



Austin, V., & Sciarra, D. (2016). *Difficult students and disruptive behavior in the classroom: Teacher responses that work*. New York: W.W. Norton.

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Approximately 8.3 million children (14.5%) aged 4-17 years have parents who have talked with health care providers or school staff about their child's emotional or behavioral difficulties, resulting in 2.9 million children receiving prescription medication for these difficulties (Simpson, Cohen, Pastor, & Reuben, 2008). Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) requires that students with disabilities have access to general education and receive individually designed instruction appropriate to their academic and behavioral needs. Pairing behavioral challenges presented by students with teachers that have had little training on behavioral supports is a significant factor in teachers leaving the profession (Billingsley, Crockett, & Kamman, 2014). In the United States challenging behavior impacts some students beyond the classroom, and incarceration rates for U.S. juveniles are the largest in the world. Of incarcerated youth, 85% have disabilities that make them eligible for special education services; yet only 37% received these services

DIFFICULT STUDENTS & DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR in the CLASSROOM

TEACHER RESPONSES THAT WORK



Vance Austin | Daniel Sciarra

while in school (National Council on Disability, 2015). The cost of incarceration is much higher than the cost of specialized supports in schools for these students. Although statistics and research on behavioral challenges and their impact on student success appear to be insurmountable, Vance Austin and Daniel Sciarra, authors of *Difficult Student and Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom: Teacher Responses that Work* provide a comprehensive framework for teachers dealing with the most frequent and challenging student behaviors.

The authors trajectory in special education and psychology is evidenced in the insights offered in their book. Vance Austin is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Special Education at Manhattanville College, and Daniel Sciarra is a psychologist, Professor of Counselor Education, and Director of Counseling programs at Hofstra University. As a researcher in classroom behavior management, applied behavior analysis, and special education teacher preparation charged with preparing current and future special educators to work with students that present challenging behavior in schools, I was personally enticed by the title of the book. My experiences as a middle school resource teacher, a self-contained high school teacher, and as a one-on-one behavior support provider for children with autism allows a distinctive perspective from which to analyze approaches to supporting student with difficult and disruptive behaviors in classrooms. Reviewing this book offered the opportunity to examine student behavior from multiple theoretical backgrounds, particularly from attachment theory.

Difficult Student and Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom is organized into four distinct sections (i.e., introduction, attachment theory, principle of pedagogy, teacher response for students with challenging behaviors). In the introduction, the authors present a manifesto for good teaching. According to the authors, good teaching encompasses three key

elements: (a) relationship building, (b) pedagogical skill, and (c) subject knowledge. In this book the authors focus on two of these elements: (a) the quality of the teacher-student relationship, best understood through attachment theory, and (b) the development of a sound pedagogical schema. Through these two elements the authors provide a framework to address the Nines. The Nines refer to the nine most challenging behaviors teachers typically encounter in the classrooms that include students with disruptive disorders, anxiety disorders, mood disorders, eating-disorders, students who bully and are bullied, victims of bias in the classroom, survivors of suicide, high-functioning autism and social skill deficits, and impulsivity.

Attachment theory and principles of pedagogy (Refs), build the foundation for the remainder of the book. Attachment theory focuses on a teacher or student's early experiences with their primary attachment figure, where a secure or insecure attachment style is developed that can affect their academic and social development later in life. Thankfully, the authors point out that environmental effects are stronger than genetic effects on attachment styles. This is good news for teachers that are working with difficult students. Secure students have better academic outcomes compared to insecure students and teachers can act as attachment figures for difficult children.

Next, the authors discuss principles of pedagogy for teachers of students with challenging behaviors. In order to discuss effective pedagogy the authors present a comprehensive analysis of pedagogical principles based on their thorough analysis of the literature, and then the authors present their framework consisting of six essential elements of an effective pedagogical framework.

Element one is to define and provide pedagogy relative to teaching children. Element two ensures the framework provides

a schema for the development of a teacher's pedagogy and is not a prescriptive manual. The third element is to acknowledge and articulate the vitality of one's role, as a teaching professional, in contributing to the development of children and adolescents. Recognizing the importance of the culture and social contexts of your students comprises element four. Element five states that teachers should be prepared and equipped to motivate, entice, and inspire their students to learn, and accept their part in many aspects of their students' development, including body, emotion, and spirit, as well as intellect. Finally, element six is about embracing the view that teachers are lifelong learners, and share a passion for learning.

The final section contains vignettes for each of the nine challenging behaviors, and examples of how teachers with different attachment styles might respond to the challenging situations described in each vignette. Additionally, the authors describe *why* teachers need to know about "The Nines" from an attachment and pedagogical perspectives, *what* teachers need to know about "The Nines" from each perspective, *who* the individuals are in each of the vignettes from both perspectives, as well as providing several suggestions on *how* teachers might respond to a child displaying each of the nine challenging behaviors. The overarching theme across each of the nine challenging behaviors frequently encountered by teachers is that the attachment quality between teachers and students is the key to successful interventions.

In my experience when special education teachers, general education teachers, administrators, and district personnel devise a plan to support a student presenting difficult and disruptive behaviors the focus is almost always on the student and rarely on the behavior of teachers. Austin and Sciarra take a drastically different approach to working with students that display the above-mentioned challenging behaviors. The focus, and rightfully so, should be on what teachers need

to do to create supportive relationships that can foster environments that lead to successful situations for students with difficult and disruptive behaviors. Austin and Sciarra state,

Approaching problem behaviors in a student-focused manner ignores one-half of the relational equation, which suggests that the teacher doesn't need to be self-reflective and honest about her or his strengths and weaknesses. The very real problem with this perspective is that it fails to acknowledge the fact that the teacher and student are always in a relationships with each other, and that all relationships are recursive, the teacher's cultural influences as well as her emotional and psychological states are as important to the quality of the relationship as the student's (p. 231).

Despite the comprehensive descriptions of attachment theory, principles of effective pedagogical principles (what teacher need to know and do), and presentation of effective teacher approaches, the authors do fall short in two areas. While they provide several effective strategies for responding to difficult students, the authors fail to thoroughly describe *how* teachers should do this, leaving the readers to figure out the implementation end of the teacher responses. Also, they ignore the importance of using data to make decisions on the strategies they are implementing and how to obtain this data. Decision-making for students with learning and behavioral difficulties often involves the use of ongoing progress data. Before using data to inform their instruction, teachers must understand and interpret progress graphs; yet people vary in their ability to understand and interpret graphs, often experiencing difficulty with interpreting even simple graphs (Espin, Wayman, McMaster, Deno, & Rooji, 2017). Without data and the ability to interpret that data, teachers are unable to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of what they are doing to support students.

All in all, *Difficult Students and Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom: Teacher Responses that Work* offers important insights on challenging student behaviors, with a special focus on the roots of those challenging behaviors. The book is also timely due to the proliferation of challenging behaviors in classroom, which is a large factor in the exodus of educators from the profession. Special education teachers working with students with emotional disturbances experience burnout, one correlate of teacher attrition, at crisis proportions

(Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997), as well as general education teachers (Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). The ability for teachers to recognize how their own behavior and actions influence student behavior is a critical skill that all teachers need to be aware of and a skill that is worth investing in. The framework for working with challenging students provided in *Difficult Student and Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom* is a beacon of light in the sometimes-stormy seas of education.

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