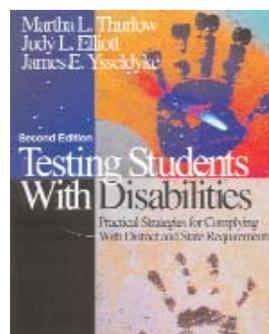


Start using this book on the first day of school with the first chapter on making all students welcome in your class! More than 50 reproducible pages of useful forms will make your job easier. Winebrenner, a skilled classroom teacher, also gives concise explanations of various learning differences you may encounter in your inclusive classroom and presents proven techniques for dealing with diverse learning styles, language, literacy, science, math, social studies, behavior problems, and much more. 1996, 248 pages. ISBN 1-57542-004-X

#5188 .....\$29.95

### Testing Students With Disabilities Practical Strategies for Complying With District and State Requirements, 2nd Edition

Martha L. Thurlow, Judy L. Elliott, & James E. Ysseldyke



This guide explains how to decide which tests students with disabilities should take; what assessment accommodations are, their purpose, and who is eligible for them; how to blend the assessment process with the student's IEP; and more. Two sections give very useful reproducible forms and suggestions for staff development. 2002, 344 pages.

ISBN 0-7619-3809-5

#5578 .....\$49.95/CEC Members \$34.95