Emotional/Behavioral Disorders: A Problem of Definition

- one reason it is so difficult to arrive at a reliable definition of emotional/behavioral disorders (or disabilities) is that an emotional or behavioral disorder is not a thing that exists outside a social context, but a label assigned according to cultural rules
- for the most part, an emotional or behavioral disorder is whatever behavior a culture designates as intolerable, unacceptable, excessive, or deviant
- defining an emotional or behavioral disorder is unavoidably subjective, at least in part
- the problem of definition is made all the more difficult by:
  - differences in conceptual models,
  - differing purposes of definition,
  - the complexities of measuring emotions and behavior,
  - the range and variability of normal and deviant behavior,
  - the relationships among emotional or behavioral disorders and other exceptionalities,
  - the transience of many problems during human development, and
  - the disadvantages inherent in labeling deviance.

The Importance of Definition

- definition is a crucial as well as a difficult problem
- the definition of a disability area (i.e., E/BD) reflects how we conceptualize the problem and, therefore, what intervention strategies we consider appropriate
- a definition communicates succinctly a conceptual framework that has direct implications for practitioners
- a definition specifies the population to be served – who receives intervention and how they will be served
- if a definition specifies a population, it provides the basis for estimates of prevalence
• working definitions guide/direct the decisions of legislative bodies, government executives, and school administrators concerning allocation of funds and training and employment of special educators
• vague and inappropriate definitions contribute to confused and inadequate legislation, foggy administrative policies, non-functional teacher training, and ineffective intervention

The Current Federal Definition: Its Derivation and Status
• the current federal definition actually derives from research conducted by Bower (1981) involving thousands of students in California in the 1950s

Bower’s Definition
• Bower defined *emotionally handicapped students* as those exhibiting one or more of five characteristics to a marked extent and over a period of time:
  I. an inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
  II. an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;
  III. inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions;
  IV. a general, pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression;
  V. a tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains, or fears associated with personal or school problems (Bower, 1981, pp. 115-116).

Bower's definition has many good points:
• its specifies five characteristic types of behavior
• the first of these characteristics, *problems in learning*, is possibly the most significant school-related aspect of emotionally handicapped youngsters' behavior
• another important feature of his definition is the inclusion of degrees or levels of severity

Bower's definition is, however, widely criticized:
• it lacks the precision necessary to take much of the subjectivity out of decision making
  • it does not easily enable one to determine that a particular child or youth is or is not emotionally handicapped
• there is much latitude in terms like to a marked extent and over a period of time
• there is a need for subjective judgment about each of the five characteristics

To complete or improve Bower's definition:
• it would be necessary to establish a continuum in which the degree of handicap can be perceived and/or perhaps estimated for:
  • children who experience and demonstrate the normal problems of everyday living, growing, exploration, and reality testing;
  • children who develop a greater number and degree of symptoms of emotional problems as a result of normal crises or stressful experiences;
  • children in whom moderate symptoms of emotional maladjustment persist to some extent beyond normal expectations but who are able to manage an adequate school adjustment;
  • children with fixed and recurring symptoms of emotional maladjustment who can with help profit by school attendance and maintain some positive relationships in the school setting;
  • children with fixed and recurring symptoms of emotional difficulties who are perhaps best educated in a residential school setting or temporarily in a home setting.

IDEA Definition
• Emotional disturbance is one of 12 disability categories specified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA ’97). It is defined as follows:
  (i) The term means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:
    (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
    (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
    (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
    (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
(E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

(ii) The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance (CFR §300.7 (a) 9).

The National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition Definition

- the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition has proposed an alternative definition:

  I. The term emotional or behavioral disorder means a disability characterized by behavioral or emotional responses in school programs so different from appropriate age, cultural, or ethnic norms that they adversely affect educational performance, including academic, social, vocational or personal skills, and which:

     (a) is more than a temporary, expected response to stressful events in the environment;

     (b) is consistently exhibited in two different settings, at least one of which is school-related; and

     (c) persists despite individualized interventions within the education program, unless, in the judgment of the team, the child's or youth's history indicates that such interventions would not be effective.

Emotional or behavioral disorders can co-exist with other disabilities.

II. This category may include children or youth with schizophrenic disorders, affective disorders, anxiety disorders, or other sustained disturbances of conduct or adjustment when they adversely affect educational performance in accordance with section I. (Forness & Knitzer, 1992, p. 13)