

Jeffrey
BENSON



Hang In

Strategies for Teaching the
Students Who Challenge Us Most



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Hangin In

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Introduction

I was chairing an hour-long meeting with school administrators, teachers, therapists, and support staff. The group had convened to deal with a single issue: how Dean, a volatile 4th grader, could more successfully transition from class to class. Dean insisted on being first in line, argued over every expectation, and swore at staff as he quickly lost his temper. He was exhausting his teachers, classmates, and everyone who was called in to de-escalate him and then assess his readiness for rejoining his class. We hypothesized what triggered Dean's reactions. We reviewed his complex family history, his ability to cognitively understand directions, and his ability to physically manage the passage from one room to another. We reviewed what staff had been saying to him, what rewards and punishments had been tried (all so far without lasting success), what the quality of his relationships was with peers and school staff, and what our overlapping goals were for Dean and the school. By the end of the hour, we had synthesized our perspectives and developed a plan (the focus of Chapter 2 in this book). At that point, the principal turned to me and said, "That should do the trick." I sighed and responded, "There are no tricks."

There are no tricks to working with our most challenging students. If there were simple solutions to support their growth, the

students wouldn't be challenging. The professionals most responsible for dealing with these students—among many and most often, special education teachers, social workers, occupational therapists—do not have a secret cache of techniques. These professionals have received training in identifying disabilities and employing common interventions, but our most challenging students confound common solutions. These students crisscross categories of disabilities, challenging us to develop new and complex interventions, in combinations we have never tried before.

In examining the effect solely of trauma on students, Cole and colleagues (2005, p. 4) identify a long list of potential problems: decreased concentration, fragmented memory, poor organization, language deficits, perfectionism, depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior. It is reasonable to add to this list excessive absences, uneven skill development, and deficits in content knowledge. Now add a learning disability and all its possible presentations. There are no textbook cases that point to absolute interventions for students with such layered lists of issues. Each child is truly unique, and we can't "fix them" immediately.

The challenge for the staff is to hang in. Students like Dean can shed maladaptive behaviors for better ones, but not overnight. These students remind us that humans don't change as much as grow. We grow through support, useful feedback, trust, safety, and time. There is no guarantee that any intervention will work, and there are no guarantees that growth will happen within a given period of time. Hattie (2009), in summarizing his extensive studies on student learning, writes:

Learning is spontaneous, individualistic, and often earned through effort. It is a timeworn, slow, gradual, fits-and-starts kind of process, which can have a flow of its own, but requires passion, patience, and attention to detail. (p. 2)

With no reliably predictable timetable for success, these students try our patience, arouse our emotions, and often bruise our

professional pride as teachers, problem solvers, and caretakers. Dean's difficulty transitioning between classes triggered anger in some staff. For others he provoked sadness—"When Dean is like that, I'd rather be any other person in the world than that little guy." For many, Dean brought up feelings of incompetence and despair. They were professional helpers, and Dean would not let them help; his failure became their failure. We have been schooling children for many centuries, yet a 10-year-old was baffling the experts. Mary Haywood Metz (1993) notes that students "can confirm or destroy" a teacher's "pride in craft." She explains the students' power: "Because teachers' work consists of affecting their students, they are dependent on their students both for the actual success of their work and evidence of that success" (p. 130).

We are in the infancy of understanding what works for every child, at the beginning stage of identifying practices that can cut across community, cultural, and personal contexts. Dean has no researched cohort—in his case, an upbringing in poverty with a single mother, a disabled older sibling, attention deficit disorder (ADD), advanced language skills, and the experience of having switched schools three times. His case is unique. So we hang in, take actions, reflect on progress, recalibrate, take more actions, collect our stories, and recalibrate again. We hang in. We may have to hang in through as many as 100 repetitions for a student to grow into new skills and for us to learn what works (Benson, 2012).

Everyone who hung in with Dean learned a lot, and we are all better at what we do because of that work. A challenging student provides one of the best means of reaching mastery in our field—but only when teachers themselves get support and safety, and when they are not dealing with many such students in isolation. Hanging in with challenging students can be so meaningful and reveal to us the richness and novelty of human relationships. What we experience in schools reinforces our uniquely human capacities to accommodate, synthesize, learn, and grow.

Storytelling

As I chaired the meeting about Dean, I knew we could not pull a manual off a shelf to find step-by-step directions to solve his problems. Instead, I combed through my years of teaching experience, looking for a student and set of conditions that resembled, in some key components, what was happening with Dean. I knew I would not find an exact match with his environment, *and* with his cognitive abilities, *and* with his chaotic life, *and* with his age. But I did find a promising story.

I said to the team, “I once worked with a student named Charlie, and we. . . .” With my storytelling, I was inviting the others to find similarities and differences, or as we might say in a basic English class, to compare and contrast the setting, the characters, and the primary conflict in Dean’s story with the one I was telling about Charlie. The story about Charlie—who was 10 years older and of a different race, economic class, and cognitive ability—did spark our creative solutions for Dean. Buried within all those differences were important, but not so obvious, parallels. My expertise, born of experience and theory, was in identifying the parallels, the most salient aspects of one context with another. The group’s collective wisdom pulled the relevant elements from Charlie’s story into a useful intervention for Dean.

What I offer in this book are stories of hanging in, the practice-based evidence from working with our most challenging students, and the wisdom I have gleaned from each. Many of my experiences come from working in special education settings. The intimacy of small classes (8 students with one teacher) and of small schools (100 students) provides the opportunity to drill deeply into the complex layers of social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, economic, and environmental factors that make each student who he or she is. There is never one thing that defines a challenging student, never one cause, never one life event, never one disability. As noted above, if it were one thing, the solutions would be simple. One of my own

teachers confronted me with this important and demanding advice: “Keep the complexity as long as you can.” My stories invite you to hang in with the complexities of our challenging students and to take action with no guarantees of immediately observable success. The only guarantee is more evidence that you can use with the next challenging student—because I can guarantee you, there will be another one who challenges your capacity to hang in.

With that evidence, we must work together along the path from stories to informed practice. Just as two people can have a different interpretation of the motives of Rick Blaine, Humphrey Bogart’s character in *Casablanca*, team professionals will have many analyses of the root causes of a child’s behavior and of what is to be learned from our interventions. The important work is to discuss and synthesize those perspectives while interactions with the student are still fresh. Once, in a meeting convened to develop an intervention with a particularly idiosyncratic student, I said, “This is a lot like our work with Harry a few years back.” No sooner did I offer that bit of wisdom than hands shot up around the room with a chorus of, “No, this is not like Harry at all.” We had never shared our various conclusions about what had caused Harry to be so challenging; with the passage of time, the team was unable to reconstruct the events in Harry’s story in order to craft a shared understanding. Our stories are valuable only inasmuch as we collectively construct their meaning and articulate a shared wisdom. Set time aside to tell stories. The learning must be made explicit; we hang in collectively.

I have learned so much from working with our traumatized, neglected, and remarkably alive students and with their teachers. I want to distinguish that sentiment from the idea that, when I am teaching a core curriculum subject, my students are also teaching me. I come to them with an expertise in teaching theory and content knowledge that is beyond their years. I have no doubt who the teacher of the class is. What I learn, the gift to me, is how *this* student and *this* student and *this* student are coming to understand *this* lesson in the varied and unpredictable ways the human mind can work.

To be fascinated with the thinking and growth of each student is a formula for lifelong learning as an educator. Small classes are prime real estate for such adult education.

The teachers in our schools who embody this accumulated education should be treasured and exalted, but too often they work without the resources and support their challenges demand. The admiration they get is often in the form of “I don’t know how you do your work,” but rarely are these teachers asked to say how they actually do their work, as if the teachers of our most challenging students are in a different profession or possess superhuman qualities. This is a loss for us all, because the accumulated stories of hanging in with our most challenging students are vital to maintaining a diverse and just society. There will be other students like Dean and Charlie in our schools, and for now what works is less a step-by-step program in a box than a sharing of the learned wisdom from hanging in.

How This Book Is Organized

Each chapter of the book explores pedagogical issues through my work with one or two particular students. A couple of the students are composites. All of the students’ names have been changed, and some identifying characteristics altered, out of respect for their privacy and their struggles, from which they have not always emerged with the hoped-for success. Those struggles underscore an important lesson: however hard challenging students have been to teach, their lives have been exponentially more difficult to live. I spent many an hour pondering what my schools could do for these students, but then I turned off my computer and rejoined my loving family, in my safe home where the bills had been paid. Many of our students did not have such luxuries.

Each chapter opens with a short summary of the issues that emerged from the work with the given students. The ensuing portraits of the students and description of the evolution of their growth are designed to embed those issues in the complexity of the daily

labor of schools. As you read, if you are wondering how the lessons from each story apply to the students in your school, you are on the right path. Interventions that travel unaltered from one challenging student to another are a fool's gold. Please pan for the nuggets that fit your setting.

If it takes a village to raise typical children, challenging children in our villages need their schools to provide critical attention and some very unique structures. Thomas Armstrong (2012) urges us to make schools “positive niches—advantageous environments that minimize weaknesses and maximize strengths and thereby help students flourish” (p. 13). At the end of each chapter in this book, I will suggest approaches for “hanging in” that provide the most consistency and flexibility in developing those positive niches. The approaches are divided into three categories:

1. *For individual students:* Here you will find a variety of suggestions for students who may present similar challenges, and some warnings about the limitations of any given intervention.
2. *For the adult team:* Hanging in with challenging students is an ongoing curriculum for the adults in a school. Here you will find recommendations for the team to develop skills, obtain support, and not lose hope through the ups and downs of the work. You will also find prompts for storytelling.
3. *For administrators:* Administrators have their hands on the gears of a school and exert the most structural, political, and symbolic pressure on the program as a whole. Here you will find recommendations for constructing systems and procedures that give our most challenging students the best chance for success.

Throughout the book are figures offering advice, charts, and forms that I have come back to repeatedly when puzzling over what approaches might be adapted to the challenging student currently stretching our creativity.

I hope this book helps your school team hang in, learn, grow, and appreciate the hard work they do. I also hope for

- An increase in support and funding for the staff and programs that hang in with our most challenging students.
- An appreciation of the potential that rests within each student and the capacity to hold onto the hope when they can't.
- A realization that the expectation to educate every child is a monumental task, the complexity of which we do not understand.
- A commitment to storytelling and to constructing a shared meaning from those stories.
- An invitation to all educators to work with our most challenging students so that you can add your stories to our growing body of knowledge and practice.

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1

Toni

Absolutes and Teachable Moments

Schools embody particular minicultures. That is a good thing—when we enter a school, we want to feel that we are in a special place, that we have stepped from the street into an environment that offers students opportunities that they don't experience elsewhere. The confluence of the staff, the community, the history of the program, the physical characteristics of the building and grounds, and the regulations from the government create a unique school culture. That culture and the special opportunities that it generates are secured by the school having predictable rules and expectations, and the adults having predictable emotional responses to student activity. This story centers on a student, Toni, whose needs bring into question which elements of the school's culture are absolute and which can bend.

Challenges for Toni:

- Trauma history
- Substance use
- Learning disabilities and diminished skill set
- History of school failure
- Lack of trust

- Racial isolation
- Explosive outbursts

Challenges for the adult team:

- Maintaining caring when verbally abused
- Not holding grudges
- Rethinking absolute school rules
- Maintaining school safety
- Being alert for teachable moments
- Carefully measuring responses
- Developing reliable plans
- Acknowledging student emotions and frustrations
- Communicating as a team

The Capacity to Trust

When Toni came to the therapeutic school for her initial intake appointment, she was too scared to be alone with us, and so was accompanied by her state-appointed social worker. Toni was not a likely candidate for success. The toxic combination of her learning disabilities, her many gaps in basic academic skills, her post-traumatic stress disorder, her persistent marijuana smoking, and her difficulty in trusting others might never allow her to take the healthy risks necessary to succeed. But there was something in Toni's willingness to hang in that was compelling. During our initial conversation, she flashed an occasional bright smile and gave serious consideration to what she was hearing. Her testing reports revealed a keen intellect, now muffled by her many difficulties. Most importantly, her relationship with her social worker hinted at a lingering ability to connect; if she could trust one consistently caring adult, she might trust the school staff and the other students in the school community.

Above all else, the foundation of schools that hang in with challenging students is building trusting relationships—relationships

that allow these often overwhelmed young people to try again. Atwool (2006) notes that for students like Toni, success in school will be “unlikely to develop . . . without a relationship with at least one . . . adult in which they feel worthy and loveable” (p. 322).

Toni would need from us the fundamentals we provided all of our challenging students—namely, the six essential elements of hanging in shown in Figure 1.1.

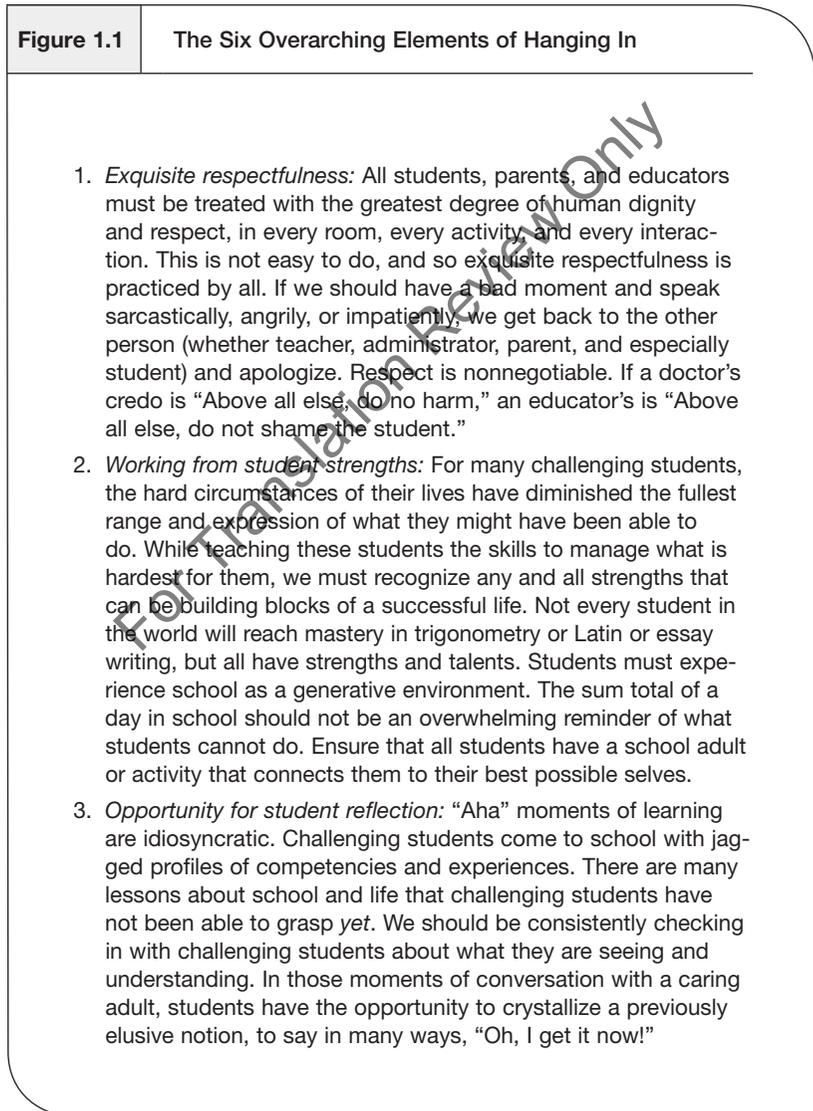


Figure 1.1**The Six Overarching Elements of Hanging In** *(continued)*

4. *Learning from errors:* The path to competency, especially in the social and emotional domain, is filled with missteps. Students will make the same error more than once. We must make sure that consequences for their errors are not damning. Consequences for mistakes (including punishments) should be time-limited and offer a realistic way to regain trust. As much as possible, and as soon as possible after the misstep, offer ways for students to demonstrate and practice the replacement skill.
5. *Allowing multiple interests to inspire diverse solutions:* With challenging students, there is rarely one issue, one stakeholder, one obvious path. The students' struggles affect their educators, their peers, their families, the community at large, and most significantly, their own growth into adulthood. It is important to keep the multiple interests on the table and not get stuck in the trap that in order to satisfy one interest, the others must be sacrificed. The school community will grow by developing a rich menu of strategies.
6. *Working as a team:* No one effectively does the work of teaching challenging students alone for very long. Teachers and professional staff must have multiple venues to vent, ask for advice, brainstorm strategies, and celebrate successes. All educators bring to the work the experiences and skills that may be critical to the success of a single student and to the growth of the programs—make sure that meetings and other forms of communication access the full range of team input. Everyone who works primarily with challenging students should have an ally, a supportive supervisor, a coach.

Toni Reacts

When Toni started at our school, she found the culture created by our six overarching elements disconcerting. As with many students on the verge of dropping out of school completely, she had tried a year or two of public high school and failed to bear up to its anonymity, stress, and the intense social cauldron. Toni often reacted explosively to situations she found stressful or scary. She could look

menacing and swear like a sailor. This had gotten her into a lot of trouble at the public high school. At our school, no matter what Toni might say or do (in her case, academically more often *not* do), she was never shamed. Within such an emotionally safe setting, students have a shot at being reacquainted with their strengths and hopes. But could Toni?

Often we thought not. Like other students who have had hard lives, she experienced the staff's boundless friendliness as unsettling. "You all are too nice. I don't like you all saying hello to me every day." She might have been more comfortable if teachers held grudges and rejected her when she stomped away, muttering curses at them on those rough days when we would have to send her home early because she was refusing to comply with any school rules. Instead, the next day the teachers greeted her warmly, ready to start over on whatever lesson had scared her away the day before.

Toni faced other obstacles. She struggled with feeling isolated. Coming from a black and Latino family, she said, "I'm not used to being around so many white people. My perfect school would be all black." She struggled with homework, with required reading, and with math. But her willpower was enormous, and she had an innate ability to discern people's feelings and to attract people to her. She tested everyone with her abrasive language, impatience, her dark moods, and her approach-and-avoidance behavior when asking for help. For instance, a day after Toni flashed us her warm smile and showed us a dance step to a song we had never heard before, she'd burst into class with headphones on, singing loudly, and when asked to put the headphones away and settle into the task at hand, she'd explode: "This fucking school and its fucking rules. You just want to give students shit all day, don't you?"

Putting Behaviors in Categories

One of the key approaches for hanging in with students who display such unpredictable and explosive behaviors as Toni's is to

identify which behaviors demand a rigidly consistent response and which behaviors suggest a more nuanced and context-specific response. Ross Greene (1998), in his excellent book *The Explosive Child*, describes three categories of behavior that we used to sift Toni's typical outbursts and to plan our responses: behaviors that are not to be tolerated, behaviors that the school can ignore, and behaviors we choose to respond to as teachable moments.

At one extreme are *behaviors that are not to be tolerated*, mostly because these behaviors threaten the safety or the integrity of the community. In this category for Toni was aggressively swearing at someone. Toni would be sent home for the remainder of the day if she was verbally abusive. The school team all knew the steps to take when Toni displayed intolerable behaviors. No one cherished the expectation to confront her at those times, but knowing that the teachers had each other's backs, and that the administration would follow through without any question, gave each one the strength to set that unwavering limit.

At the other extreme are *behaviors that the school can ignore*, even if other schools or programs wouldn't. Toni was allowed to wear hats and do-rags; in fact, the realization that such articles of clothing for her were not at all gang related but a safe and creative aspect of her sense of self led the school to reexamine all of its policies toward headgear. What Toni wore on her head provided opportunities for conversation and appreciation of her style. Her hats never interrupted the business of learning. Whether or not she wore a hat had no impact on the school's functioning.

Between the extremes of absolute rule adherence and ignoring is the largest category of behavior, those *behaviors we choose to respond to as teachable moments*. These behaviors occur in the vast gray area of context and relationships and so can be molded into opportunities to learn and grow. For Toni, these moments could be crucial in shaping her emerging capacity for self-control. When Toni turned away from teachers and muttered loudly, when she initially refused to follow a direction, when she slammed a book on her desk

and declared the work to be “the stupidest thing I have ever been asked to do,” the teachers did not have to immediately censure her. They did not ignore the behaviors; to do so would give Toni a false sense of how the world operated. Instead, they gauged each situation in choosing their responses: Toni’s overall mood that day, the volatility of the peer group, their own relationships with Toni, the time available to engage with her. Through experience, teachers developed a handful of guidelines for addressing these behaviors; their accumulated wisdom from the decisions they made and the small successes with Toni were critical in Toni’s development.

What worked best for Toni was when teachers gave her a quiet minute after her outbursts. The teachers stood close enough to demonstrate attention but not so close as to trigger Toni’s fears. When they gauged that the moment was right, the teachers simply acknowledged and put into words what Toni was feeling: “Wow, that made you upset.” The message to Toni was that the school was strong enough to weather her emotions. She might glare back, mutter more, walk farther away, but the teachers did not add to her escalating reactions. They let her safely simmer down. In various ways, again context dependent, the teachers would say, “Let’s try that again, OK?” The goal was to communicate that she could move on, and that the staff would not hold grudges. Tomlinson (2012) describes this staff approach as “half pit bull and half Mother Theresa” (p. 88). It was one of Toni’s strengths that she could recognize those attitudes in the adults.

We developed a form for sorting student behaviors into the three categories and deciding on responses. Figure 1.2 shows this form, which we call the “Specific Behavior Plan,” filled out for Toni. The plan reflects shared team experiences and perspectives and represents a team consensus for how to respond. The form is a tool, not a set rule book, and should be reviewed and adjusted as the team gains new insights and the student develops new skills.

The team also asked Toni to reflect on her own behavior, identifying situations that upset her, how she might avoid these situations,

and how she might keep calm if she started to get upset. Toni and staff agreed on an escape plan for her, a safe place in the school where she could go to calm down if she lost, or was about to lose, control. Figure 1.3 is Toni's "Get Me Out of Trouble Plan."

The Team Holds the Power

There is no way to overestimate the critical importance of adult teamwork and communication when we have challenging students like Toni. In isolation, teachers can feel like the last soldier on the battlefield, defending modern civilization against the potential chaos of a world filled with unruly teenagers. Toni was seen as one of those chaos-threatening students. She would often display her bad behavior in front of a lone teacher, provoking all of the consequences the adult had available. As a teacher once admitted to me when reflecting on his own emotional buildup and fear of losing control, which had propelled him to become more harshly punitive than he even expected he could be: "Not on my watch were we going to lose the battle!" When teachers have time to collaborate with each other and administrators, the metaphor of war can be put aside, and we can return to the boundless terrain of education.

The shift for Toni's teachers was to see her as a sad and scared person, who had few tools at her disposal, ineffectively trying to get through her day. In her emotionally charged state, Toni did not yet have the cognitive capacity to modulate her behavior; the arousal process took her from stimulus to action in a short period of time (Siegel, 1999). She stomped away from teachers in shame from what she had just said and fear of what might next come out of her mouth.

In contrast, the adults were an organized team, with all the institutional power at our fingertips. With our collective resources, the adults would never lose. Toni's team learned to be like the black-belt martial artists whose strength and training allow them to stay calm in a conflict, knowing that they hold a huge advantage. They rarely if ever need to actually fight; instead, they can educate. Mendler (2012)

Figure 1.2**Specific Behavior Plan****Behaviors that we are responding to as teachable moments:**

- Toni shouts out when work is assigned.

What the teacher says or does to shape new behavior:

- Leave Toni alone for a few seconds.
- Say, “Can you tell me in a quiet voice what is hard about this?”

What student can be expected to do when given a prompt:

- Remain silent; no need to talk to teacher immediately.
- Ask for more time to cool off.
- Ask to go to her safe place.
- Talk to the teacher quietly.

Behaviors that demand one consistent response:

- Toni swears aggressively or is verbally abusive.

What the teacher says or does to interrupt behavior:

- “Toni, it is time to go to your safe area.”

What is expected of student:

- To go to her safe area as quietly as she can.

Staff who must be contacted:

- The assistant principal, who will meet Toni at her safe area or come to the room and communicate to her the consequences to her actions once she de-escalates.

Behaviors that we are ignoring:

- Toni mutters under her breath.
- Toni puts herself down verbally.
- Toni scowls.
- Toni disregards headgear rule.

notes: “The only way to effectively manage provocative moments is for you, the classroom leader, to stay calm” (p. 49). Toni’s teachers stayed cool in the moment, knowing that they worked as a team, and their calm gave Toni the time and space to try again. For Toni’s teachers, maintaining calm was supported by four important conditions:

Figure 1.3	Get Me Out of Trouble Plan
<p>Name: <u>Toni</u></p> <p>These things can really make me upset:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff standing too close to me • Not giving me time to stop doing one thing before I have to do another • Feeling stupid <p>Ways I can avoid the things that upset me:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't go into class if I am already pissed off • Do my homework in study hall <p>Ways I can keep calm when things are starting to upset me:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask to be left alone ("I want to be alone now") • Listen to music <p>My escape plan—where I go in school to be safe when all else fails:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outside Sandy's office 	

1. They knew what the absolutes were and what steps would be taken in those situations.
2. They knew they had the latitude and flexibility to work with Toni in situations that were not absolute and that they would not be second-guessed. This assurance gave them the security to discuss how they might nudge Toni's learning even more the next time they were in a similar situation.
3. They knew they could review as a team Toni's specific behavior plan, and its lists of absolute, ignored, and teaching moment behaviors, which evolved as Toni herself developed a broader array of coping skills.
4. They knew that supporting Toni's emotional development was often going to take precedence over developing any particular academic skill. It was not yet time to judge the team's success based on Toni's standardized test scores.

Toni Responds to Our Holding the Hope

We recognized Toni's breakthroughs mostly in retrospect; each was the result of Toni coming back to school day after day and of the staff holding onto the hope. Sandy, her therapist at school, could look Toni in the eye and talk to her in a direct language rarely practiced in social work schools. For instance, Sandy might say, "It's not okay that you dumped all your shit on that teacher." Sandy's wording connected Toni directly to her own emotions because it was the wording Toni used to talk to herself. In those moments, Toni felt heard and understood. After a year and a half, Toni finally allowed her math teacher to show her the steps of long division. One day, when she had dropped all of her books and folders in the hallway, Phillip, a teacher with blonde hair and bright blue eyes, set aside his own pile of papers to help Toni with hers, and she said, "That was the nicest thing anyone could have done for me." When it came time for writing her senior thesis, the school offered Toni the tutorial support of Meg, a soft-spoken Irish girl from the suburbs, and Toni accepted. The two of them sat in the cafeteria, finding a common language to navigate through the 75 note cards and pages of bibliography required to graduate.

As a school administrator, my own relationship with Toni had always been tenuous. More than once, I was the target of her wrath. I watched from afar as she learned to write book reports, went to a job training program off-campus, cochaired the school's weekly community meeting, and truly became a citizen, someone who would contribute, not only to our school, but to the larger community. In many ways, she changed more than any student I have known in my 30 years in the business. One day, in the middle of her senior year, we were walking onto the campus together. I realized I was jealous of the many staff and students who were now in her circle of trust and warm regard. I decided to take a small risk and let her know how much I admired her efforts. I caught up with her and said, "Toni, you have done an amazing job of turning around your life." There was a pause. She eyed me for a moment and then exclaimed in her most

boisterous voice, a voice that still echoes in all of our memories, “It’s about time, huh?!”

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for Individual Students

1. *Create schedules that maximize students’ contact with the adults who are having success building their trust.* Even if it appears to be giving these students something special that they have not yet earned, this extra contact is what they need. Each student has a different capacity to develop trust.
2. *Let staff who have established trust communicate to the student the school’s expectations*—what are the most valuable and guarded elements of the school’s culture?
3. *Help each student develop simple coping tools for times of heightened emotions* (going to a special quiet part of the school, taking a walk on grounds, controlled breathing). Make a plan for what the student should do in stressful situations. (See Figure 1.3 for a sample plan.)
4. *Work with students to develop a signal for when they need to escape to a designated quiet place.* Something simple like three fingers in the air can be a way of asking for permission to go without having to give an explanation in the moment. Most students who challenge us with eruptions the way Toni did need escapes before they make things worse. We know they cannot change their behaviors overnight. We want to find ways those behaviors have the least effect on the school’s functioning.
5. *Don’t enforce consequences immediately when de-escalating the situation with a student.* Almost always, the first task with challenging students who are having an outburst is to support them in calming down. Give these students options for correcting themselves or cooling off, if the momentary behavior does not undermine the safety or culture of the school.

6. *Build in time and positive feedback for students' individual accomplishments.* Challenging students like Toni come into school way behind the pack in feeling good about themselves, so don't worry about spoiling them with compliments—that's an unlikely outcome. More likely, your compliments will build relationships that can allow you to tell the truth about all their behaviors.
7. *Don't stop giving sincere compliments when the student seems to be rejecting you—you are being tested to see if you can hold up to a bit of rejection.* Some students will reject you before you can reject them. Don't let their attitude change your attitude of appreciation. They have to know that you believe that they can be successful in the culture.

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for the Adult Team

1. *Storytelling:* Share what student you hung in with for the longest time before you began to achieve academic success. What were the pivotal moments? Share what student you hung in with for the longest time before there was a level of trust. What helped you hang in through that time? What were the pivotal moments?
2. *Review all behaviors that require absolute and unvarying responses.* As teachers we make so many complex decisions every day; having clarity about the absolute behaviors we must address reduces the burden of decision making.
3. *Develop specific behavior response plans for challenging students.* (See Figure 1.2 for a sample plan.) Consider which student behaviors might be responded to as teachable moments, based on the context and the time available, and which might be safely ignored. Share results of using the plan and adjust accordingly.

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for Administrators

1. *Identify places where students who are escalating can calm down.* These places should be easily accessed; a student who in the moment has very little ability to calmly ask for help should not have to navigate a complex set of permissions to get where he or she can recover. Make it easy. The school culture will develop its capacity for safety and compassion.
2. *Develop structures that allow staff who are working closely with challenging students to communicate their progress.* Toni's team shared with each other her small successes and evolving abilities. They were all abreast of what had been tried and what would be the next step to target. Teams need time to meet, or technology, to share the latest news.
3. *Review each year the list of absolute rules and consequences and keep them to a minimum.* Certain rules, followed in lockstep, are critical to maintain the school's culture, but sometimes a school's rules have not been reviewed for years and just keep getting reprinted in the handbook. In many schools, teachers arbitrarily treat a lot of rules as guidelines, because the rules are not the best practice in the moment. The professional culture of a school can erode when teachers feel compelled to go their own way in support of a needy student. Administrators can unite a staff around a smaller set of absolute rules—easier to remember, easier to enforce, easier to supervise—and a lot of reasonable guidelines.

2

Charlie and Dean

Creative Transitions

For challenging students, one of the hardest tasks of the school routine is moving successfully from one place in the school building to another. Many individualized education plans (IEPs) identify transitions as areas of weakness for these students, and yet they are often required to make many shifts during the day, which set them up for being disciplined. The stories of Charlie and Dean reveal the difficulty in dealing with transition problems: some are about the physical hurdles in schools, and some are about the atypical hurdles buried within the students.

Challenges for Charlie and Dean:

- Sensory overload
- Impatience
- Impulsiveness and ineffective coping strategies
- Rigidity
- Minimal peer relationships to help bound their impulses

Challenges for the adult teams:

- Being spoken to rudely

- Setting aside time for an intervention
- Keeping the group stable while helping one student

Getting Ready for Charlie

Marie was a high school history teacher, new to our school and new to the profession. I checked in on her as she was setting up her room during staff orientation week. She had placed her desk in the back corner of the room, where she felt it would be least obtrusive.

“You’re thinking strategically about the details,” I said. “That’s what we have to do. But let’s put your desk up at the front. From there, you’ll have a direct line of sight through the door into the hallway. When students are walking in the school, they’ll know we are keeping a caring eye on them; it can help them resist their worst impulses. And if students want to meet with you, and they are shy, they can see you from the door instead of having to step into the room and search for you. We don’t want to give the impression that we are hiding from them. We want them to get the message over and over that nothing pleases us more than to be available. They’ll see you at your desk, and you can wave hello. Those little waves will make you feel good all through the year. And I have to talk to you about Charlie.”

Charlie was diagnosed along the autism spectrum, but no one is a pure model of any diagnosis. All of his teachers still needed to develop an awareness of the collection of behaviors that Charlie demonstrated.

Charlie loved cars. In his bulging, messy pack, he carried a sketch pad for drawing all sorts of automobiles, in great detail. When he heard a fellow student discuss drivers education, Charlie would jump into the conversation and share information about engines and gas mileage and tire specifications. At times his contributions were appreciated, and he developed a couple of friendships with other students who also were fascinated by cars. Other times, he was gently ignored.

Charlie had solid academic skills but could be hyperfocused on a task. This hyperfocus meant that every transition during the school day was a struggle—not just the big transitions from one class period to the next but also the little ones, from entering the room to paying attention to directions to closing his textbook in order to begin to write on a worksheet. He struggled to find the binder where he kept notes and then to turn to a clean page, because that meant passing by so many interesting ideas already in the binder. He'd amiably call out, "Mr. Benson, do you remember this one, the sentence I wrote about circus clowns?" He was always rushed, always behind, always determined to please.

Some days he just fell apart. "I can't do anything. I can't do anything!" he'd moan loudly, his head down. "I can't go to class today. Don't you understand?!" He acted as if walking into the classroom was walking into a torture chamber. "There's just too much of everything!" Charlie had fewer days like these as he matured, and as we all learned ways to help him enter a room: a clearly designated seat with a cushion; a seat near the windows but with his back to them (to decrease distractions from outside and to afford him natural light on his papers); a seat near the pencil sharpener; a reliable and welcoming "Hello, Charlie" from the teacher.

Marie, our new teacher, would have to know all of this. Charlie would need to see from the first day that Marie was in on what worked for him, that she was on the team. She would also have to be alert for ways that she and Charlie could develop their own special bonds and rituals—he had a unique and playful engagement with every one of his teachers.

Marie would need to know about the voice volume scale that we developed for Charlie (see Figure 2.1). Charlie had difficulty hearing how loud he was and was often oblivious to the context of his talking. Telling him to "keep it down" was too vague—how far down was down? One guideline for hanging in with challenging students is to make directions simple and consistent. Number scales can work better than verbal explanations for describing a point in a range

Figure 2.1 Voice Volume Poster

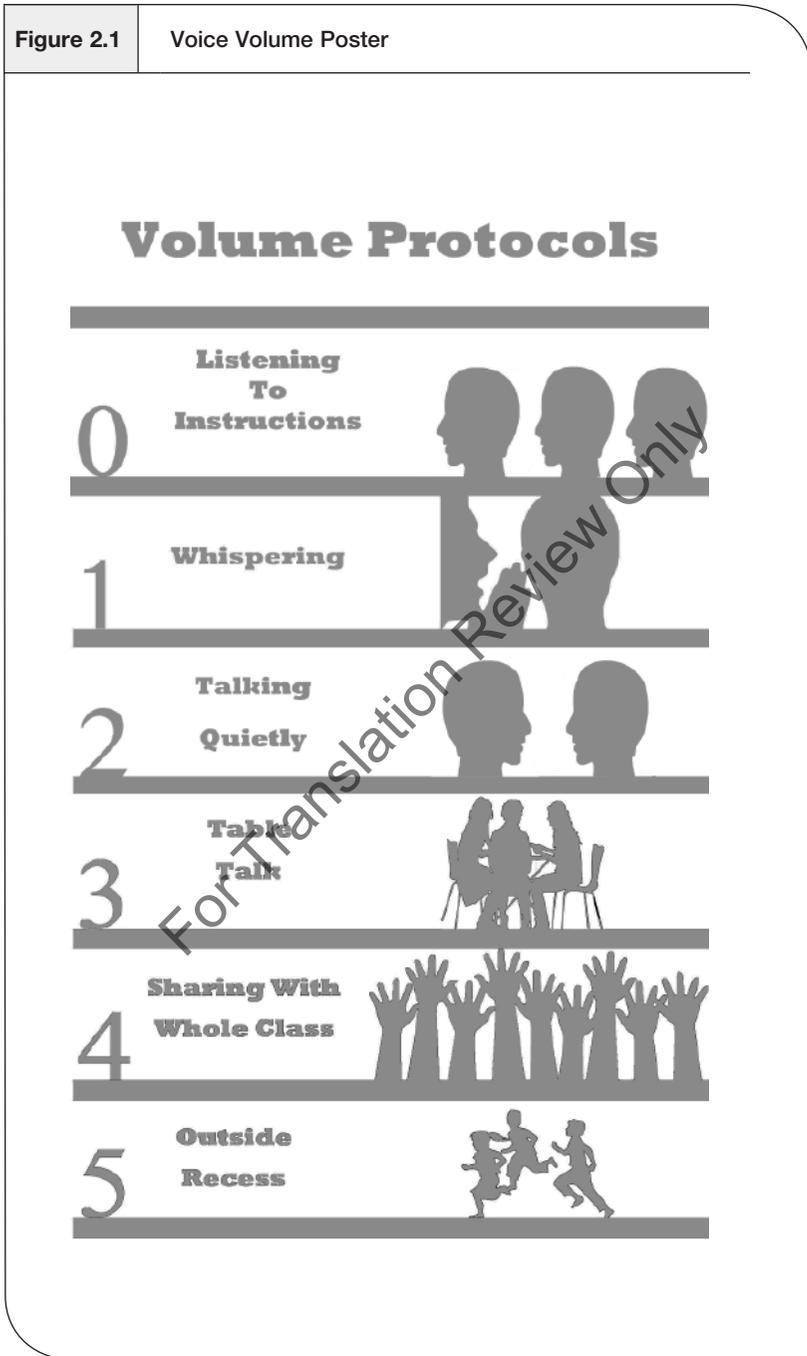


Image by Robert Worth

(we'll see a number scale used to communicate emotions in Chapter 3), and we know an image is worth a thousand words. With Charlie's input (he had great ideas for images), we developed the number volume poster, and with that we could say, "Charlie, we're at Level 2 volume now." Some teachers liked this approach so much that it became part of their class culture, a way to give all students a rubric for conversing, one that identified volume levels between the difficult absolute of silence and the anarchic roar of the playground at recess.

Experience the Classroom Through a Student's Senses

I wanted Marie to view everything she did through the lens of Charlie. By asking "How will Charlie do at this point in the lesson, and what cues will he follow?" the class work would go well for everyone. After Marie put her desk in place, she pondered how to set up the student chairs and tables for Charlie. In rows? In small groups? In a big circle?

We discussed the various ways to arrange chairs and tables. For each arrangement, we predicted what Charlie might assume was expected of him. For instance, if asked to sit directly across from a very focused student, he would likely engage that student in conversation, even if what we wanted was for him to take the cue to be silent. If our best prediction of his behavior proved incorrect, and Charlie was alert to everything in the class but the lesson at hand, we would try again. A key in this process was to believe that Charlie had every intention of being a good student—his behavior was out of synch with our expectations because the environment affected him, not because he wanted to be difficult. How would the placement of his chair support his strengths as a learner and minimize his weaknesses?

Marie had an "aha" moment: "The tables and chairs don't have to be exactly the same every day. They should be when Charlie walks in the room, to get him oriented. It would be cruel to switch that

every day. But once we are settled in, we can make small changes for the lesson.”

The biggest challenge for Marie in hanging in with Charlie was the study period right after lunch. Charlie was always revved up from the chaotic stimulation of the cafeteria. He had seen and heard a thousand things. His mind buzzed with stories and potential drawings and important advice and new jokes he needed to share with his peers. Could the setup of her room moderate his behavior and decrease her need to intervene?

Marie considered all the elements of the physical classroom that she could influence—textures, colors, sound, light, scent. She aimed to make her room as soothing as possible. She went for it in ways that no one else in the school had tried. She turned off the overhead fluorescent lights. She put on soft music or the sounds of a babbling stream. She brewed a pot of mint tea. She stood by the door, slowing everyone down by shaking each student’s hand and greeting them by name as they walked into this very unusual classroom. When it was time to be quiet, she rang a deeply sonorous gong with a soft wooden mallet; the class developed a routine of listening as long as they could until the last vibration of sound became inaudible. “Best 20 seconds of the day,” she said.

It was a wonderful set of interventions. Her room became a special place, even though every teacher could do a version of what she had done. The students responded, in part to the novelty but also to the actual soothing conditions. “It helps me as well,” Marie said. “It’s a time of day I also look forward to.” Students teased her about being a hippie—“I am far too young for that!” she responded.

For most secondary school students, walking into a score of rooms every day is a simple task. For a handful of students—those challenged by sensory stimulation or by trauma or by a learning disability—crossing each threshold is a risk, which they have to take over and over again. Few jobs for adults require us to switch work sites and supervisors every hour, to adjust to a shift in sound and seating and objects and tones so often. The chairs in classrooms are

hard, the desks rigid, the lighting harsh. Rooms smell of dry-erase markers and human sweat and antiseptic cleaners. People talk too loudly or too softly, and the pencil sharpener sounds like a dentist's drill. When working with a challenging student, especially those who struggle with sensory overload, you have to ask yourself, "What will make that student want to be in my room? Is my room better than the hallway?"

One More Intervention to Enter the Room

Charlie loved entering Marie's soothing room for study period as much as any other student, but that wasn't the only intervention he needed. He was still so revved up that his voice boomed, and he invariably needed to finish a train of thought aloud with a peer or to tell a joke he had just remembered. He also made a lot of noise until Marie could sit next to him for a moment to help him decide what to work on from his homework list. Marie decided that Charlie needed an even slower and more predictable transition into her room.

The added intervention was that he would be the last student to enter the room. This was nonnegotiable. Marie stood in the doorway, one eye on the rest of the class, her two hands briefly holding Charlie's two hands as he stood in the hallway. There are some students with whom we would never hold hands; some whom we high-five; some who appreciate a quick, firm handshake; and some who let certain teachers put a comforting hand on their shoulder.

To gain entry to the room, Charlie had to tell Marie two things: the work he would take from his binder as soon as he sat down and the joke he would tell the class. The joke telling was Marie's marvelous way of giving Charlie a chance to make people laugh, while adding another sweet ritual for the group. An unexpected side effect of the ritual was that Charlie's entrance into the room became important for his peers, giving him a more secure place in the group. Charlie told Marie about a joke book from home, and he was now carrying it in his backpack. He never forgot to have a new

joke ready. She stood with him each day to make sure his transition into that room would likely be successful. He would then enter class, get his work out, and raise his hand to signal to Marie that he was prepared. She rang the gong. As its last echo faded away, she told the class it was time for Charlie's joke, and after it was told to a variety of groans, laughs, and occasional applause, the group knew it was time to settle into their work routines, Charlie as well.

Dean Always Disrupts the Beginning of Classes

Dean also had a terrible time transitioning from one class to another. As a 4th grader, this was a less frequent occurrence than for Charlie in high school, but Dean's volcanic reaction made each change a stress for everyone. He always wanted to be first in line. He stomped and swore when other students were given that position. His teachers felt strongly that being first in line was a privilege for the students, and Dean could not always get that prized position. Even when first in line, he would often push against other students and then race forward, ahead of the teacher monitoring the class; this often provoked other students to race with him, which made him race faster, creating fears of students tripping over each other against the hard linoleum floors or into door frames. In class he was a ball of distracting energy and emotional frailty, often annoying his peers and disrupting the beginning of the lesson. His agitation did not diminish until he could bury himself into the work the teacher assigned. He frequently missed the start of class because he had been unable to behave himself until the lesson was initiated, and had been sent to the principal's office, where he yelled and cried about how unfairly he had been singled out.

We knew a lot about Dean, his difficult family life, his academic strengths and weaknesses. His teachers were working very hard to give him praise as often as possible and to be consistent and uncompromising when he broke important school rules. They knew they had to balance the safety of the class and the smooth functioning

of the school with the needs of this very overwhelmed, and overwhelming, little boy.

As the adult team pondered our options, I remembered and shared Marie's interventions for Charlie, in particular the requirement that he wait by the door with her until she determined that it was time for him to enter the room. She would not let him in until she assessed that he was ready. Marie's other students needed her to smoothly integrate Charlie into their functional space.

Don't Ask Students to Do What They Can't Do

Marie's work crystallized a key notion in our group's work hanging in with Dean: don't ask challenging students to do what they can't do. Don't set them up for a failure that will have no redeeming possibilities. In our work with challenging students, we have to accept that they will stumble, periodically regress, make unexpected leaps in functioning, and then still have bad days or hours or moments. But we must not ask them to do tasks that are likely to result in failure. If we knew nothing else, we knew that Dean could not handle the routine of the transitions.

I also remembered Riley, a student I once had in a math class. He asked me to explain how to do a particular equation. I told him the usual way, and he still didn't do the problem correctly. I repeated my directions; he seemed more confused. I tried a different approach, and halfway through my meandering explanation, Riley's expression told me that he did not understand this explanation either. I looked at him—he had reached out for help and still was so lost. I said, "You don't have to do this problem today, Riley. Right now, I don't know how to explain this to you, and that's my job. I have to do some homework tonight to figure this out. It's my failure, not yours. I promise you that I will do my homework and give you a good explanation tomorrow. I promise you that you will get this when I know what I am doing. OK?" Teaching every child, leaving no child behind, is so difficult to do. Too many students internalize a belief that our failure

to know how to teach them in the moment is actually their failure to learn. For challenging students, abandoning them to repeated failure is part of what has made them so challenging.

Dean's team decided that our failure to know how to make transitions go well should not continue to be his failure. We decided that he would not make the routine transitions. One teacher said, "I hadn't thought of this before, but it's as if standing in line and waiting are torture for Dean. And going into a room filled with students wandering about to their seats makes him stressed too, in ways we just don't understand yet. It makes sense that he tries to get to the front of the line and race into the room just to get through that difficult part of the day."

Dean Must Demonstrate Readiness

We met with Dean and his mother and told them our plan: while the other students walked to the next location, Dean stayed for five minutes where he was with a member of the teaching team. During this time, he would start the assignment of his next class. (If the transition was to recess, the staff member would play a card game with him.) If after five minutes he was able to be engaged and polite, he could rejoin his class and was walked to the room where his classmates were now seated, organized, and already working. If in those five minutes he could not demonstrate readiness to go to class, he was walked to the principal's office, where he would likely have ended up before we had this plan, but now without a public failure and disruption to the next class getting started. (A big part of this plan's implementation was the buy-in from the staff and their hope that the five minutes spent with him one to one would result in a huge shared benefit for everyone.)

The plan worked immediately, a rare occurrence of guessing right when we didn't truly understand the causes of the problem. The plan revealed that Dean wanted to get to class; there had been a chance that he would be happy to not be in class. Had he shown

no motivation to join his peers, that would have told us something else about Dean's struggles, and we would have needed to rethink this strategy; instead, he displayed motivation to do well. Most unexpectedly, he often seemed happy to have those five minutes with a teacher to himself when he wasn't being lectured for being in trouble. His teachers could appreciate his strengths; he could be a "good kid" getting started on his work. Then, at the end of the five minutes, he would enter his next classroom, already focused on the task at hand, while the rest of the class and his teacher had had a few minutes of quiet transition.

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for Individual Students

1. *Assess the sounds, lighting, smells, and textures of the classroom* if a student is having trouble with a transition into a room. Sometimes it is not the task or the type of teacher, but the actual physical environment encountered that is problematic. This is particularly true for students on the autism spectrum. With just a few questions, many students can tell you what is irritating them.
2. *Preserve the student's standing among his peers during difficult transitions by limiting those times.* Charlie and Dean were annoying their peers over and over and preventing the group from settling into its routines. Limit the amount of disturbance our challenging students can cause; the predictable functioning of the group is critical to the functioning of the challenging students who are part of that group. You don't have to remove challenging students from the group after the damage is done, if you can alter ahead of time the conditions of entry.
3. *Consider the arrangement of the desks and chairs* and how it will enhance or inhibit the completion of each task for the student. Practice with the students rearranging the room and reward them for doing it well. This will also help them learn

to alter their learning environments to be more successful in other settings.

4. *Don't tolerate significantly bad behavior.* For Dean's team, as we saw with Toni's team in Chapter 1, vulgar and aggressive language aimed at a person was not to be tolerated and triggered a predictable course of action. Perhaps the team might learn something else about what Dean found difficult, but whether or not they learned anything, Dean had to experience a good dose of calmly structured, reasonable consequences. For Dean, the first step was a trip to an administrator's office and a call to his mother.

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for the Adult Team

1. *Storytelling:* Share what you have done in any setting to make your classroom an inviting place to enter. What have you seen other teachers do that you wish you could do?
2. *Consider ways to soften the sound in classrooms,* adding such features as cushions, noise-reducing headphones, quiet corners, rugs, and foot-tapping bands around the legs of chairs.
3. *Discuss particular transition routines that have been effective with challenging students and that likely will be comforting to all students.* Focus on routines other than the academic "Do Now" activities that teachers often use to start a class.
4. *Support each other in strategically, and temporarily, removing a student before the transition* that routinely causes the student to undermine the functioning of a class. Hanging in with challenging students means helping them save face and allowing their peers to see them as not always irritating. Discuss how to prevent the intervention from being seen as a punishment. Plan who will handle the student in question and who will work with the rest of the student group during each transition of the day. Sometimes a strategy allows one teacher to handle both

the group and the student; sometimes an approach requires extra adult support.

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for Administrators

1. *Make use of occupational therapists* when assessing the sensory stimulation in environments. They have a deeper knowledge base than even many special educators for evaluating what can distract and how to decrease overstimulation.
2. *When budgets allow, buy more individual student desks instead of tables.* Individual desks can be configured in rows, pairs, trios, quartets. Students can face their own desk away from stimulation without displacing others. Form should follow function, and the more flexibility teachers have in arranging seating, the more likely the seating will maximize the learning of a given activity.

For Translation Review Only

3

Rosa

Sitting Together in Silence

Schools are filled with words: instructions, texts, announcements, reprimands, greetings. Schools are equally filled with emotions. At any given moment in a school, students and teachers feel a range of emotions as broad as all of human experience—but schools do not encourage us to demonstrate most of those feelings, even when heartfelt. For many challenging students, learning to live in a diverse world means learning to moderate emotional extremes so that the business of school gets accomplished. Their emotional learning is often a work in progress. The story of Rosa is about the strength of silently hanging in when a student is struggling with emotion and enough words have already been spoken.

Challenges for Rosa:

- Dyslexia
- Moodiness
- History of school failure and retention
- Trauma history

Challenges for the adult team:

- Identifying and appreciating her effort
- Trusting her honesty
- Acknowledging her emotions
- Allowing her time to process
- Working from her nonacademic strengths

Rosa Talks About What She Knows Well

I watched Rosa on her skateboard one day at recess. It was the first step in developing a good working relationship with her. She was graceful and strong. She was more skilled on her board than any of the boys in the playground, who were unsuccessfully trying to complete basic flips. She skated in and around them. The boys bantered back and forth, as 7th graders do, teasing someone who had fallen or calling “Watch this!” and enduring predictable howls of laughter when the trick failed.

On her own, a few yards from the boys, Rosa practiced one maneuver again and again. I didn’t know the name of the trick or the series of turns and jumps involved; I assumed she had failed when the board scooted away or she landed awkwardly. She’d grab the board and begin again. And again. And again. Even after she had completed the trick, she did not alter her routine. She kept practicing the move. At one point, one of the boys yelled over to her, “You having trouble doing that? Check this out!” In a moment, he was on the ground. Rosa said nothing, just smoothly glided past him on her board toward where I stood.

“He’s a loser,” she said to me quietly. “Just all talk.” She jumped down on her board. It spun around twice in the air and then landed just where it had been.

“Wow,” I said.

“Everyone can do that,” she said, looking down.

I pointed at the boys. “They don’t seem to be able to do what you do.”

“They just talk,” she said flatly.

I didn’t know anything about skateboarding. I asked Rosa to tell me about the trick I had observed her practicing. As she did, she spoke more than I had ever heard her say before. She told me the trick was complicated and that she occasionally was able to make it work, but she needed to keep practicing until she could do it every time. She wasn’t satisfied yet. It took all of my professional experience not to interrupt her with a lecture about how she might be a better reader if she put as much time into reading as she did her skateboarding. She was talking and I needed to listen.

She told me she lived next to a skateboard park, where she worked on her tricks every day. She told me the names of the various tricks she had mastered, each one more complicated than the one before. She said there was an older boy in the neighborhood who was “the best”; he gave her ideas and advice (remembered word for word), which she applied with dedication to her routines. Not once did she boast about her accomplishments.

“I admire anyone who practices to get better at a skill,” I said truthfully, finally succumbing to my desire to teach her a lesson. “I admire you. I never knew this about you. I really appreciate everything you just told me. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she answered and for a moment looked up at me. We exchanged smiles.

A complaint I have often heard through the years from challenging students is that they are never understood. The need of every child to be understood, to be listened to respectfully likely has roots in our evolution of survival as social creatures (Siegel, 1999). Listening is a fundamental way to invite a child into the community. It is commonly said that listening is the cheapest concession you can make. In schools, adults listen, but mostly for the answers to our academic questions. We listen to determine what is right and wrong. We listen for opportunities to lecture. It is unlikely a previous school adult had ever listened to understand Rosa’s complex study of skateboarding. Her poor school performance through the years

had made her the object of our educational improvement plans, the defective model, the one who did not understand—not the one who wasn't understood.

Students Need Competence to Feel Confident

I had my ulterior motives with Rosa, as I always do (we'll see them again in Chapter 4). I wanted her to work harder at academics and to be a better reader. I wanted her to be less susceptible to sudden displays of anger and self-defeating behaviors. I wanted her to look forward to a productive adult life; she knew that she could not earn a living on her skateboard.

I did not doubt that she was learning something critically important by her persistence in practicing on the skateboard. John Holt wrote in his classic book *How Children Fail*, "What some of these kids need is the experience of doing something well—so well that they know themselves, without being told, that they have done it well" (1964, p. 38). Rosa was learning to do something well.

Challenging students often display diminished academic confidence because they have diminished academic competence. It's hard to try again after years of struggle. If they look only at surface skills and test scores, all students who are behind in their academics have evidence to undermine their confidence (Vail, 1994). To change her view of her own potential, Rosa's school would need to be a place that reinforced her strengths, not only as a skateboarder but as a reflective person who had the capacity to self-motivate, which she clearly had. How sad that schools had given her a very different message about herself.

School had never been easy or particularly kind to Rosa. She had already repeated a grade. She read two years below her peers. She was in my study period at the end of the day, but she rarely did her work. She doodled on papers or chatted quietly with her friends. She spoke less than most but was a sharp observer of the school's social scene. I knew that because she would periodically

give me a heads-up on a brewing conflict: “You better talk to Malik, Mr. Benson.” She’d briefly look me in the eye, nod, and then look down. When I would suggest that she do her homework, she would just keep looking down.

In classes, Rosa’s moods shifted quickly. She could be conscientiously engaged (with some of the determination she showed on her skateboard), then sadly withdrawn, then angry, after which she was ashamed of herself. Her moods seemed to change for no apparent reason. This emotional instability is not uncommon in children with a trauma history; Rosa had had an abusive father, who was no longer in the home. She reacted to the perceived threat of pain from poor school performance with a kaleidoscopic array of emotions.

Unfortunately, schools generally respond poorly to student emotions, especially anger. In one school where I have worked, students who responded angrily to a demerit, even if the anger was self-directed, such as a student stamping her foot, automatically received a second demerit for being disrespectful. When asked if a student who reacted to a demerit by crying would also automatically earn a second demerit, the staff at first seemed puzzled by my question—why would a student be punished more for crying? But anger was not OK. When we work with challenging students, we have to allow the students to safely manage their actual feelings. That may simply mean being quiet with them when they are angry, and doing little else. Not ignoring, but bearing witness.

Sit Down and Watch the Students

Bearing witness is hard, particularly with challenging students; we are almost compulsively integrating ourselves into their activities and thoughts. We devise lesson plans, organize the room, give them constant advice, and complete the loop by sharing our evaluations. What many of us forget to do is simply watch our students be who they are in the absence of our interventions. I had been a witness to Rosa’s skateboard skills. Given the pressures of required curriculum

and crowded classes, in some ways we don't know our students as they know themselves. We persist in defining them through their responses to our plans for them.

We should plan for them, of course. I also urge that we periodically set aside a few moments to solely observe the most challenging students. Literally, sit in your chair, with no papers to mark or e-mails to answer. Watch. Set a timer and watch for two minutes. "Nonverbal behavior is a primary mode in which emotion is communicated" (Siegel, 1999, p. 121), and as Yogi Berra said, "You can observe a lot by watching." As you watch your students, you might note the following:

- When they walk into the room, are they alone? Laughing? Slumping? Alert to the characteristics of the room?
- When they sit, are they comfortable in the chair? Wedged behind the desk? Organizing their books? Checking out who is behind them?
- When they are working on their own, do they look up to think and then return to the task? Are they smiling to themselves? Do they look scared? Rushed?
- When they express emotion, do they say the emotion they are feeling? Do they express it through their physical movement? Do they hesitate to show what they feel?

I learned through observation to predict how one student, Lisa, a depressed teenager, was feeling each day. On her good days, her hair was neatly brushed, her clothes showed a stylish attention to color and fabric, and she said hello to me on her way to her desk. On her bad days, she looked a mess and tried to slip unobserved into class and her seat. It was easy to regulate my interactions with Lisa and to not expect the same level of immediate responsiveness to the class work from day to day. Some days she needed more time and a gentler tone.

To make my assessment more precise and to let Lisa know I was noticing and acknowledging her overall readiness for the business of learning, she and I developed a simple form of nonverbal

communication, based on a scale of emotions. I would quietly say to her, “What’s today’s number?” A number between 7 and 10 (she was invariably well dressed) meant she was having a good day, and I could push her hard to produce. A number between 4 and 6 meant that she was just managing and might need more time to get work done. A number below 4 (when she invariably looked a mess) meant that I should give her a lot of space, and she would let me know when she was ready to work. No other students had to hear this interaction, and Lisa did not have to provide me with an extended verbal summary of her condition.

Lisa was self-aware enough to measure and communicate her capacity to get to work each day; Rosa could not easily identify or predict her own emotional states; they changed so quickly. The moods of trauma victims can rapidly alternate between hyperarousal and numbing, and the often uncontrollable swings significantly interrupt learning. These students are often flooded or, just as often, are empty (Ogden & Minton, 2000). The pace of their thoughts and emotions cycle so fast that they lose their cognitive organization, shut down, and become unresponsive—or they overrespond, their reactions seeming disproportionate to what is going on.

Rosa Tries Her Best to Control Her Anger

I observed Rosa one day in science class. She raised her hand. The teacher did not see her. Rosa patiently kept her hand raised. When the teacher looked up, she responded to another student who had just raised his hand and gave him permission to get a drink of water. “But that’s what I wanted!” Rosa snapped angrily. “I had my hand up first. That’s not fair!” Rosa was reprimanded for shouting out. She was told to sit quietly and wait for the boy to return, and then she could get her drink. She closed her book, put down her pencil, and stared ahead, her jaw quivering. When she did get her turn, she did not look up as she crossed the room. The door closed with a hard bang as she went to the hallway fountain. I caught the teacher’s eye and gave her a signal to just let it be.

Rosa had shouted out and had closed the door loudly. But she also had stayed in her seat, said nothing to make things worse, and walked across the room without distracting others. In those ways, she had done well. I told the teacher that Rosa had waited a long time with her hand up, also a positive sign.

Later in the day, the teacher told me she had spoken with Rosa and apologized for having kept her waiting so long for a drink. “I don’t think an adult had ever apologized to that kid before,” she said. “When I told her that I was sorry she had waited so long with her hand up, she seemed to melt.” She had also told Rosa that she’d seen and appreciated the many good behaviors Rosa had demonstrated, even when she was upset. “You were angry and frustrated,” she had said to Rosa. “It’s OK to feel all that.” Their relationship in class improved steadily following this episode. One-to-one time with a challenging student, when we are not lecturing, can profoundly shift the dynamics.

Hanging in with challenging students often requires teachers to quickly prioritize our most important interests in the moment. In their conversation, Rosa’s science teacher chose to focus on Rosa’s strengths, to recognize what had gone well. She did not dwell on the public display of bad manners Rosa had impulsively demonstrated—the lesson on manners and patience would best be delivered at another time. There was sure to be another time, cushioned by their successful conversation and connection.

Many young people do not have words for their feelings. They may verbally be limited to “sad-mad-glad” but physically feel so much more. Students who have been traumatized, both at home and in school, can be flooded with emotions and sensations—but not be able to say what they are feeling. They react. When an adult can give the student a name for the feeling, the student can sometimes let go of the behavior, because someone has noticed.

Help Identify the Feelings Driving the Behavior

When you are hanging in with a challenging student, make an effort to identify the feeling a student is experiencing before coaching a behavioral change. Rosa did not know that her behaviors were communicating a strong emotion. A teacher's attention to her primary emotion ("You are really frustrated, huh?") could literally stop her behavior. Rosa then felt safe and understood by the teacher, which was a prerequisite for taking the risk to learn. From her skateboarding, Rosa knew deep inside that she could learn, but she could not easily cope with the strong emotions that emerged when the task was academic.

If a challenging student is not settling down to work (which can manifest in behaviors from complete shutdown to loud moans to persistent chatter), quietly ask about emotional states before commenting on the behavior. You can ask questions such as,

- Are you having a bad day?
- Are you confused about this work?
- You seem angry today, yes?
- Does it all seem too much right now?
- Do you need a couple of minutes to just sit and do nothing?

Sometimes all a student can do in response to a question is nod her head. Sometimes that is enough.

Aligning with the Student's Inner Strength

Soon after the day Rosa told me about her skateboarding, we shared an experience of that silent kind, which cemented our working relationship. She was walking down the hall to class. She was already late, and she was scowling. I moved into her path so that she would have to interact with me. I asked her how she was doing. She said

nothing. I asked her if she was ready for class. She said nothing. I told her that she looked really upset. She nodded silently. I had understood.

“Don’t go to class yet,” I said. “Sit over here.” I motioned to a spot on the floor in the hallway. Breaking out of the predictable adult stance, I modeled what I meant by sitting myself down on the floor, a few feet from where I asked her to sit. She paused for a moment and then sat.

“I have no speech for you here, Rosa. I am just going to sit with you until you are ready to go to class, because right now you are not ready. You’d just get in trouble. OK?” She made brief eye contact, nodded, and dropped her head into her hands.

And we sat and sat, in silence. At one point a teacher walked toward us on his way through the school; I said nothing to him. Rosa looked at me, and I calmly returned her look. Perhaps 10 minutes later, two students walked past, and Rosa and I said nothing to them. She looked my way again, and again I said nothing. I had nothing clever or instructive to say. It was dawning on me that I would be sitting there with Rosa for an extended period of time. I had told her I would sit with her until she was ready, and now I had to stand (or sit) by my word.

It was not easy to just sit there, but I knew there was nothing I could say to make her mood pass more quickly. My willingness to be on the floor with her, and not explain our presence there to those who passed by, gave her confidence in my commitment to her—she was not being singled out or explained or admonished. She was just there with me. I was communicating many things to her, perhaps most importantly that I trusted her own capacity to metabolize her feelings (Ogden & Minton, 2000). I was in alliance with the part of Rosa that could self-regulate, the part of her I had witnessed on the skateboard. I was also modeling for her a way to cope with emotions (Wegman & O’Banion, 2013). My experience of watching her determination as she practiced a skateboard trick seemed very significant in my assessment of her ability to hang in.

I inadvertently giggled once. I was thinking about a time when I had not responded to a challenging student in the expected adult manner, because I wanted to force the student to have a personal and unique exchange with me. Gary was an angry and sullen boy, who once swore at me in such a horrific manner that he was suspended from school for two days. What would I say to him when he returned that he hadn't heard before? How could I get him to participate in a conversation? When he came to my office after his suspension was over, I said to him, "Gary, I think anytime a teacher does something you don't like you can call him a" And here I repeated syllable by awful syllable all the things he said to me. "That's what students should be allowed to do," I told him. He stared at me, dumbfounded, and then blurted out, "You're kidding, right?" "Of course, I'm kidding!" I vigorously responded. "What school would ever have a rule like that?!"

When I giggled, Rosa looked at me. "Sorry," I said. "I just had a funny memory." I looked at the time. "This class is over in about five minutes. How about we stay here, and then you go to your next class?" She nodded. When the bells rang to signal the end of the period, we both stood up. "You did well," I said to her. "You have so much silent strength in you. Are you ready for the next class?"

"Yeah," she said, and added, "Thanks." She made eye contact. I reached out my hand and, not surprisingly, she gave it a strong shake.

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for Individual Students

1. *Suggest words to describe how a student is feeling.* Oftentimes students are feeling a mixture of emotions that they cannot sort or identify, so you might say, "I could see how you would be feeling angry and hurt and very discouraged right now." These emotional states are not exclusive to interpersonal conflicts—a page of long division problems can trigger a host of emotions.

2. *Sit in silence sometimes.* Many students will benefit from the quiet safety of a trusted adult who is nearby. Adults can't fix everything with words and explanations. Be available, but not intrusive.
3. *Help the student separate behavior from emotions.* Many challenging students operate with the belief that a behavior was inevitable because they were feeling a certain way—"I threw the book because I was mad." Honor the feeling first—"You sure were mad. It's OK to be mad." Then address the behavior—"It is not OK to throw books."
4. *Model emotional intelligence, within a professional context.* One of the best techniques is to share positive emotions about the student's behavior: "It makes me feel really good seeing you in your seat." "It is so satisfying to me when you ask for help." "Thanks for holding that door for me. That brightens up my day."
5. *Engage with students through their strengths.* If we truly believe that intelligence is multidimensional, then every person has something he or she does that is noteworthy. Rosa's skateboarding talent was the manifestation of many strengths (physical, intrapersonal, visual). The fragmented nature of schooling may dissuade a student from seeing how her skills in one domain can influence her success elsewhere. We can make those connections.
6. *Introduce the student to an appreciative younger student.* A younger audience can provide recognition for students whom we see as challenging, but they see as magical. Rosa taught younger children in her neighborhood park how to do skateboard tricks. Your challenging students may be good at drawing or reading baseball statistics or making a great sandwich—all talents that can be shared.
7. *Provide opportunities for movement.* Many students' emotions build and build until they are given a physical release. Recess