

# **Emotions and Education**

Promoting Positive Mental Health in  
Students with Learning Disabilities

**Nicholas D. Young  
Christine N. Michael  
Teresa A. Citro**

**Vernon Series in Education**



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# Preface

*Emotions and Education: Promoting Positive Mental Health in Students with Learning Disabilities* was written for practitioners and educators, classroom teachers, staff, and school administrators, as well as parents and students with learning disabilities themselves. This is a book for those who are deeply invested in seeing students with learning disabilities succeed, and succeed at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. While this book largely focuses on understanding the role that emotions and social development play in education, it does so with an acute awareness that these realms may pose unique challenges for children and adolescents with learning disabilities. Much has been written about the academic and cognitive aspects of supporting students with learning disabilities, but few scholars and practitioners have focused their writings on the incredibly important nature of emotional, social, and relational elements of learning.

The motivation for writing this book comes from several concerns:

- *Our belief that all students' socioemotional needs should be at the forefront of teaching and learning;*
- *Our concern about the troubling numbers of students with learning disabilities who are not fulfilling their academic, social, and career potentials;*
- *Our understanding that levels of anxiety, depression, social aggression and other mental health problems are rising, both in society in general, and in our schools, in particular;*
- *Our knowledge that the development of healthy prosocial skills in students with learning disabilities may entail employing different strategies and materials than for non-disabled students;*
- *Our awareness that there are myriad ways in which promoting positive mental health and academic success increase the likelihood that students will thrive in both arenas;*
- *Our years of experience in educating parents, teachers, school counselors, and other helping professionals that has led to the recognition that there is age-specific knowledge*

*that could assist these key partners in building resilience and self-advocacy in students with learning disabilities;*

- *Our interest in identifying and sharing best practices that lead to academic, personal, mental health, and social success for students with learning disabilities.*

Parents, teachers and others involved in the lives of secondary school students often struggle with the delicate balance of encouraging adolescents to achieve a greater sense of autonomy and independence and inculcating those skills, values and attitudes that they prize before they launch their children into young adulthood. This is no less true of those who support students with learning disabilities, yet the challenges may be even greater, as the support systems so carefully constructed in K-12 settings give way to the greater independence of the college campus. Post-secondary students with learning disabilities may be more reticent to ask for help, and those who care about them may feel less knowledgeable about how to support their academic, career and socioemotional development at this age. This book hopes to provide some suggestions to address these challenges.

Adolescence into young adulthood is a time of many transitions for secondary school students trying to navigate it. By recognizing the nature of this developmental period, educators, caregivers, and other helping professionals can promote pro-social development. Building students' sense of efficacy through improved skills and offering them opportunities to work through developmental issues and personal challenges prior to arriving on the college campus are things that all of us can do. Creating a strong cadre of Students with learning disabilities who can persist to successful college graduation requires school, community, and home commitment.

The concerns noted above are the focal points of the chapters of this book. We have tried to balance theory, research, and data-driven best practice, as we depict the socioemotional and mental health tasks that Students with learning disabilities face and the strategies that may assist them. This book takes a multifaceted approach in that it marries social, emotional, mental health, and transitional components of the K-16 spectrum.

Written by an experienced team of practitioners and scholars, this text attempts to fill the gap in texts that specifically address the needs of Students with learning disabilities in the socioemotional and mental health domains. By providing a foundational

understanding of some of the salient issues facing students with learning disabilities, we hope to empower all of those who are working to ensure their success by providing the particular challenges that Students with learning disabilities and their families may face, and strategies and best practices for building creativity, resiliency, prosocial behavior, and positive mental health. As a practitioner and family-oriented text, this book seeks to offer a truncated review of relevant literature followed by suggestions to guide practice.

It is our hope that all who occupy powerful places in the education and development of students with learning disabilities will find valuable strategies to augment their knowledge base, skills, attitudes, and habits. By providing contact information for each of the chapter authors, we wish to encourage readers to reach out to them for further information or to engage in dialogue about what they themselves have found to be successful in their practice.



## Chapter 1

# Everybody Belongs: Structuring Positive Environments

Kristi L. Santi, Jacqueline Hawkins,  
Caroline Christensen, *University of Houston*

The history of special education legislation can be tied directly to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. During this time, the movement to end discrimination and segregation of any kind helped people with disabilities gain access to both education and work opportunities for which they were previously denied. The disability rights movement secured federal protections with the enactment of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 whereby the federal government tied the use of federal funds to the recipient's actions regarding discrimination based on disability.

Of particular importance to education was Section 504 of the Act, which contains a broader definition of what constitutes a disability. In 1975, Congress made a more concrete bid to help students with disabilities gain access to the public education system with the passage of The Education for All Handicapped Children Act or PL 94-142. In subsequent revisions, the title was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and services were broadened and better defined. While not getting into the legislative process of the laws, it is helpful to provide a quick review of the legislation that has helped pave the way to the concept we present: Everybody belongs!

### **Current State of the Educational Environment**

Students with disabilities have made great strides in general education settings over the past 40 years. Federal statistics show that we continue to move forward as a society with the intent of including all individuals in the general education setting. As evidenced by the fact that in the 2012-13 academic year, almost all students (95%), ages six through 21, served under IDEA – Part B, were educated in general education classrooms for some portion of the academic day.

More encouraging is that more than 60% were specifically being educated inside the general education class at least 80% of the academic day (USDOE, 2015).

Disability rates as a percentage of total enrollment overall remain steady (13.3 in 2000 to 12.9 in 2012); however, there is a shift in the classification category for students. For example, SLD has moved from 45.4 percent of students served in 2000 to 35.4 percent in 2013, whereas autism moved from 1.5 percent to 7.8 percent (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Thus, while the number of students classified under the Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) category has a downward trend as a percent of the total school enrollment (6.1 in 2000-01 to 4.6 in 2012-13), this category remains the most prevalent in terms of the percentage of the distribution of students served (45.4% in 1979-80 to 35.4 in 2012-2013) with speech and language impairment second (20.9 to 21.1) (Snyder, deBrey, Dillow, 2016).

SLD is only one of thirteen disability categories under IDEA and we know from the above statistics that students with classifications other than SLD are being educated in the general education classroom setting. SLD, like the other categories, is a heterogeneous group and the 'one-size fits all' approach will not work in any classroom setting. The SLD definition as stated in IDEA as law 20 U.S.C. §1401 [30]. is a disorder in:

...one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (Great Schools, 2017).

This definition is broad in scope, and to qualify, schools need to have a data-driven approach to show a student's lack of response to evidence-based instruction using a variety of assessment and instructional strategies. Within each category of disability, there is a continuum of ability levels. The range, while typically defined into three categories of mild, moderate, and severe, is a point of reference and not yet one more mechanism to be used as a method of

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## About the Primary Authors

### **Nicholas D. Young, PhD, EdD**

Dr. Nicholas D. Young has worked in diverse educational roles for more than 28 years, serving as a principal, special education director, graduate professor, graduate program director, graduate dean, and longtime superintendent of schools. He was named the Massachusetts Superintendent of the Year; and he completed a distinguished Fulbright program focused on the Japanese educational system through the collegiate level. Dr. Young is the recipient of numerous other honors and recognitions including the General Douglas MacArthur Award for distinguished civilian and military leadership and the Vice Admiral John T. Hayward Award for exemplary scholarship. He holds several graduate degrees including a PhD in educational administration and an EdD in educational psychology.

Dr. Young has served in the U.S. Army and U.S. Army Reserves combined for over 33 years; and he graduated with distinction from the U.S. Air War College, the U.S. Army War College, and the U.S. Navy War College. After completing a series of senior leadership assignments in the U.S. Army Reserves as the commanding officer of the 287th Medical Company (DS), the 405th Area Support Company (DS), the 405th Combat Support Hospital, and the 399 Combat Support Hospital, he transitioned to his current military position as a faculty instructor at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, PA. He currently holds the rank of Colonel.

Dr. Young is also a regular presenter at state, national, and international conferences; and has written many books, book chapters, and/or articles on various topics in education, counseling, and psychology. Some of his most recent books include *Wrestling with Writing: Effective Strategies for Struggling Students* (in press); *From Lecture Hall to Laptop: Opportunities, Challenges, and the Continuing Evolution of Virtual Learning in Higher Education* (2017); *The Power of the Professoriate: Demands, Challenges, and Opportunities in 21st Century Higher Education* (2017); *To Campus with Confidence: Supporting the Successful Transition to College for Students with Learning Disabilities* (2017), *Paving the Pathway for*

*Educational Success: Effective Classroom Interventions for Students with Learning Disabilities* (in-press) *Floundering to Fluent: Reaching and Teaching the Struggling Student* (in-press); *Educational Entrepreneurship: Promoting Public-Private Partnerships for the 21st Century* (2015), *Beyond the Bedtime Story: Promoting Reading Development during the Middle School Years* (2015), *Betwixt and Between: Understanding and Meeting the Social and Emotional Developmental Needs of Students During the Middle School Transition Years* (2014), *Learning Style Perspectives: Impact Upon the Classroom* (3rd ed., 2014); and *Collapsing Educational Boundaries from Preschool to PhD: Building Bridges Across the Educational Spectrum* (2013), *Transforming Special Education Practices: A Primer for School Administrators and Policy Makers* (2012), and *Powerful Partners in Student Success: Schools, Families and Communities* (2012). He also co-authored several children's books to include the popular series *I am Full of Possibilities*. Dr. Young may be contacted directly at nyoung1191@aol.com.

#### **Christine N. Michael, PhD**

Dr. Christine N. Michael is a more than 40-year educational veteran with a variety of professional experiences. She holds degrees from Brown University, Rhode Island College, Union Institute and University, and the University of Connecticut, where she earned a PhD in education, human development, and family relations. Her previous work has included middle and high school teaching, higher education administration, college teaching, and educational consulting. She has also been involved with Head Start, Upward Bound, national non-profits Foundation for Excellent Schools and College for Every Student, and the federal Trio programs, and has published widely on topics in education and psychology. Her most recent works included serving as a primary author on the book *To Campus with Confidence: Supporting the Successful Transition to College for Students with Learning Disabilities* (2017), *Beyond the Bedtime Story: Promoting Reading Development during the Middle School Years* (2015), *Betwixt and Between: Understanding and Meeting the Social and Emotional Development Needs of Students During the Middle School Transition Years* (2014), and *Powerful Partners in Student Success: Schools, Families and Communities* (2012). She is currently the Program Director of Low Residency Programs at American International College. Dr. Michael may be contacted at cnevadam@gmail.com.

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