

10-1-2001

## Using Thematic Units to Decrease Problematic Behavior in Students

Amy Stevens Griffith  
*The University of Texas at Tyler*

Nancy Spence Horton  
*The University of Texas at Tyler*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)



Part of the Education Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Griffith, A. S., & Horton, N. S. (2001). Using Thematic Units to Decrease Problematic Behavior in Students. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 42 (1). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol42/iss1/7](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol42/iss1/7)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



# **Using Thematic Units to Decrease Problematic Behavior in Students**

**Amy Stevens Griffith**

**Nancy Spence Horton**

The University of Texas at Tyler

## **Abstract**

Many students in general education classrooms exhibit problematic behavior at some point during their academic careers. These students often have special learning needs in reading instruction and instructional emphasis on appropriate behavior. Using thematic units for reading and language arts instruction can improve these students' reading skills and help students with problematic behavior learn more appropriate standards of conduct at the same time.

Nationwide, teachers are noticing an increase in the number of students who exhibit problematic behavior in general education classrooms. Often teachers seek outside assistance to address problematic behavior. However, reading teachers have at their hand pedagogy that can address both reading instruction and teach appropriate behavior and emotional control at the same time. One such instructional method is the use of thematic units. Thematic units can be developed around behavioral themes that address students' behavioral needs. In addition, picture books can be included in thematic units for all grade levels as a valid resource to meet a variety of reading levels. Thus, reading instruction can address many students' reading levels as well as teach all students additional behavioral responses to difficult situations.

*Why should reading instructors be concerned about students with problematic behavior?*

Many children exhibit problematic behavior at some time in their lives. Most students with problematic behavior are never identified for special education services and are educated in general education settings (Kauffman, 2001). General education teachers recognize that these students have special needs, but they often do not realize that low academic skills and run-of-the-mill teaching and ineffective classroom management techniques can bring out the worst in students' behavior (Kauffman, 2001).

Academic deficits that students with behavior problems bring to the classroom affect their educational performance and behavior. Specifically, many students who have behavioral problems perform poorly in reading, functioning at least one year below grade level (Epstein, Kinder, & Bursuck, 1989). These students perform significantly lower on achievement tests and intelligence tests while exhibiting poor communication and problem solving skills (Kauffman, 2001). Low academic achievement is a strong correlate of emotional and behavioral problems. While it cannot be said that low academic skills cause behavior problems they often go hand in hand. Academic tasks that are out of these students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) lead to frustration, often a precursor to inappropriate classroom behavior.

A second factor limiting the academic success of students with behavioral problems is history of poor prior educational experiences. Isolation, tyranny, and limited scaffolding often characterize the educational history of students with problematic behavior. Further, these students respond poorly to ridged or inflexible instruction as well as to learning activities that are externally controlled by teachers (Kauffman, 2001). Lack of individualized instruction and flexibility, coupled with passive teaching, also interferes with these students' learning. When students without coping skills are asked to perform tasks with insufficient background information or scaffolded instruction they become confused about tasks and procedures and their compliance decreases (Gunter, Shores, Jack, Denny, & DePaepe, 1994).

*What type of learning environment do students with problematic behavior need to succeed academically and socially?*

Effective instruction is the key to improving reading skills and successfully bettering student behavior. Instruction should focus on student self-control, decision-making, and importantly, the improvement of academic deficits. These students respond to instruction that is constructivist and content rich, and promotes the autonomy of learners (Kaplan, 1995, Kauffman, 2001, Marshall, 1998).

Constructivist teaching is one avenue reading teachers have to combat the reading needs and educational barriers experienced by students with problematic behavior. Constructivist teaching promotes independent thinking, understanding, and self-control for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Marshall, 1998). Effective constructivist instruction is at the heart of successful education and

behavior can be a powerful teaching tool that is often neglected (Kauffman, 2001). With the appropriate content rich environment, students may be guided through reading instruction to develop literacy skills while also learning more appropriate standards of behavior.

Third, these students respond to autonomous learning situations. Providing students a choice of learning activities is a long accepted strategy for educating students with behavioral problems (Kaplan, 1995, Munk & Repp, 1994). Marshall (1998) recommends using authentic activities, promoting student responsibility and ownership for inquiry, and promoting a democratic learning environment when working with students who exhibit challenging behavior.

An empirically based educational method, thematic units meet the academic needs of students and provide behavior instruction in a non-threatening manner. Deliberate planning and use of explicit teaching techniques, within thematic units, leads to improved reading skills as well as reducing inappropriate student conduct (Munk & Repp, 1994). Thematic units may be used at any grade level or content area and are effective when used to instruct students with problematic behavior.

*How can I address the reading needs of older students with low reading skills?*

One approach to ensure success when implementing thematic units is the promotion and use of picture books related to daily lessons within thematic units. Daily use promotes the acceptability and validity of picture books as an art form and an appropriate medium for information at any grade level. Literature written for younger audiences is successfully used with older students (Cassady, 1998). However, prior to use with older audiences, teachers should provide background information concerning the appropriateness of the book. It may beautifully express a point of history or personal experience or it may simply be one of the teacher's favorite stories. Discussion could continue with dialogue identifying students' favorite picture books. After establishing an environment accepting the validity of picture books for students of all ages, thematic units incorporating picture books as instructional tools offer potential for great success to older students who have experienced limited academic growth in the past. Validating

picture books allows teachers to use material on an appropriate reading level for students with academic needs and low tolerance for frustration. The use of picture books in thematic units frees teachers to plan a variety of learning activities meeting the needs of a range of students from the slow learner to the gifted student.

*How do I develop a thematic unit that addresses behavior?*

Seven planning stages lead to a well-developed thematic unit. These stages include: (1) Identifying an organizing theme, (2) Determining instructional objectives, (3) Identifying topics within the thematic unit, (4) Identifying resources and activities, (5) Planning for student evaluation, (6) Gathering resources and materials, and (7) Designing instruction.

*Identifying an Organizing Theme.* Begin by identifying an organizing theme. Thematic units may be built around social skills, problem behaviors, acceptable behaviors, empathy building, or managing emotions. Organizing themes addressing behavior may be determined by identifying the behavioral needs of specific classes or groups of students. In fact, reading teachers are encouraged to consult with special education teachers for information about goals and benchmarks outlined in behavior improvement plans (BIPs) or individual education plans (IEPs) should they have special education students in their reading classes. Brainstorming with students may also provide potential topics while allowing students control over their learning environment. Meaningful themes may be selected by observation or from behavioral goals.

*Determining Instructional Objectives.* Thematic units should be built around instructional objectives. Before developing the unit, make a list of objectives that will be addressed instructionally. Identify objectives in the areas of listening/speaking, reading vocabulary, reading comprehension/response, writing, writing/connections, and visuals. Objectives may be posed as questions or as statements. Refer to Table 1 for an example of a working list of language arts objectives that may be addressed in a thematic unit on emotions.

**Table 1.** Instructional Objectives for Thematic Unit: Emotions of Many Colors

LISTENING/SPEAKING/AUDIENCES

Student listens actively and purposefully to solve problems and appreciate.  
Student speaks clearly and appropriately to present dramatic interpretation of experiences, stories, and poems to communicate.

READING/VOCABULARY/COMPREHENSION/RESPONSE

Student reads to discover models for own writing.  
Student develops vocabulary by listening to selections read aloud.  
Student distinguishes denotative and connotative meanings.  
Student uses personal knowledge and experiences to comprehend.  
Student establishes and adjusts purpose for reading to understand, interpret, and solve problems.  
Student interprets text ideas through journal writing, discussion and enactment.  
Student analyzes characters including their traits, conflicts, points of view, relationships, and changes they undergo.

WRITING

Student writes to express, discover, record, develop, reflect on ideas, and to problem solve.  
Student selects and uses voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose.  
Student generates ideas and plans for writing by using prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, graphic organizers, notes, and logs.

WRITING/CONNECTIONS

Student corresponds with peers or other via e-mail.

VISUALS

Student selects, organizes or produces visuals to complement and extend meanings.

*Identifying Topics within the Thematic Unit.* Make a list or web of topics related to the theme that was decided upon in stage one. Freely jot down as many topics as you can identify. Next, refer to the list of objectives and eliminate and topics that fail to address objectives. Should great topic be identified for which there are few/no objectives identified, add appropriate objectives to your working list.

*Identifying Resources and Activities.* For each topic within the unit, resources need to be identified in the areas of printed materials, non-print materials, and instructional activities. Make a chart of resources in the three areas for each of the remaining topics (refer to Table 2). In printed materials include, magazine articles, picture books, chapter books, poems, essays, web sites etc. In non-print materials include videos, field

trips, possible speakers, etc. In instructional activities include instructional activities, center activities, and games.

**Table 2. Resources and Activities**

Resources & Activities	Introduction	Recognizing Emotions	Exploring Emotions	Responding to Emotions	Culmination
Print	<a href="#">Hailstones &amp; Halibut Bones</a>	<a href="#">My Many Colored Days</a> <a href="#">Chrysanthemum</a>	<a href="#">When Sophie Gets Angry- Really, Really Angry</a> <a href="#">The Pain and the Great One</a>	<a href="#">Feelings</a> <a href="#">Where the Wild Things Are</a> EPALS.com	<a href="#">I Like Me</a> <a href="#">Hooray for Me</a>
Non Print	Various music selections	<a href="http://kidshealth.org/kid/">kidshealth.org/kid/</a>	<a href="http://lightspan.com">lightspan.com</a>	Emotion Ball (a bouncing ball with emotions written on it)	<a href="http://ed.gov/pubs/parents/index.html">ed.gov/pubs/parents/index.html</a>
Instruction	Drawing Emotions Brainstorm: Examples of emotions	Read Aloud Journal: "I am this color today because..."  Mapping: Emotions and their color representation	Read Aloud Writing: Coping with Anger Shared  Reading: Individual writing products to younger class  Journal: "When I'm angry I..."	Read Aloud Brainstorm: When was a time you were angry?  Role-Play: Appropriate responses to emotions Web Discussion Board	Read Aloud/Chorus Reading Brain Dump/Think Tank: "I'm Phat" (I'm Great)  Writing/Illustrating: I'm "Phat"! Authors Chair with Invited Guests

\*In groups of 5-9 students, students begin their own descriptions on a piece of paper. Then they pass paper to another student to continue the description. Then pass to another (in a circle), until a variety of thoughts about each student is recorded on students' individual papers.

*Planning for Student Evaluation.* Review the objectives and activities that have been included in the unit. Evaluation should directly relate to the thematic unit's objectives. Determine which activities may easily provide evaluative information about mastery of the objectives. Balance evaluation materials including daily work, special projects, tests, and observations and determine the value of each towards the unit grade. Decide how much value will be placed on effort and how individual grades will be determined during group activities/projects. Finally,



determine who will evaluate work products, the teacher or a joint effort between teacher and student. Evaluations should be planned before you begin teaching the unit.

*Gathering Resources and Materials.* Collect resources and materials from a variety of sources. Utilize school personnel such as fellow teachers, media specialists, curriculum specialists, and librarians. In addition, parent and teacher organizations, parents and students can be a valuable resource. Request donations of magazines, books, and other materials that will be needed.

Two additional resources for gathering materials include public libraries and private businesses. Public libraries are useful for three reasons. First, librarians are great reference persons. Second, public libraries may have books, magazines, and videos that the school library may not have, and third, public libraries may be willing to donate deleted materials that may still be appropriate for school projects.

Private businesses are a final resource for materials. Many school districts are matching up schools with business sponsors that support the school in educating students. If your school does not have a formal business sponsor, seek out a sponsor for your class. Many businesses are more than willing to donate supplies or volunteer time to support the public schools.

*Designing Instruction.* After materials have been collected, formalize instructional plans and activities (refer to Figure 1). Outline lesson plans referring to the list of objectives to ensure that they are all addressed during instruction. If at this time an objective is eliminated from the thematic unit, make sure to eliminate it from the evaluation procedures as well. Unit introduction, an instructional phase, and unit culmination comprise the three phases of thematic units (Moore, Moore, Cunningham, & Cunningham, 1998).

During unit introduction utilize an attention grabber that will motivate students and identify personal connections with the material to be explored. Activate prior knowledge and assess what special knowledge individual students bring to the unit. Orient students to the

expected learning outcomes (instructional objectives). Schedule at least one day for these activities.

The instructional phase includes the majority of instructional activities. At the start of each individual lesson, plan an attention grabber, assessment of background information, and orientation to the instructional objectives. For each lesson, provide ample instruction and scaffolding for students to master procedures for instructional activities and learning outcomes. Provide for guided and independent practice and re-teaching activities. Successful instruction for students with behavioral problems requires that students understand why the lesson is meaningful and of practical relevance. Authentic activities capitalizing on student interests and providing students with choices will increase involvement and mastery of objectives. Most students with behavioral problems require instruction beginning at a concrete level, but also require direct instruction of higher order questioning, cognitive flexibility, and problem solving (Marshall, 1998).

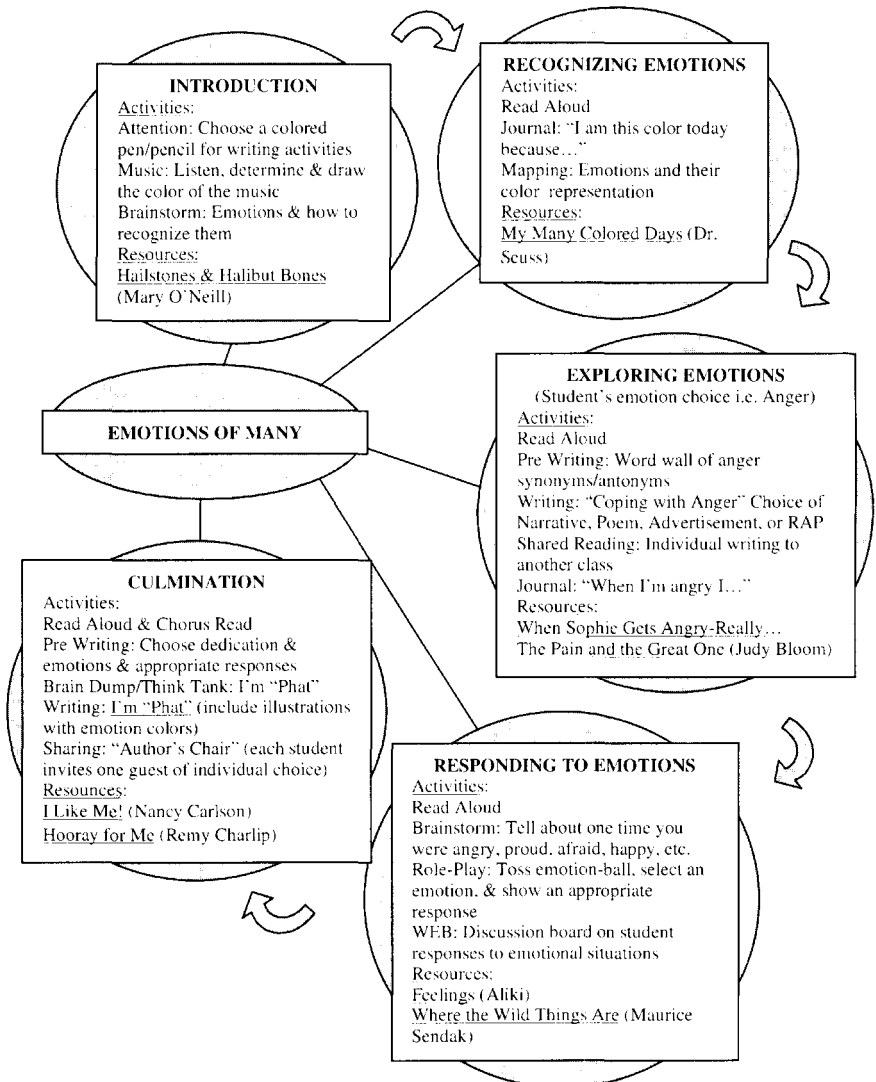
At the end of the thematic unit, the third phase of unit culmination, takes place. During this time, include activities that allow students to tie together information and explore generalization to other situations. Provide opportunities for students to showcase their academic accomplishments. This phase is extremely important for students with problematic behavior because it provides closure and a cue for transition to something new. In addition, it provides an opportunity to receive positive regard for their accomplishments from their peers, parents, and school personnel. Although evaluation has been ongoing throughout the instructional phase, it may be finalized during culmination if there are long-term projects or tests.

### Conclusion

Using thematic units for reading or language arts instruction can minimize the underlying causes of inappropriate behavior, reading skills and spurious learning activities. Thematic units provide the content rich learning environment needed by students with problematic behavior and academic needs. By capitalizing on a variety of student perspectives and focusing on behavioral themes, thematic units provide a valid

instructional vehicle for all students to learn and participate in instructional activities.

**Figure 1.** Thematic Unit: Emotions of Many Colors



## REFERENCES

- Bos, C. S. & Vaughn, S. (1998). *Strategies for teaching students with learning and behavior problems* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cassady, J. K. (1998). Wordless books: No-risk tools for inclusive middle-grade classrooms. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 41(6), 428-433.
- Epstein, M.H., Kinder, D., & Bursuck, B. (1989). The academic status of adolescents with behavior disorders. *Behavioral Disorders*, 14, 157-165.
- Gunter, P. L., Shores, R. E., Jack, S. L., Denny, R. K., & DePaepe, P. (1994). A case study of the effects of altering instructional interactions on disruptive behavior of a child with severe behavior disorders. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 17, 435-444.
- Kaplan, J.S. (1995). *Beyond behavior modification: A cognitive-behavioral approach to behavior management in the school* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Austin, TX: Pro-ed.
- Kauffman, J. M. (2001). *Characteristics of emotional and behavioral disorders of children and youth* (6<sup>th</sup> edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Marshall, M. (1998). *Fastback #428: Fostering social responsibility*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Moore, D.W., Moore, S.A., Cunningham, P.M., & Cunningham, J.W. (1998) *Developing readers & writers in the content areas K-12*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Munk, D. D. & Repp, A. C. (1994). The relationship between instructional variables, and problem behavior: A review. *Exceptional Children*, 60(5), 390-401.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, & E. Souberman, Eds.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

*Dr. Amy Stevens Griffith and Dr. Nancy Spence Horton are faculty members at the University of Texas at Tyler, Texas.*