The Developmental Approach to Educating Special Education Students

The EDGE Program: The Engineered Classroom used by Chandler Unified Schools is based on the developmental approach to teaching students with and emotionally disability. As one of the four major strategies utilized by teachers of emotionally disabled students, this strategy combines the best of the other three strategies and recognizes a developmental sequence of educational goals. The developmental sequence attempts to identify the stages of operations associated with learning in the classroom. It is the developmental strategy's assertion that **the failure to master these basic levels is what characterizes the emotionally disabled student.**

Background

There are four major strategies utilized by teachers of special education students**: psychodynamic- interpersonal, sensory-neurological, behavior modification, and developmental**. Combining the best of all three strategies, the developmental strategy derives primarily from the behavior modification strategy. The developmental strategy adds specific educational goals to the behavior modification strategy's powerful methodology, allowing the strategy to be successfully implemented in a public school setting.

The Developmental Sequence of Educational Goals

The developmental sequence of educational goals hypothesizes that in order for successful learning to occur, the student must pay attention, respond, follow directions, freely and accurately explore the environment, and function appropriately in relation to others. The developmental sequence includes master of self-care and intellectual skills and achievement of self-motivation in learning as the highest goal. It further hypothesizes that the learning of these behaviors occurs during the normal course of development from infancy to school age, and that the failure to learn any or all of them may preclude the child's school readiness.

The Developmental Sequence of Educational Goals

Achievement

Mastery

Social

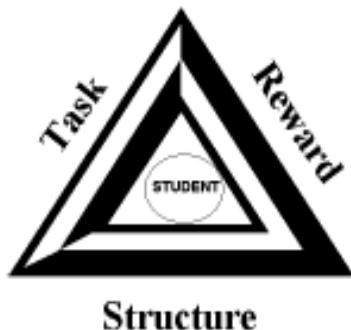Exploratory

Order

Response
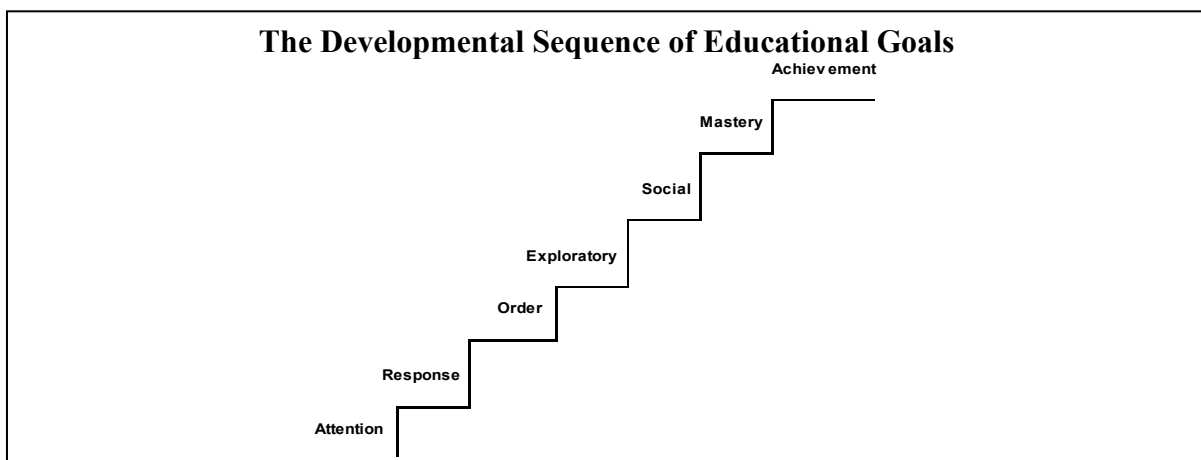
Attention

The sequence, as presented above in hierarchal form, describes the behaviors as part of a continuous sequence of development related to the learning process.

The Levels of the Developmental Sequence

Attention the capacity to direct attention to task.

Response making an appropriate response to an assignment; student must participate.

Order the ability to order one's behavior like following directions, obeying rules, completing assignments.

Exploratory requires students to care about exploring their environment, acquiring accurate knowledge about the world around them, making independent choices.

Social caring about and obtaining the approval of others and attempting to avoid disapproval. Also means not being overly dependent on others for attention and praise.

Mastery ability to utilize one's intellectual capacities.

Achievement the pursuit of learning for intrinsic reasons.

The developmental sequence of educational goals is the **basis for defining the needs of** the **special education student for success in school.** For the teacher to meet these needs, it is hypothesized that three components in a learning program need to be present. These three components may be conceived of as the sides of a triangle, with the central position occupied by the special education student. This triangle is referred to as the Learning Triangle.

The Learning Triangle   <u>Components of the Learning Triangle</u>

Structure

Task the learning task is defined as any activity, lesson, or assignment given to the students which is directed toward assisting them in achieving one or more goals on the developmental sequence of tasks which progressively moves the students towards the end goal in steps which assures continued success.

Reward reward refers to a positive consequence which tends to maintain or increase the

strength or frequency of behavior associated with accomplishing the task related to the achievement of educational goals on the developmental sequence. The learners receiving a reward for their efforts facilitate learning. In classrooms for typical students, these rewards for learning are readily apparent (I.E., teacher nods for approval, smiles, grades "Good Work" written on paper, etc.). Students with an emotionally disability often have a difficult time finding anything rewarding in school. Books and assignments represent failure, reactions from classmates consist of rejection or ridicule, and grades become sources of parental criticism. Before the students can learn in school, some form of reward must be present in the classroom. Each student may have to be rewarded in different ways, using a continuum ranging from tangible rewards to intrinsic satisfaction from acquiring knowledge skills. The range of rewards in the classroom will relate to the developmental sequence of education goals.

Structure	structure refers to the limits or "strings" the teacher attaches to particular tasks assigned to the student, which determine whether or not the student will be rewarded. Simply stated, it is the degree of teacher control present in the learning situation.

> **Structure can be the:**
>
> **When-**   time, time limit
> **Where-**   location
> **What-**   activity/assignment
> **How-**   the way it is done
> **How well-**   level of correctness
>
>   of an educational task.

Through constant monitoring and adjusting these three components, the teacher creates a learning environment in which all exceptional students can be taught something.

<u>**The Learning Triangle Applied to the Developmental Sequence of Educational Goals**</u>

Having identified the developmental sequence of educational goals as the "needs" of the special education student and the learning triangle as the tool the teacher uses to meet these needs, the two can be combined to discuss each developmental level in detail.

Attention   Before the learning process begins the student must be attending to instruction. The student must respond to the teacher.

-     **Task** characteristics useful in getting the special education student to pay attention fall into four categories:

  1. Removal of distracting stimuli
  2. Presentation of small, discrete units of work
  3. Heightening the vividness and impact of stimuli
  4. Use of concrete, rather than abstract, tasks

- **Rewards** utilized at this level typically involve the most basic of rewards, and often the most powerful-tangible rewards. The use of tangible rewards at this level is based on the premise that students with an emotionally disability students do not pay attention because there is nothing rewarding
in the act of attending. Just as attention is the most basic of all learning competencies, tangible motivators are the most basic of all rewards

- **Structure** at the attention level is directly related to establishing contact with the student and initiating learning. In order to accomplish this goal, it may be necessary to attach fewer quantitative or qualitative strings when assigning tasks. This may mean dictating the "where" (work area), "how" (non-disruptive behavior), but not the "what," "when," or "how well." Imposing some degree of structure during tasks is essential; as an educational program, where the student makes all of the decisions regarding structure, will likely not teach anything efficiently or well. It is not possible to present specific rules for establishing the appropriate degree of structure at this level, as the goal is to establish contact and initiate learning. Each student will be different.

> **Note:** In the initial stages of introducing the emotionally disabled student to **learning tasks** (attention and response)**,** it is the reward dimension of the learning triangle which is emphasized, sometimes at the expense of maintaining fixed environmental expectations. It is at the order level where the student is more directly confronted with fixed environmental expectations and the limits that determine the consequences of their behavior.

Response   Before the learning process starts the student must paying attention to the task at hand. The student will respond

- **Task** characteristics found at the attention level are equally applicable at the response level. Two additional task characteristics deserve emphasis at the response level:

    1. Reduction of criteria for correctness
        I.E., decrease demands for perfection in certain skills or elimination of letter grades.
    2. Guaranteeing the student's success in learning
        assigning tasks that the teacher is sure the student can accomplish

Rewards used at the response level involve "social attention." Social contact and attention may be the most effective means of soliciting appropriate responses in learning. At the response, level, emotionally disabled students may be initially rewarded more effectively by

> **Note:** At each level of the developmental sequence, rewards associated with either the higher or lower levels may be useful.

attention than social praise.

- **Structure** at the response level is still subject to the same flexibility used at the attention level.

Order The order level aims to design tasks that help the student adapt to a routine, follow directions, completing assignments, and controlling their own behavior.

- **Task** characteristics found at the order level include:

  1. Maintaining a structured learning environment based on fixed environmental expectations.
       I.E., posting classroom rules and daily schedules that are consistently adhered.
  2. Defining a specific starting point and a series of steps leading to a conclusion, which is scorable as complete or incomplete.
       I.E providing written assignments that clearly detail what work needs to be accomplished.
  3. Requiring "student" behavior
       I.E requiring the students to raise their hand, sitting correctly in their chair, not disturbing others during tasks.

- **Rewards** operating at the order level revolves around task completion. At this level, the belief is that task completion provides a reward in itself and aids the student in developing motivation for finishing learning tasks. This is an important goal for students, in that these students expect to fail and have negative attitudes towards themselves and school. Selection of suitable tasks for these students is essential to guarantee success, in order to develop motivation for task completion.

- **Structure** at the order level is concerned with having the student fulfill the minimum requirements of the "student role." This includes reasonable tolerance for limits of time (when), space (where), activity (what), and a reasonable respect for the working rights of others (how). "How well" assignments are done is a concern for the mastery level.

- **Task** characteristics found at the exploratory level include:

  1. A wide range of multi-sensory experiences
  2. An emphasis on reality
  3. Predictable outcomes

The skill level of order, which precedes the exploratory level, should be maintained and reinforced. Exploratory activities should allow for some

freedom of choice, but are considered learning tasks, not free play.

- **Rewards** at the exploratory level involve multi-sensory experiences. Sensory stimulation of any modality is rewarding and can be used to motivate students in learning.

> **Premack Principle** rewards (based on a student's interests) can be used to strengthen and accelerate low-frequency behaviors such as the pursuit of academic subjects.

- **Structure** at the exploratory level allows for some freedom of choice in the activity the student chooses, but the activities are still considered learning tasks. Exploration is done within limits and involves definite assigned tasks; the student is expected to explore as a "student" and in relation to the assigned learning task.

Social   The goal of the social level is to help the student learn to obtain the approval of others and to avoid their disapproval. It is an extension of the response level, where getting the student involved in learning in a social setting and working for social attention is stressed. It also relates to the order level through bringing the student's behavior under control so it is not disruptive to the class group.

- **Task** characteristics found at the social level include:

    1. Communicating with the teacher or one or more peers
    2. Maintaining appropriate social behavior
    3. Tolerating a period of delay, during which time the student must "wait their turn.

- **Rewards** operating at the social level involves the approval of others and the avoidance of disapproval. At this level, the avoidance of a negative consequence (disapproval) is added to the receipt of a positive consequence (approval). In the lower levels, the teacher relies upon acting fairly and predictable in letting the students know where they stand on a largely non-verbal level, using tangible rewards. At the social level, the goal is to get the student working to gain approval and to avoid disapproval. Operating at this level is required for success in regular classrooms.

- **Structure** at the social level is emphasized, as it was at the exploratory and order level. The "student" role takes on a social aspect, and includes more than a minimal control of behavior and a reasonable respect for the working rights of others. Standards of social appropriateness, referring to behaviors that elicit teacher and peer group approval and restrict disapproval, become more of a concern. The goal is to advance students

to a level where their behavior must include appropriate communication and understanding of the expectation of others.

Mastery The mastery and achievement levels complete the developmental sequence of educational goals. The first five levels (attention, response, order, exploratory, and social) are considered the basic goals of education. The master and achievement levels are higher level goals, and may continue to be defined and developed throughout the individual's life, for the purpose of educating the special education student. The mastery level is concerned with bringing the student's ability in self-care and intellectual and academic skills to a level commensurate with their chronological age.

- **Task** characteristics found at the mastery level include helping the student attain:
  1. A level of self-care enabling students to function independently in their environment.
  2. Cognitive development in such areas as speech, concept formation, and problem solving within the limits of the student's intellectual potential.
  3. Their expected achievement level in basic school subjects.

- **Rewards** operating at the mastery level are related to doing learning tasks correctly. The knowledge of results in an educational setting exerts a positive effect on learning rate and performance. Assuring the student's success, and hence the receipt of positive consequence, is the focus of the developmental approach. By successfully manipulating the structure and task components of the learning triangle, it is possible to provide the student with the powerful reward associated with knowledge of positive results.

- **Structure** of mastery level focuses primarily on the "how" and "how well" of the educational task, while maintaining the structure imposed at the lower levels.

Achievement The achievement level is not as relevant to the education of special education students as the lower six levels. It is mentioned here as the ultimate goal of education: aiding students in becoming efficient learners and assisting them in developing a true self-motivation for learning.

- **Task** characteristics found at the achievement level include:

  1. Presentation of an enriched curriculum
  2. Allowing the student freedom in selection of learning tasks and encouraging creativity
  3. Stimulating critical thinking ability, strengthening study and reference skills, and increasing proficiency in such areas as power and speed reading.

- **The distinction between the three sides of the triangle diminishes at this level.** The **task** is to get the student to efficiently pursue learning in breadth and depth on a self-motivated basis, the **reward** is the pursuit of learning, and the **structure** is largely determined by the students themselves as they seek to gain knowledge and skill.

Assessment Using the Developmental Sequence of Educational Goals

A device to assess the needs of students was created using the developmental sequence of educational goals. This device includes characteristics, at each developmental level, commonly associated with emotionally disabled students. Additionally, the device seeks to determine rewards that the student finds meaningful, as well as determining the appropriate structure to assure successful learning. The teacher will complete an inventory of the student at each developmental level.

The results of the assessment will provide answers to the following questions:
1. Which educational goals has the student failed to attain and which are most basic to getting them ready to learn in school?
2. What does the student find rewarding in learning? What possibilities exist for assuring that some meaningful reward is present for them in the classroom?
3. In terms of the degree of structure suggested at each level, can the student tolerate limits of what, where, when, how, and how well?

Addressing the Needs Identified by Assessment

Based on the assessment, the students will likely have deficits at various levels on the developmental sequence. When considering a program of study, it is important to:

1. Consider all deficits and not just restrict on a single level.
2. At least initially, give priority to helping the student with the most basic learning problems and decrease emphasis on higher-level problems.
3. Emphasize the aspect of selected tasks that represent the student's most basic learning problem. Most activities contain aspects of several, if not a majority, of the levels on the developmental sequence. Be specific to the most basic problem. Reward the student for accomplishing the aspect of the task, which represents the most basic learning problem. Settle for the student's minimal accomplishment in line with their most basic learning problem and consider such an accomplishment indicative of teaching success.
4. Be prepared to reassess the student at any given moment and drop back to a lower level expectation to ensure their success.
5. Increase demands for functioning at higher levels gradually and systematically.

The Developmental Sequence of Educational Goals

Achievement

Mastery

Social

Exploratory

Order

Response

Attention

Task **Reward**

STUDENT
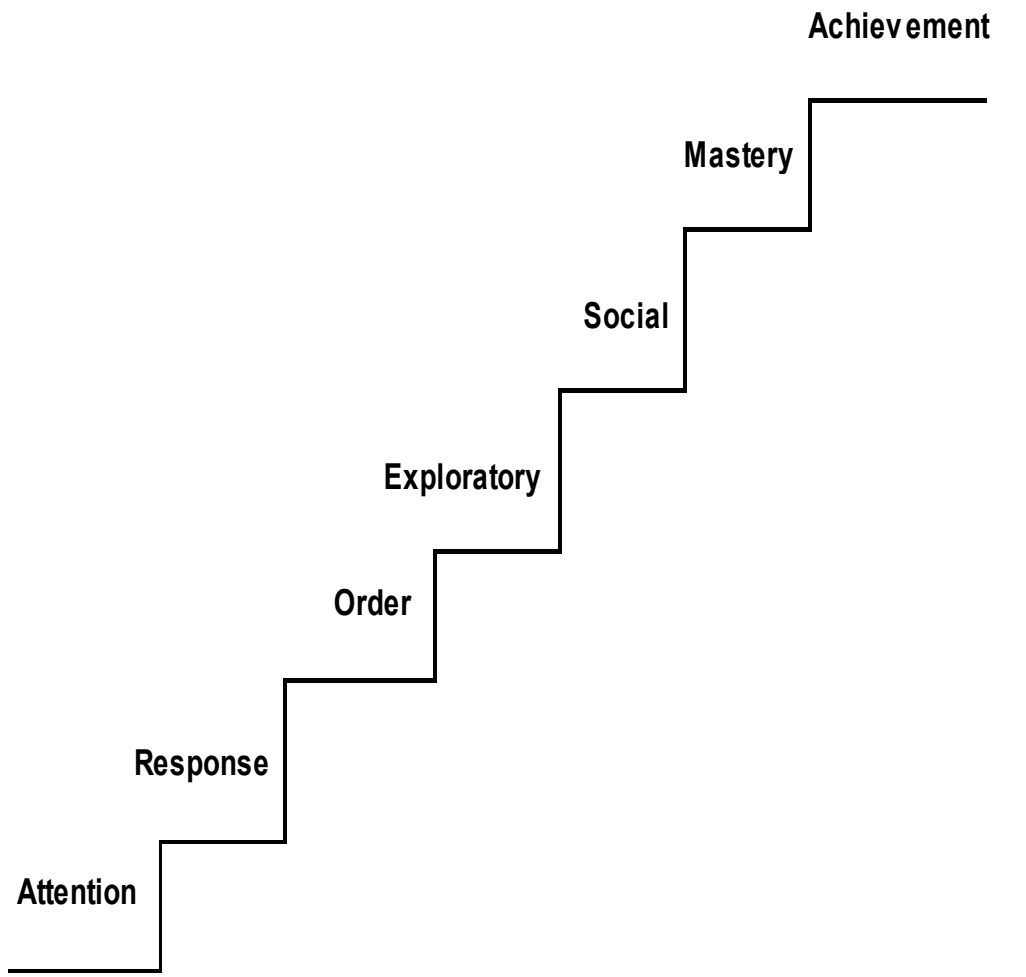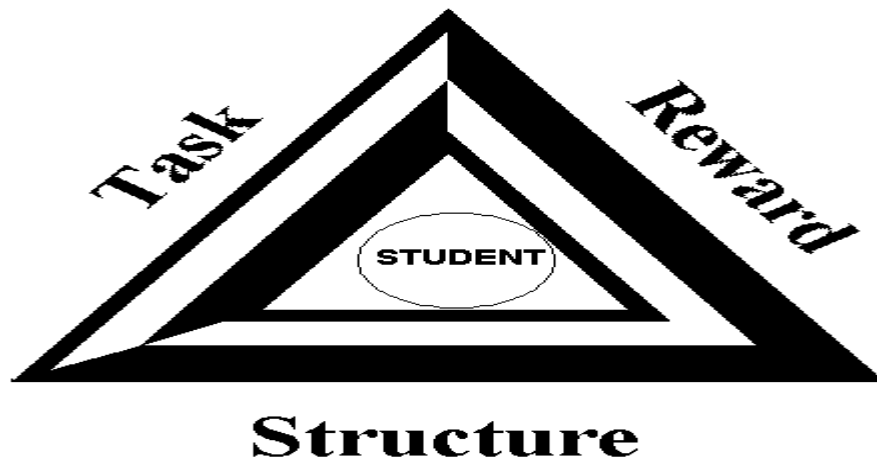
Structure

1.
TASK_____

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2.
REWARD_____

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3.
STRUCTURE_____

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