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CEP 832 - ABC Project

**Identifying the problem:** This year I am teaching a class of 16 third graders that present a number of fairly unique issues due to the fact that their second grade teacher took a leave of absence after Thanksgiving, but she never returned to the classroom.  From that time until the middle of February the class had day-to-day, unlicensed substitute teachers doing the planning and instruction.  At that time a long term sub was hired as a replacement, but it was too late to prevent some of the major consequences including the students’ overall lack of trust, attachment issues, and extreme problem behaviors resulting from a lack of consistency in the classroom.  One of the children that was most affected I will refer to as Kaylee. Behaviors that had been apparent since she moved to this school at the end of kindergarten were extremely exacerbated, and I have been trying to help her make progress toward changing them.

Kaylee is, in general, a very sweet girl who wants my attention and approval.  She is a great helper, is very bright, and is quite creative.  When she is in a good frame of mind, she can and does accomplish anything she sets her mind to.  However, there are times that she perceives an assignment as too difficult (particularly those connected to reading), does not like an assignment, is having problems with a friend, or she is in a bad mood and will ‘shut down’.  Kaylee will sit at her desk looking sulky, doing no work, and being totally unresponsive.  When she is like this I cannot get her to even shake or nod her head in answer to a yes or no question.   I have seen her do this for anywhere between 10 minutes to 2-3 hours or more, and often multiple times per day or week.  Even though I have taken the time to garner her trust and build a strong relationship with her, the social attractiveness (Brophy, pp. 22) is not enough to help her come out of this state. The part of her behavior that I struggle with the most is her almost entire lack of response

Kaylee and I have had many discussions about how I as the teacher cannot help to fix a problem that I do not know exists or do not understand, as recommended in Glasser’s 10-Step Model in step 5 (Brophy, pp. 39).  Her job is to communicate with me what is causing her difficulties so that I can do my job and make appropriate changes so that she can participate and learn.  I make sure to provide positive reinforcement in the form of praise for her effort whenever she is able to do this, and am as patient as possible always (Brophy, pp. 22, 25 and 28).  Often the issue is something as simple as Kaylee would like some help reading the text and will not ask, but sometimes it is as complicated as something that happened at home with her brother (who is in the class) or at recess with a friend. She may be tired, or sometimes there is no explicable reason that I can find.  Once Kaylee has communicated why she is upset, I am usually able to help in some way and she will at least begin her work, but the situation is often so far advanced that I am not able to help her problem solve as completely as either of us would like (e.g. from the day before).  This impacts what she is able to accomplish during lessons, with regards to completing assignments and participating.. These discussions have not had a significant impact toward minimizing her shut-down incidents, although I am sometimes able to get more minimal responses (e.g. head movement) for a day or two afterward or the shut-down episodes are of a shorter duration.  I am hopeful that showing continued patience and determination (Brophy, pp. 22) with some of these strategies will help her to continued making progress.

One of the biggest issues I have when deciding how to handle these situations is that Kaylee’s ‘moods’ are sometimes, but not always, work avoidant.  If she was consistent with acting this way during certain subjects or for certain types of assignments I believe that I have several management strategies that I could use effectively.  However, her issues are more personal often enough that I cannot make the assumption she is trying to avoid an assignment.  Kaylee was one of the most personally impacted children when their teacher left last year and she has shown an extreme lack of trust in many adults ever since.  I have made great strides in working with her, which I do not want to jeopardize, but I have to hold her accountable for the classwork that she has missed due to these episodes.  I have been trying to figure out a way to help her manage these situations that do not put our relationship at risk while still helping her to complete assignments and make academic growth that she sorely needs in certain areas.  At this time of the year I am also concerned with helping her to make progress because I want her to feel prepared, academically and behaviorally, for fourth grade.

To this end I have tried a number of strategies.  Toward the beginning of the year I spent a great deal of time problem solving with her, with the focus of building trust and social attractiveness.  I knew that I needed to have a solid foundational relationship with her before I could push her in order to prevent her from lashing out.  As the year has progressed, I have begun pressing her more firmly little by little.  This has taken the form of holding her accountable for completing her work during the appropriate class time (or during one of her free times like snack or recess) in hopes that these negative reinforcers will, “...[increase] desired behavior[s],” (Brophy, pp. 31).  I have made accommodations and modifications to her assignments, work spaces, groups, and more all with the hope of setting her up to be successful.  As often as possible I will offer Kaylee choices so that she has some level of control over her own situation (e.g. choosing where she would like to work).  Most of the academic accommodation strategies have helped to avoid or moderate some of Kaylee’s shut-downs that are connected to classwork (although not the socially based ones) depending on the specific details of the situation.  I also model the behavior that I ask of Kaylee and all of my students in all areas, hoping that having a consistent good example will prove helpful (Brophy, pp. 23).

At the time that I began analyzing Kaylee for this assignment, I would help her start an assignment, give her a chance to work independently, return to offer 2 choices for next steps (either in the assignment or possible changes to the work environment), and walk away to give her a chance to decide within a specified time frame (usually 1-2 minutes).  If she did not make a decision within that time, but continued to sit as still as a statue then at least a portion of the missed work time was made up to me later in the day.  This method helped Kaylee to show some growth toward fixing these behaviors because instead of multiple shut-down episodes per day we were down to perhaps three per week.  However, I felt that she was beginning to plateau and I was not sure what to do next.  I had gradually begun to firm up my expectations for behavior and press for more consistent positive behavior choices, using these same techniques, in hopes of avoiding the plateau.  I was also concerned that this ‘firming up’ would press Kaylee in a way that will cause a reversal of the progress she had shown.  I wanted to develop my repertoire of skills and strategies to help Kaylee to avoid or decrease the severity of her shut-downs with a particular emphasis on those connected to social or other non-academic reasons.

At the time, I had had several conversations with her parents about this issue, but they do not always have a working telephone or vehicle and had not been able to maintain a regular home to school correspondence when I had attempted one.  They clearly care about Kaylee, but their follow through on plans had been mediocre to non-existent.  They had also refused when I attempted to get Kaylee additional support services outside the classroom, up to and including meetings with the school counselor as needed.  To the best of my knowledge the family deals with other versions of challenging behaviors from Kaylee at home, but not this type of shut-down.

**Understanding the problem:** In order to collect data on Kaylee I took both informal, observational notes as well as more formal records of the amount, severity, and duration of Kaylee’s shut down behaviors. My informal observations were recorded in a format similar to a journal and recorded my understanding of the situations I handled with Kaylee including the antecedent to the behavior, the behavior itself, my reaction to the behavior, and how Kaylee responded. Knowing that I am fallible I did not rely solely on my own observations. I also received support from a full time para-professional that works in my classroom who used a spreadsheet to record the time of Kaylee’s shut-downs, their duration, the assignments missed, and her perception of the severity based on Kaylee’s actions (e.g. level on unresponsiveness). All of this information was combined at the end of the observational period in order to design and decide on intervention strategies to try with Kaylee.

In observing Kaylee’s behavior in the classroom, I have noticed a few patterns for when these shut-down episodes occur.  One type of trigger is when I do group work and she is placed in a group that she does not like or cannot be the sole leader of.  Problem solving situations as a class or with individuals present a major challenge for Kaylee.  Additionally, there are times that Kaylee is not able to begin writing during Writer’s Workshop.  If she does not think her idea is good enough or has trouble finding an idea, she simply will not write.  She won’t ask for help, let me know that she is stuck, or take any steps to resolve the situation until I intervene (and sometimes not even then).  Then, once she finally begins writing, she often will not stop when the writing time is over because she does not want to have to make up the missed work later. Similarly, during activities that require Kaylee to read it is not unusual for her to shut down and refuse to complete the work.  Reading is a little bit of a challenge for her, but not as much as for other students that she works with and often volunteers to help.  However, Kaylee likes to feel completely confident in her work, and she does not always have this feeling while reading.

By focusing on when these challenges do occur for Kaylee, I have also been able to deduce a few factors that seem to be consistent for when these behaviors are not happening.  There are almost always two adults in the room, myself and a paraprofessional that Kaylee has known since kindergarten.  Kaylee’s shut-down incidents happen least frequently when there is little chance of her classmates seeing her complete work that she feels to be ‘risky’ (she might not get the right answer).  When she feels confident, she is an active participant in both activities and lessons.  If the activities involve the class being split up into small groups all over the classroom and she is having a positive relationship with her group members, I also rarely see her shut-down.  Kaylee loves to do hands-on activities and projects, particularly when she is allowed to choose who she works with or can work alone.  I get the feeling that she likes the sense of control these aspects give her in the situations.

In general, it seems that the level of risk and control in a given activity are the primary triggers.  Activities that present a challenge to her, like those connected to reading, are high risk.  She would much rather complete a straightforward math computation worksheet than word problems and I almost never see her shut-down during computational math practice.  Math class is a strong time of day for Kaylee on a regular basis.  Numbers and computational thinking seem to make a great deal of sense to her with little help from me.  Kaylee also likes to be a leader and in control of any given situation.  If she is in a group for a project that allows her to be the leader, she is usually highly participatory and engaged.  Also, when she feels confident with our writing topic, Kaylee will often fill several pages with creative ideas and lots of descriptions that she loves to share with the class.  Her writing will usually make the whole class laugh out loud or gasp, as appropriate and she takes tremendous pride in the ability to do this. When she does not feel confident that she can get those reactions is when I see her begin to have shut-down episodes.

Finally, in observing Kaylee’s behaviors, I have also recognized the importance of observing my own.  How I have organized my classroom, how the expectations have been established, and my relationship with all of my students is vital to my ability to manage the class, Kaylee included.  Brophy provides a helpful list of attributes to analyze my behaviors on pages 22-23 of the text.  Of those listed, I feel that the most pronounced attributes, particularly when Kaylee is doing well, include my patience and determination, projection of positive expectations, my ability to accept the individual, but not all of her behavior, and my firm but flexible limits.  I would say that patience is a dominant part of how I run my classroom, especially because my students come from challenging home lives and had a particularly difficult year in second grade, but I refuse to let that knowledge color my understanding of their potential and abilities.  This allows me to develop strong relationships with my students, helping to develop their social skills and manage their behavior.  The one factor on the list that jumps out to me as an area I would like to focus on in ensuring I have realistic perceptions of myself and my students.  I have a tendency to make excuses for my students, and sometimes even be a little too patient or flexible, because of what I know of their home lives or other personal struggles.

**Developing a Plan:** In collecting data of the specifics of Kaylee’s behaviors I think that the most challenging aspect of choosing an intervention is the fact that there is very little in the way of a pattern to her shut-down behaviors.  As previously mentioned, the one factor that could be generalized as a precipitating factor is that the shut-downs occur regularly as a result of facing a something she feels to be challenging, either in academics or social situations..  Kaylee does not have very many strategies to use in problem solving without teacher assistance, so when she feels upset she stops functioning.

Based on all of this data I feel that the best place to start with Kaylee is to help her develop a set of problem solving strategies and have her using them appropriately and effectively in both academic and social situations.  I think a good place to start would be with teaching coping strategies similar to those used with aggressive student with the lens of removing the excess of emotion as a whole instead of just anger.  These would include overall self-control, management, conflict resolution, self-regulation, and focus on using these methods to prevent shut-down episodes rather than trying to backpedal once they have occurred.

I would also very much like to involve Kaylee with the tracking of her own behaviors so that she realized the impact they are having on her education.  For the rest of this school year I would like to see Kaylee track her shut-down episodes using a graphic organizer and use strategies the guidance counselor and I teach her to decrease the number of incidents so that episodes based on social interactions have nearly stopped (ideally 1 incident per two weeks or less, including issues with group work in class) and have her start applying the same strategies to coping with academic challenges.   I think that narrowing the focus of the intervention will allow Kaylee to feel more success and therefore more motivation to continue to make progress.

“Aggressive students who show basic attentional and information-processing deficits often fail to analyze social situations carefully enough to develop accurate perceptions, so they are prone to jump to erroneous conclusions about what others are doing or thinking and then act on these conclusions in aggressive ways,” (Brophy, pp. 182).  I believe that this is also true for students who are overly emotional and not simply aggressive.  Children who do not understand what is going on around them are going to have difficulty in knowing how to handle what is happening.  This happened with Kaylee and an incident at recess this week surrounding tetherball with a friend.  Kaylee stepped in from the line to ‘help’ a friend finish the game before recess was over. She honestly thought that she was helping her friend to finish the game before time was up, and her friend was upset for Kaylee taking a turn when she was supposed to be waiting in line. Kaylee then left the presence of all people and hid, refusing even to come inside at the end of recess. She needed time to problem solve with me, eat lunch alone, and take almost an additional half hour to rejoin the class effectively. The guidance counselor helped her to process this incident and problem solve with her friend, but the damage had already been done because Kaylee did not know how to handle her own emotional reaction to the situation.  It is not unusual for incidents like this to happen with Kaylee 2-3 times per week or more, although it fluctuates greatly with regards to both severity and number of occurrences.  These social misinterpretations affect Kaylee’s ability to participate in the classroom regularly enough that they have impacted her academic skills, particularly in reading, which has then contributed to academically based shut-downs.

The first step to implementing the aforementioned strategies I believe is to consult with the school guidance counselor.  She was able to work with Kaylee successfully during the tetherball incident, allowing her to problem solve effectively with the other student and no teacher involvement after having one short meeting (because the counselor was on duty during recess).  I think that she could provide valuable insight into what strategies worked in that moment and why.  I know that Kaylee’s parents will not give consent for her to work with the guidance counselor on a regular or consultant basis because I have already asked and been denied permission, but I can try to work with Kaylee using similar methods that the counselor can help me to learn about and implement.

The next step would be for me to introduce a graphic organizer to Kaylee that will help her track her shut-down behaviors.  It would be very difficult for her to track the number of minutes due to the nature of the behavior, but she could track the approximate time of day (based on subjects), the work and lessons missed, the reason why she could not participate, and how she bounced back.  Knowing Kaylee, I would try to set it up like a journal, either in a binder or pages glued into a notebook because of her creativity and affinity for writing.  I would set up a chart that looked something like this:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Subject Missed | Work Missed | Reason for Behavior  (What happened?) | Cause of Behavior  (Why was I upset?) | How I ‘Came Back’ |
| \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  -Lesson  -Activity |  |  |  |  |

This would not be a writing assignment and there would be no specific amount of data required for each column, but I think it is important for Kaylee to realize the impact her behavior is having on her education, regardless of the origin of the behavior.  She could discuss this information with me and even add a section for how should could handle a similar situation differently next time.  This will take a certain amount of more time away from other academics, but I think that in the long run this will earn Kaylee more functional time in the classroom.  It will help her to learn what is causing her to have this kind of reaction, strategies that work to help her ‘come back’ from the shut-down from of mind, and help her to work with me on how to stop them from happening again. I am hoping that her motivation to decrease the behavior will increase once she recognizes how much her life has been impacted by it thus far.

One final aspect to this intervention for me the effective use of praise when Kaylee does use the strategies she has to problem solve effectively and avoid shut-down episodes.  She needs to know that she is making progress from all points of view, not just her own.  If she is not making progress she will likely have no motivation to continue working toward minimizing her shut-downs and instead of minimizing these incidents they would instead probably increase in frequency (Oka, slide 13).  Additionally, it may be useful to offer some form of intangible rewards (e.g. extra choice activity time, a one-on-one activity, etc.) that has value for Kaylee as she achieves steps towards her goal.  The first of these steps can be decided in a partnership between Kaylee and me at the introduction of the chart system and each new goal would be set on the achievement of the previous goal.

**Carrying Out the Plan:** After developing the aforementioned plan, it took me several weeks to begin implementation due to our school going on vacation for a week, the following week having one day with winter sports activities (academics from 8-11 followed by lunch and, for Kaylee, skating), and she was out sick on another day, leaving only 3 ½ days of academic contact during that time.   Additionally, there had only been one day when the guidance counselor and I were in the same building and her schedule did not allow for a meeting.  Because of various restrictions to what we are allowed to discuss via email or phone, we had not had the opportunity to discuss her ideas for specific coping strategies to teach Kaylee. Finally, I did not implement the use of the graphic organizer at that time because we do not have school the following week on Monday or Tuesday due to teacher in-service and Town Meeting Day and I thought trying a new strategy for 2-3 days then having a four day weekend before another 3 days and a weekend would not provide the consistency needed for this plan to be effective.   This means that at this point we have only been using these strategies for two weeks, so I have limited data, however the outlook appears to be promising.

Kaylee’s awareness of her own behaviors has definitely increased. She is quite insightful when it comes to filling out her organizer and can identify the cause as well as specific characteristics of her reaction. She can tell if it is a social or academic root to the behavior and can gauge the severity of her shut-downs, although this is most effective when she is comparing one episode to another (e.g. more or less severe than…). With all of this being said, I have not yet observed a decrease in the number of shut-down incidents. Something happens to upset Kaylee, she shuts down, I hold her accountable for the shut-down by trying to help her get out of it quickly and if unsuccessful giving her two choices before walking away to give her processing time. If she has not made a choice within the allotted time she knows that she will make up the missed work, which has happened in the last two weeks with the same regularity as before. Once she has come out of it, whether 10 minutes or 2 hours later, we have a conversation about what happened and she takes a few minutes to complete her organizer. The same process could, and one time did, happen 15 minutes after completing this process once already in the same day. We are still working on how to use Kaylee’s increased awareness to prevent further shut-downs instead of just analyzing them.

This aspect of Kaylee’s intervention is the most challenging currently, and I am working with our guidance counselor with a focus on this. In the conversations we have had since the implementation of these intervention strategies, Ms. Towle, the counselor, feels hopeful that the aforementioned strategies will be successful to some degree. They fit in with her professional stance regarding Kaylee well, and her primary suggestion was to enhance these interventions with whole class mini-lessons on problem solving, particularly prevention of problems (e.g. choosing a smart place to sit for lessons, picking who to play with at recess carefully if you are struggling with certain individuals on a given day, etc.). She and I agree that the goal is for all of the students, not just Kaylee, to become more independent problem solvers with a focus on proactive measures like identifying potential problems and planning accordingly.

**Evaluating the Plan and My Current Professional Stance:** Overall, I have a very positive take on this intervention plan’s progress so far. I do not believe that it will be perfectly successful and that every aspect will go according to plan, but I do think that positive changes will happen before the end of the school year. Kaylee is already more clearly identifying the causes of her behaviors and how strong her reactions tend to be, which I believe is an important first step to not only saying the words needed to make a plan of action when that same situation happens again, but having a productive plan in place that she is able to carry out. She is able to talk about how to handle similar problem situations differently already, and the next logical step is helping her to practice implementing her own plans so that she eventually will be a more productive and independent problem solver and these shut-down episodes will be minimal to non-existent.

Because I recognize that these strategies are still new, I know that it is important to look forward and identify possible pitfalls that Kaylee and I may encounter in this process. One of the biggest areas of concern I have relates to the graphic organizer I designed for Kaylee to track her own behaviors.  The strategy is still new and I think we are in the ‘honeymoon’ phase of using it where it is still new enough that it is interesting and something different for her to do. I am worried, however, for several reasons, one of which is the fact that I know writing is often a subject when I struggle with Kaylee. Sometimes it is hard to get her writing in the first place and keep her motivated to participate for the duration of the period.  The organizer requires Kaylee to write, and if she struggles to form the words she wants to use to describe what happened it may induce another shut-down episode.  This has not happened yet, but it definitely might. I am also concerned because there are times Kaylee will not stop writing because she would rather write than do the work for the subject following writing, even if it means making up the missed work later.  I wonder if Kaylee will use the time spent recording her thoughts, or avoiding recording her thoughts, in the organizer as a way to further escape.  So far Kaylee has used the time with her organizer fairly well because we decided to use a timer to help her monitor her progress. However, she has tried to extend the time I’ve allowed her and has definitely tried to have me sit with her to fill out the organizer more than I am needed to. This has helped me to recognize that I may need to become a bit more firm in my overall handling of Kaylee’s situation, and that perhaps I have been too patient with her at times. I do not want her feeling like she can manipulate me and my time and I need her to recognize that I am serious about helping her to become more independent with her problem solving. I need to be careful about maintaining our relationship and ensuring that she does not feel abandoned, but I think I need to become a little bit more strict in how I help her through her shut-down episodes.

Additionally, I recognize how very bright Kaylee is and that she has a great deal of ‘street smarts’ that have helped her to survive her challenging home life.  Knowing this, I am curious if Kaylee will perhaps plan times to shut-down, knowing that she will not only miss the work from that period but also possibly miss additional work in order to fill out her organizer.  I have not yet seen this happen, but I do not believe that I can rule it out as a possibility yet. On the other side of this same issue, I wonder to what degree Kaylee will manipulate her shut-down incidents so that she gets to spend the one-on-one time with me that her intervention plan requires to be effective. Kaylee does not have a good home life and craves attention from adults in general, and will do almost anything to please the adults that she cares for. I recognize the value of having a positive relationship with Kaylee and being an adult that she can trust, however I do not want her using this plan as a means to garner even more attention. She has already tried this to a small extent by having me help her fill our her organizer more than I am strictly needed to, particularly given that the goal is for Kaylee to be as independent with this process as possible. I will try to circumvent this possibility by using specific praise copiously so that she is receiving a great deal of positive attention, but I am aware that this is a distinct possibility. These are pessimistic options that I do not necessarily foresee happening, however I feel that I need to be prepared in case these eventualities do occur. I would like to have as many possible outcomes mapped out as I can so that I can quickly and effectively respond to Kaylee and whatever changes in her behavior might happen.  She can be very unpredictable, which makes this pre-planning even more important as far as I am concerned because she needs to know that I can and will be consistent for her, helping to maintain our current relationship.

Although I have not yet made many significant changes in my teaching practices due to the implementation of this strategy, I have begun to change how I approach situations that I believe may present difficulties for Kaylee.  I know that the goal is to teach Kaylee preventative measures to help her avoid shut-down incidents, and because we will be working towards that I have begun looking at my lesson plans and my approach to social events (even small group work) with the lens of setting Kaylee, among others, up for success.  I have always used this lens for academic success, but I am really trying to focus on the social aspects and not just who to partner her with to help avoid as much conflict as possible.  Instead of thinking about avoiding all problems, I am trying to set up the class so that they have the opportunities to identify issues and solve them without teacher assistance.

Most of my students do not have the same set of challenges facing Kaylee, but the guidance counselor and I agree that many of them would benefit from a less intense intervention of learning the same skills.  In teaching a subset of the skills Kaylee will be learning and practicing to the whole class, not only will the people Kaylee interacts with know what to expect and how to respond, but the children will be empowered to problem solve independently.  Less reliance on teachers to ‘fix it’ will support all students as they grow up and will aid Kaylee in particular because her peers’ knowledge will help to support her own work on behavior modifications. With some luck, this will free up some of my time so that I can focus on students who need my support for academic concerns and for more major problem solving issues.

Finally, I would recommend the majority of this intervention plan to other teachers who have students experiencing similar challenges with their students. Involving the guidance counselor, teaching strategies to the whole class, and helping Kaylee to analyze her own behavior have already made an impact even though we have only been using this plan for about two weeks. It is fairly time consuming, but the results I have seen so far make me feel that the time has been worthwhile for the whole class. The one aspect that I am withholding judgment on still is the graphic organizer as I have currently designed it. It has been time consuming for Kaylee to think about and fill out, and it has given her an opportunity for one-on-one attention that she has craved and that she seems to be trying to take advantage of. I do not feel that enough time has passed for me to write it off completely or to fully recommend it, but it is an aspect that I will be monitoring closely in the coming weeks.

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