behavior management

Why don’t you leave me alone?
Do I have to sit at this stupid desk?
Why should I have to listen to you?
Why are we reading this dumb book?

Q:

Jennifer Luna helps one of her students sound out the words in “The Farm” on Nov. 12, 2008, at Parkade Elementary School. Luna is a learning transition specialist at Parkade.

A:

Jennifer Luna has the answers for some of the district’s toughest elementary school students.

story by Stephanie Detillier

photos by Christy Siebert
Sitting in a kid-sized chair at a small round table, Jennifer Luna makes a quick assessment of the students in her classroom.

Beside her, a kindergartner is struggling to learn his alphabet, but he can’t stop fidgeting and whining.

Near the bookcases, a second-grader labors to create phrases out of word flashcards. It’s easy work, but not for a student who has spent a lot of time in the principal’s office.

Across the room, another second-grader sits on top of his desk, threatening to run away. He twirls a chair on one of its legs, screams and refuses to do his worksheets.

Luna ignores his behavior.

She has her reasons.

About 20 minutes later, the boy has worked out his issues by himself and sits quietly in his chair. He hasn’t started his work yet, but he raises his hand to ask for a bathroom break.

It’s a sign to Luna that he’s ready for interaction. She begins to share her attention with him.

“If I would have played my power card and interrupted his session,” she explained, “I would have robbed him of the opportunity to figure out for himself that sitting on his desk and yelling across the room isn’t working.”

The skills Luna teaches her students seem basic, but their lives depend upon them. These are children who haven’t learned how to sit still, walk across the room, wait their turn or ask for help.

The world revolves around them. They don’t understand how their actions affect others or what the consequences are.

Luna, 48, teaches Columbia elementary school students who have the most severe emotional and behavioral problems. With her dogged determination, loving discipline and unconventional techniques, she gets through to students other teachers have found impossible to teach.

The old rules of teaching and parenting don’t work in this Parkade Elementary School classroom, the only one of its kind in Columbia. Tantrums and swearing are ignored. Such outrageous behavior is tolerated, not punished. No one is suspended or sent to the principal’s office for the day.

Luna combines her patience and passion to help struggling children find ways to “re-
train” their brains. Misbehaving is redirected into more positive channels. She teaches her students to try different strategies to get what they want.

Through one-on-one learning, she gains their trust and coaches them through the process of cleaning up their inappropriate language, behaviors and thoughts.

“I bring every lesson home to them,” she said. “I let them know that people don’t want to be around them when they act like that. I help them notice that they don’t get what they want this way either.”

Often, it’s like dealing with a 2-year-old inside a 5-year-old’s body. Instead of using words for attention, the children may kick, bite and throw fits.

Luna has only eight students in her K-3 class this year. In 2007, 196 Columbia students in kindergarten through high school were classified as having an emotional disturbance. That’s roughly one per 100 students. Across the state, 8,220 students suffer from emotional difficulties, according to 2007 figures.

These students exhibit inappropriate actions or emotions, poor interpersonal skills, an otherwise unexplainable inability to learn, an unhappy demeanor and/or fears about school or personal problems, according to a definition from the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

Federal law requires school districts to meet the needs of emotionally disturbed students, as well as those with other disabilities, through free individualized programs.

Until this year, three Columbia district-wide classrooms had been designated to provide students with the skills to successfully transition back into regular education rooms, according to Jeaneal Alexander, director of the Columbia Public Schools Special Services Department.

Luna’s is the only remaining specially designed room that serves emotionally disturbed students who are sometimes from different parts of the district. Typically, she works with kindergarten through third-grade students, though exceptions are sometimes made.

Another classroom at Parkade is designated for third- through fifth-graders with emotional disturbances, but these students are co-taught by a special education teacher and regular education teachers. Slowly, most can be integrated into regular education settings as they approach middle school.

Removing students from a regular school or classroom is typically a last resort. Instead, resources are assigned to support teachers within their own classrooms and school buildings, Alexander said.

Many students do remain in a regular class with the assistance of special education staff or are served by other designated special education programs at their school. When those options don’t work, some students are sent to Luna.

Her appreciation of diversity and individuality helps her get to know her students and figure out what makes them tick. She develops a specialized plan to address each academic and emotional problem.

It’s rare for a student to only have one. Often, they have poor language skills, impaired ability to learn a certain subject, difficulty reading social cues and problems being flexible, Luna said.

Although most of her students have an average IQ, they have fallen behind their classmates because of the time their misbehavior robs from the school day. Some are quite intelligent but can’t focus on their work, often because of attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or a difficult life, Luna said.

Some of her students live in poverty, have
family members with mental illnesses, have been abused or have an incarcerated parent. Others simply have not learned to use their social skills to get their needs met in the way other students have.

As hard as it is, Luna doesn't let sympathy for her students interfere with her ability to help them. Her teaching style is loving but firm. She sings fun songs, imitates animal sounds and ends books with a spirited shout of "Ta da!"

At times, she is picky about even the little things, like whether students raise their hands and how they walk across the classroom. It's all part of retraining their brains to behave in a school appropriate manner. They won't get out of completing their work, no matter how much they whine, protest or act out.

"Jennifer is structured yet flexible and genuinely cares about every student she has," Alexander said. "The children know they can count on her. She works and works and works until something works."

One morning in early December, Luna sat with a student wading through a book about babies. When they finished, Luna turned back to the first page so they could read it again.

The student, who had not learned to control his emotions, banged his left fist on the table. "Why are we reading it again?" he demanded. "I don't want to read this dumb baby book."

He continued to slouch in his chair and then threw himself on the floor. Luna made no eye contact.

When she got up to help another student, the boy moved to the top of a table. By the time Luna returned, he was back in his chair. She started to read the book, and slowly he began reading with her.

Because of bad experiences in preschool, this student is working through old hurts. Luna said students often feel bad because they don't know how to read or do math problems as well as others do. Compared to what he used to get upset about, Luna says this incident was minor.

"In May, he'll be walking back to table to read without whining," she said with confidence.

Other teachers might have caved in and pushed the work off to another day, but not Luna. "I need to make sure they're caught up academically," she said. "Otherwise, it's not fair. A lot have missed school because of their behavior and have horrid lives. Why would I rip them off again?"
Luna’s philosophy is that even if her student keeps his head down, he has still heard her.

“He’ll remember what I said,” Luna said. “We’ll read the book again, and he’ll remember more and therefore have less issues because now it’s not new. He’s seen it before.”

Although the number of these students with emotional disturbances has steadily increased, the misconception that they are “bad” or misbehaving on purpose persists.

“Historically, we’ve always believed people choose what they do,” said Luna, who is dedicated to helping others realize an emotional disturbance is a learning disability in thinking and processing skills, emotional regulation, language skills, social skills and cognitive flexibility.

When these students missed school in the past, it was a relief for their teachers and fellow students. Eventually, many dropped out of school.

Luna understands how difficult it is to be a late bloomer. She didn’t learn to read until the third grade. So she knows that if she only teaches her students social skills, they act up again once they get back into regular classrooms because they don’t have the academic skills necessary for success.

On most school days, Luna arrives at Parkade by 7:30 a.m. on a powder blue moped. It’s not uncommon for her to stay at school until 11:30 p.m. working on lesson plans or adding to her detailed files on each student. She’d rather stay late and reserve her weekends. But she can’t make the mistake of being unprepared.

“Down time is deadly for these students,” she explained.

Her lessons are catered to each child’s level. Every day, she provides one-on-one reading instruction. During that session, each student must individually complete four assignments with the help of paraprofessionals.

That means each day, Luna prepares 12 individual assignments to accommodate her students. She uses her restaurant work experience to multitask and make sure “every table gets its food.”

Situated in a trailer at the south end of Parkade, Luna’s classroom is full of bright yellow bulletin boards, stacks of games and shelves of books. But there is no treasure chest. No chart for gold stars.

She does not reward her students with stickers, candy or pizza parties. Having their lives go smoothly is reward enough. She explains to students who ask what they’ll get after completing their work that treats don’t endure and that they don’t teach the lacking skills that caused the problem in the first place.

“Learning how to think through problems, plan ahead for what you want, teach yourself to stay calm and successfully conduct yourself so that your needs are met is so powerful that no treat on the planet could ever touch the sweetness of this kind of success,” Luna said.

Occasionally, she offers real-life incentives. When everything is going well and the students talk out their problems, she extends playtime by 10 minutes. When they work hard, they go outside for recess. Otherwise, there’s no need for them to take a break.

Students are not typically sent home or to the principal’s office for screaming, hitting or cursing. Their punishment is reflective of the consequences they would face in the real world. They are placed out of community.

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wants to be around them when they’re misbehaving,” Luna said.

While other students complete their tasks or participate in group activities, those “out of community” remain at their desk with worksheets. The desks are strategically placed along the classroom walls away from the others.

Those out of community are largely ignored until they provide clues that they are ready to interact with others. For some students, it takes weeks before they learn to raise their hand, stop arguing about work, keep their hands and feet to themselves and walk down the hall without causing a scene. For others, it only takes a few hours or days before they are ready to be held accountable for their actions and willing to talk about what happened.

It’s often awkward for her two paraprofessionals or other visitors to remain inattentive to a child Luna is purposefully ignoring. It’s not easy for Luna either, but she’s spent years training herself to remain calm and unengaged during flare-ups.

As a child of an English professor and nurse, Luna said she struggled to temper her strong will. She became fascinated with the human condition and a champion of the underdog. Unlike most, she enjoys delays at airports when she can listen and observe total strangers.

During her senior year at Warrensburg High School, she began tutoring a student in the special education classroom and decided to make that her major at MU.

It took her a while to find her way into the classroom. After graduating, she married, enrolled in graduate school and gave birth to two daughters.

She started a babysitting service, which quickly grew into a daycare center that served 20 children, including those with behavioral, learning and physical disorders. She chased down counseling workshops across the country, which improved her ability to connect with students, parents and staff members.

After seven years, Luna closed the daycare business. Her daughters were now in middle school, and the work had become a time-consuming challenge from a business and licensing standpoint. She dusted off her lifetime teaching certificate and began applying to school districts. She never imagined how the great the demand would be for teachers specializing in emotional and behavioral disorders.

“I chose a school I thought would be a bit of a struggle for me and would provide a great learning opportunity,” Luna said about Derby Ridge Elementary School, where she taught for 12 years.

She survived her first few years with energy and grit. After a divorce, she became a single parent in the midst of trying to gather resources that would improve her teaching. She spent all of her breaks observing other teachers and stayed up late reading research and developing lesson plans.

Through it all, Luna provided the consistency that her students needed, said Tina Windett, who was teaching at Derby Ridge when Luna started.

“She doesn’t have any button that the kids can push,” said Windett, now the principal at Derby Ridge. “She knows when she needs to walk away and take a few deep breaths. Her calm demeanor has made her very successful in this position.”

Luna’s been told she has a knack for working with emotionally disturbed students, but she’s not convinced.

“Just like any good musician plays his instrument all the time, I’ve continued to play my instrument, even in my time off,” she explained. “I work on honing my skills because there’s always more I can learn.”

On the Wednesday morning after Thanksgiving, Luna spotted one of her students wandering aimlessly around her classroom.

“What’s your job right now?” she asked him.

Most students would stop in their tracks. But he ignored her and continued on.

Luna placed her hand on his arm, and he jerked away and began twirling in a circle.

“For this child, this is where all the problems
This is not your average elementary school student. He reads books with remarkable ease and has discussions about what happens when stars die and how car engines work. When asked during his initial evaluation for a word that starts with the letter “B,” he answered: “Bulgaria.”

Unlike most of the others, he doesn’t have an emotional problem. But with ADHD and behavioral issues, his smarts alone will not carry him through his school career. He is a black-and-white thinker who spends more time arranging his flash cards in perfectly straight lines than concentrating on a task. He is often confrontational and he demands attention.

Luna eventually cornered him near his desk and placed her hand on his chest to soothe him as he worked himself into a tantrum.

“When I stopped you so I could get information from you on what you were doing, what did you do?” she asked him.

“I walked away,” he reluctantly answered.

“Let’s practice,” she said. “Wander around the room, and this time practice stopping and talking to me.”

They act out his scene and when Luna calls the student by name, he said, “Excuse me, Ms. Luna, what is it?” in a calm voice. He stops and tells her he is trying to find a book to read.

When this student first entered her class, he refused to write with any color pen other than green. She gave him a green marker until she could work through other issues. Then she began making him receptive to change, preparing him for the day he’d receive a different color pen.

“Here’s what you do,” she told him. “Use your skills to tell yourself it’s not important.”

One day, she’ll begin teaching him how to do his work without making perfect piles, but for now, she’s managing one issue at a time.

“Here is a future Einstein,” Luna said. “How sad would it be if he missed out on opportunities because we didn’t teach him at a young age how to deal with social interactions appropriately?”

Transitions are difficult for her students. They don’t understand that schoolwork isn’t optional. Often because of their rigidity, they have trouble adjusting to change or even shifts from reading to math lessons. To prepare them and their brains, Luna gives a warning before every classroom movement.

“We will be going to circle in a few minutes,” she will announce, for example. “I know I’ll hear ‘OK’ or ‘I’ll be right there’ or I’ll hear nothing and you’ll just do it. These are all appropriate responses.”

When a student stomps his feet and whines as he heads to his next activity, Luna asks him to go back and try it again.

She calls his movements “strong body” and “strong hands,” and she insists her students act
like learners. The students develop a strong, motherly bond with Luna. They trust her and know she supports them.

“She has a real passion for kids that struggle that is unmatched,” said Amy Watkins, principal of Parkade Elementary School. “She has a willingness to think outside of the box, and she tries to blend what the child needs with what the child likes. It’s magic really.”

Jeffrey Johnson, whose 8-year-old son has been in Luna’s class since 2006, described her as part of his family.

“It’s like having another person in the family you know you can count on and trust with your child,” he said. “My son now knows Ms. Luna will not give in to him. The way we have it set up, he can’t get around anything.

“He can’t lie to me when I ask how his day was. We as a team are talking with each other to make sure he can’t get away with anything.”

Johnson worried that his son would fall through the cracks until Luna offered to take him under her wing. He and his wife had tried home-schooling and other options after their son wasn’t successful in regular classes.

Now, they say, he’s not the same child they knew in 2006. He doesn’t curse or hit or pinch to get his way.

That’s the satisfying part for Luna. Because she works with students over a period of years, she gets to see the end results of her efforts.

“I know it might take two to three years to see changes,” she said, “but I know I will see change.”

Growth often occurs in spikes. Over time, the spikes that represent prolonged good behavior get closer together, and she begins to work the children back into regular education classrooms, one hour at a time.

Principal Tina Windett of Derby Ridge recalled one of Luna’s students in particular who seemed to be a difficult case. By fourth grade, Luna began easing him into regular education classrooms. Although the transition was a bit bumpy at times, he adjusted to a regular fifth-grade class and successfully moved on to middle school.

“He knew she believed he could do that,” Windett said. “Luna gets to know her students and what works for them. She provides support to fill their emotional tanks in a positive way and gets them to improve academically.”

Needless to say, Luna’s job is challenging and unpredictable every day. Sometimes she needs to get away, to hike, ride her bicycle or scale a mountain with a 45-pound pack.

Luna gets away by climbing glaciers around Seattle. She’s trained to run long distance and hike in preparation for three-day journeys up and down the glaciers.

“It’s another way of challenging yourself in ways you never thought you could,” she said matter-of-factly. “Pushing myself to the edge physically helps me push myself in the classroom.

“In both, I tell myself I can put one more foot in front of the other. I can learn to ignore it. I can absolutely let this go. I can stand this for a few more minutes.”

She spends the weekends keeping balanced by camping, gardening and playing piano. Because she cannot openly discuss many of the trying parts of her school day, Luna seeks support through an international counseling center.

“I can’t change these students’ past,” she said. “But I can go someplace safe to talk through my feelings so they don’t get in my way of helping them.”

No matter how uncomfortable it gets, Luna insists that her students remain in the classroom where they can learn skills and re-evaluate their behaviors.

If her students have explosive outbursts or
otherwise become a danger to themselves, Luna accompanies them to the “safe room,” a valuable resource at Parkade. There, she gives her students a chance to get redirected.

Without the ability to command the attention of the class, they can’t help but pay attention, explained Luna, who also uses this method to maintain control.

“They need to know that the buck always stops with me,” she said.

For less severe situations, she’ll hand out a “think sheet,” a half-page with a question for the student to reflect and answer. Luna has one for every occasion and every child.

The questions ask: What’s my job right now? What choice am I making right now? What did I want? What do I need to do to get it?

Students struggling to stay in their seats and focus will wear a 3-pound weighted vest. For those with sensory issues, an elastic band is wrapped around them and their chair, providing the deep sensation of a hug while the student remains working at his desk.

Everything that happens in her classroom is handled in her classroom. She asks parents not to punish their children for misbehaving. Instead, she instructs students to be honest about their school day and instructs parents to discuss with their children how to do better next time.

Students who get in trouble at home for their behavior at school often tend to act out more. Luna said these students become so wary of punishment that they decide after one mistake that they’re already in trouble and might as well misbehave all day long.

When Kim Ball’s 8-year-old niece came to live with her in 2002, she couldn’t read, write or spell her name. Because of developmental delays and lack of school attendance, the girl had a multitude of problems in school. Luna’s classroom provided a setting for her to obtain everything she needed, even breakfast, if she could not be successful among her peers in the hallway or during recess. Ball immediately saw her niece settle down and take things seriously.

“A bond was able to develop because she could express herself with Ms. Luna very easily,” Ball said. “She (Luna) took time to express her genuine care. It made my niece want to give her best since Ms. Luna was giving her best.”

The girl developed confidence and began reading from the scriptures publicly at church.

“You get what you give,” Ball said. “She (Luna) gives more than 100 percent and gets the return.”

It’s not uncommon for parents or guardians to also develop a close relationship with Luna. She calls anytime there is a big incident or notices a trend developing. She won’t call every day with a litany of what a child has done wrong. Sometimes she’ll just send a short note home.

“It’s hard enough to live with any human being who has emotional issues,” Luna said. “It wears parents out having to listen to every little thing their child does wrong.”

Johnson said he appreciates not getting daily phone calls about minor issues like teasing or insulting others.

“I wish we could find more teachers with that patience and time to work with those individuals and families that are struggling,” he said. “No one wants their child falling through the cracks.”

Watkins said Luna impresses her every day and reaches out to parents on an emotional level.

“Sometimes parents feel guilty or that something’s wrong,” she said. “But Jennifer ensures them that we look at those skills just as we do academic skills.”

Although the work is tiring, Luna pictures herself as a 98-year-old woman, still in the classroom, rapping her cane on students’ desks. With all the years it’s taken to develop her deep knowledge of these types of children, she can’t imagine walking away.

“Unless I could take a world tour, I can’t imagine not having my finger in the pie.”