

Case Study

Introduction

In all classrooms, teachers are expected to provide a safe, equitable learning environment. Students are expected to be cooperating in achieving this task. This is not always the case. Oftentimes, students have not been taught the skills to function well in a classroom. In the same way, students may not have been given the proper motivation to desire to be engaged in class. Positive behavioral support theory espouses that every student is exhibiting some positive behaviors that can be augmented and reinforced. This process of changing behavior is often about changing environment and reprioritizing goals. These strategies can go a long way to improving student behavior. In the case of one John Doe, this theory could be applied to behaviors that have, so far, been unmanaged.

The Student

John Doe is a 15 year old, tenth grader, who has been diagnosed with a Learning Disability. According to John's IEP, he has deficits in both math and reading and the creator of the IEP ranked him as "poor" in both areas. John also is somewhat lacking in social skills as well. He is very comfortable interacting with most of the adults, be they teachers or administrators, throughout his day; however, he rarely interacts or discusses with students in his classes.

John consistently refuses to do work in the classroom, stating that it is too hard and he has no idea how to complete it. He has never been asked to work on an activity

that has not been fully explained to him by the teacher. However, it is clear that the instructions given to the rest of the class are not enough to get John off on the right track.

This refusal to begin class work is very broad in its scope and occurs in activities from projects to lab assignments. John usually feels comfortable completing simple worksheets, but his difficulty is very pronounced in any activity that involves higher-level thinking. He is also provided with a modified test which consists of two prompts for multiple choice questions (pared down from four) and a word bank for his fill-in-the-blank questions.

This refusal to complete class work occurs anywhere from 1 to 4 times a week, depending on the assignment load. It will usually persist until the teacher spends 5-10 minutes sitting down with John and walking him through each step. However, after he has been walked through some of the more difficult questions, he seems to have a fairly full grasp on the concept.

John is accompanied by one of several para-educators to each class throughout the day and they are sometimes given John's assignments ahead of time to help prepare him. Generally, the para-educators that attempt to help John in a similar manner do not meet with success. It should be noted that few of the paras have experience teaching science.

This refusal to work, either alone or with a para, has very little effect on the teacher's ability to teach as it does not interrupt the general flow of classroom instruction. It does require for some of the work time to be spent with John, who could detract from other students' need to pose questions to the teacher, but overall it would not be considered disruptive. The class reaction to John is usually very minimal as he addresses his inability to the teacher after the students have begun working on their assignments.

One source of his defiance might be a result of learned helplessness. This is John's sophomore year and so he has already had a para and SPED support for one year. Perhaps he has grown used to having shortened tests, modified assignments and a para to assist him whenever he needs it. Knowing that he has access to these materials might have induced certain laziness in the way he approaches school. However, more likely is that he truly suffering from LD and has difficulty processing certain types of information.

Based on observations, John will usually have a very firm grasp on the material, even the most complex, after the teacher presents him with a one-on-one lesson. During the time the teacher is individually helping him, he asks many questions, several for each step of the assignment. Perhaps the function of his behavior is fear. He may be too afraid or embarrassed to ask these questions during class because he knows he will have so many. It might be that John learns better at the slower pace that can be provided when the teacher is helping him. Either way, it is clear that John is certainly capable when it comes to learning the material; he just has extreme difficulty learning at the traditional classroom pace. In addition, we believe that another function of his behavior may be attention from the teacher. He does not have positive relationships with the paras, but does have good relationships with the teachers. This could motivate him to desire personal time with the teacher.

Intervention Attempts

In the past, many of the teachers in the school told John they did not have time to help him during class and that he would need to come in before or after school to get the help he needed. Approaches like this meant that John would spend the rest of the class period, while other students were working on an assignment that he did not fully understand, sitting around and attempting to look busy to avoid repercussions for not working. While it would be easy to blame the lack of the intervention's success on John's behavior, it had less to do with behavioral purpose and more to do with uncontrollable environmental factors. This technique proved ineffective in that John was not always able to come in before or after school to receive the help he needed. When he was able to come in and have the teacher explain an assignment to him individually, he usually did fine on it. However, John needed help in a majority of his classes, and since he rode the bus, it was not practical to come in every morning and stay after school every day to get additional assistance.

Other teachers have tried explaining John's assignments in full to one of his para-educators; however, that was also usually met with little success. He did not seem to have a very close relationship to any of the paras he worked with throughout the day, and he generally had a different para for each class. In terms of the teacher's ability to balance John's needs and the time it takes to accommodate these needs, using the para as an intermediate is a necessary option. John does not have trouble with the social skills necessary to communicate with adults, but he prefers to work with his teachers rather than the assigned paras.

Intervention Goals

Goal 1: Modify student behavior to improve the classroom-learning environment for both John and other students.

Goal 2: Student becomes aware of his own metacognitive abilities. Student will be able to realize the ability to access previously learned information to answer his own questions.

Goal 3: To increase student's self-efficacy.

Goal 4: To build positive relationships of trust and cooperation with para-educators

Goal 5: To effectively utilize the school support systems that are available to every student

Classroom Procedures

An important first step in developing an intervention strategy for John would be to ask him what he thinks the source of his learning problems is and how he thinks the staff can best meet his needs. Along with this, it will be important to incorporate his thoughts into the intervention strategies. Next, John may need to know how to appropriately ask for help during work time. He may need to learn patience in asking for help. He may need to "Beat the Clock" in the amount of time that he tries to understand the task before he asks for help. This strategy begins with measuring the amount of time

that John is on task before he asks his para for help. Then, John and the teacher should set goals to increase this time at independent activity. Progressively expanding the time that John works independently is a necessary step because he is not unintelligent. His inability to comprehend what he is told in lecture and apply it to independent study is a processing issue common to students with a Learning Disability. Before asking for assistance from the teacher, John could attempt to separate his work into sections he may be able to complete and sections he needs help from the teacher to complete. By separating his work in this way, the teacher can spend less time going over the entire assignment and focus on the areas that John specifically needs help with. Additionally, paras can provide similar support after John has identified trouble spots in his assignments. This will also allow John to familiarize himself with the assignment before asking his teachers and paras for help.

To facilitate appropriate participation in the classroom, the teacher could work on “Checking for Understanding” more during the lecture. John may feel that the only time that he can appropriately ask questions of the teacher is during independent work time. This is not true and can easily be changed by the teacher. If the whole class were given the expectation that lecture would not proceed (at certain times) without a clarifying question from the class, then John would have the opportunity to ask, or listen to, questions in a way that is helpful for the whole class. In a situation where the lecture is stalled by the teacher, John may actually become the hero by appropriately questioning and making the lecture flow. Either asking or listening, John is getting another opportunity for process time and clarification. This is especially helpful because John may not be the only student who has clarifying questions.

Prevention Procedures

It would be appropriate to try to prevent John's further dislike of the paras he works with throughout the day. To do this, we would have to find the antecedents. It seems like John has trouble trusting the paras because they are always changing. If he were to have one para for the whole day, or a small number of paras, then he would be able to build healthy relationships. If he and his paras got time to talk about life and could create trust, then John would have reason to ask them about class work first. If it proves impossible to provide John with one or only a small number of paras, then it might be beneficial to ask about the possibility to establish a Class within a Class system where John could have consistent, daily support from the same special education instructor. If this Class within a Class also proves impossible to set-up, it might be necessary for John to have a weekly meeting with his paras to help build communication and relationships.

"Beat the Clock" is also a preventative technique. John's questioning is not necessarily distracting to the rest of the class, but it may hinder other students' desires to ask questions. He may dominate question time. Preventing the harm that this may do on his relationships with his classmates is necessary.

To prevent John's dependence on classroom questions in general, he could be encouraged to use school support systems like reading and mathematics help sessions during study hall time. Since these help sessions are led by teachers and faculty, all of whom John enjoys interacting with, John will be intrinsically motivated to attend these sessions.

Intervention Plan

In-class Interventions

- Have John ask at least one question a day during normal lecture and presentation time.
- Have John “Beat the Clock” and work independently without asking questions for 3 minutes.
- Have John ask at least one question a day to the respective para-educator during classroom work time.

These three beginning objectives should be discussed with John in a 10-15 minute meeting before or after school. When the teacher explains the new system for lecture questions as well as what is appropriate for working alone before asking questions, then John can see that he will get what he may want: attention from the teacher. If John asks questions in class during lecture time at a confusing point or during independent practice after discussing with the para, then he will be reinforced for asking good questions. If John uses at least 3 minutes to try to work on his task, then he will be able to ask more necessary questions instead of questioning the whole procedure. If John asks a question of his para first, then he will have the opportunity to build positive expectations and trust with his para as well as, once again, limit the time that the teacher spends focusing on John. He will get to see the teacher, but the time should slowly decrease. Introducing John to this intervention strategy during a meeting where he can ask as many questions as needed will allow John to establish a familiarity with this strategy before it is implemented in the classroom. By teaching John these skills outside of the class period,

there will not be any time pressures and the staff can spend as much time as necessary to familiarize John with these new strategies.

If John does not follow the implementation plan, as a consequence he will have to work through the problems on his own. In order for this intervention to be successful across the curriculum, consistency by all teachers, paras, and parents is crucial. All staff involved must be made aware of the intervention and agree to its implementation to ensure reinforcement of the behavior and develop John's independence.

Interventions Outside of Class

- To provide additional assistance in John's areas of need, he should begin attending a reading or mathematics support session at least once a week during his normal study hall time.

The next step in John's independence would be for him to use school support systems that are already in place. If these tools are available to all students, then John could also benefit. These would also support his IEP where he was labeled as "Poor" in both of these areas. Increasing his reading skill as well as his math skill would help him in Science as well as all content areas.

These changes will not seriously alter John's normal routine, nor will they prevent him from enjoying school or make him anymore disruptive. These changes are also not limiting or punishing any behavior that he is exhibiting. He is free to act the way that he wants within the intervention plan. He will see that he is positively reinforced for asking

questions during lecture time, for waiting until he has tried to ask questions, to ask questions of his para first, and to attend help sessions in math and reading.

Back-up Plan

If the intervention attempts that we have introduced fail, we will implement a back-up plan. This back-up plan will be to change John's current schedule to contain one hour of study skills per day, where John can specifically focus on reading and math in an individualized atmosphere. This plan would not be preferable since it would alter his daily schedule and could lead to discontent. However, a schedule change might prove necessary to sufficiently increase his skills in reading and math. It is important to note that only after the failure of all intervention attempts will this back-up plan take place.

Current Building Policies

Yes, the school's policies and staff would be supportive of our interventions. John does not need to be punished, but if he does not want to cooperate, then he will not succeed in his desired goals. His desired goals and the intervention plan should line up seamlessly such that other teachers and the administration would have no difficulty supporting John's positive behavior.

New Skills

To succeed in education, John must find the emotional skills to ask for help. Help does not equate to inability. John's unique needs do not mean that he is unintelligent. If he is unable to ask for help when his needs create a void of information processing, then he

is not able to perform at a level commensurate with his potential. The skill that he must learn is to ask for help appropriately. The skill of asking for clarification during lecture and the skill of using the resources given him by the school will help him in college or the work world. Our intervention strategies should be the first step toward positive behaviors in the class and life.

Parent Involvement

During the eight week student teaching experience, the opportunity to interact with John's parents never occurred; however, John believes that his parents will be supportive if they are given specific strategies to use at home. To communicate these strategies with John's parents, it is necessary to meet with his parents at a convenient time. At this meeting, it would be best to have as many of John's current teachers, as well as a reading specialist and John's current special education case manager. Some strategies that may be beneficial for John's parents to implement at home are to spend time reading with John, set aside an hour per night to work together on John's homework assignments, and hire a tutor to meet with John once or twice a week if needed. While working outside of school with John, it will be important for his parents to reinforce the strategies used at school, meaning, his parents should encourage John to think about assignments on his own before asking for help.

Data

Given what we have observed in the classroom and what the experience of the paras has been John's behavior can be observed by:

- How many times he asks a question during the lecture
- How many times he asks his para a question
- Timed from when he starts working until he asks a clarifying question

These are all quantitative measurements. We believe that if John is working more efficiently in the school system then the quality of his work will also improve. In terms of going to the study session, valuable participation is more important than attendance, but that would be a later step.

Intervention Plan Changes

Considering that John's relationship with the para that is assigned to him is critical for the trust and understanding necessary to ask questions of the para, if things do not go well between the two of them, then he may need a new para. This is not to say that John's ability to relate to a para should come before his ability to ask questions of anyone regardless of how much he likes them. There may be an antecedent with paras in general and then the intervention with a personal para would not work. There are also situations where a para will not be offered to John. In these situations it may be necessary for the teacher to provide minimal additional support, while John continues to work towards educational independence through the methods described earlier.

Implementation Issues

One of the main obstacles we may face in implementing these improvement strategies would be John's unwillingness to change. He seems very content with his current status, he is passing all his classes (although he is barely passing in several), and he seems generally comfortable. Approaching him with new accommodations and plans midway through the semester may have an adverse effect if John thinks he is doing something wrong and that is why these changes are being made. This is why we hope the changes are relatively minimal and will only create positive effects. If we can focus on getting John to ask more questions of the paras, ask more questions during class lecture time, and spend more time attempting work on an assignment before asking the teacher for help, then John will be on his way to a more successful and independent educational experience.

Conclusion

John's behavior affects himself, the class, the paras he works with and his teachers. This intervention plan should modify the specific behaviors that affect John's life. This intervention plan is focused on positive behavioral support theory. This intervention plan is sensitive to John's IEP and his LD. The strategies used in this intervention plan should also be helpful for the rest of the students in the class, the paras and the teacher implementing the plan. The overarching goal of this intervention plan is John's success and we believe that this plan can start John on the path toward success.