ABC Project Elements- Chapter 4

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**Strategy Evaluation (~1/2-1 page)**

The intervention applied to the case of Maria was rather successful. The reason why it was considered effective and successful was because the student’s behavior changed. Maria, firstly, appeared as a student with Failure Syndrome. She was crying and denying her abilities to cope with certain tasks due to the absence of her parents. After the application of the strategy, analyzed in the previous chapters, Maria gained self- confidence and stopped crying during class. The factors, which contributed to the effectiveness of the strategy, were mainly two. The first is the well implementation of a well- structured strategy. The psychologist of the Foundation carefully considered the strategy implemented and approved it. The actions taken were precisely fitted to Maria’s case and psychological background. The second factor is the student’s adaptability to the implemented strategy. It must be noted that Maria’s personal character and behavior in combination with the effective action plan made her change. A strategy may be highly effective and precisely fitted to a challenging behavior but the student may be less able and/or willing to follow that strategy.

As in any other strategy, some problems were encountered. More analytically, in this case, the hard part of the plan was to convince Maria to avoid crying during class and gain more self- esteem for her efforts and studies. The strategy followed made her understand that crying is an unacceptable behavior, her teacher is next to her and in any question and/or difficulty she should ask her for assistance. Communication between the teacher (myself) and the student (Maria) was the key to combat this behavior.

**Critique of the Strategy (~1/2-1 page)**

What I mainly did well in Maria’s case was not to get emotionally involved. This was my obstacle as well as my area of strength. I arranged various meetings with the psychologist of the Foundation, for the progress of Maria and what needed to be changed based on her improvement. I was keeping a daily record of the actions and behaviors that triggered me, which, then, was discussed in the meetings with the psychologist. Next time, I would not change something in the implemented strategy but I would change it- where it needs- to fit the profile of the new student. Students with challenging behaviors must not be seen as one category with, for instance, ten fixed strategies to implement. However, each case should be seen individually and the strategy adopted should fit the student’s profile. Therefore, I would highly recommend this strategy to a colleague- not as a strategy for him/her to adopt- but rather as a case study of combating challenging behaviors. It is a realistic strategy for use in everyday practice setting. Yet, it should not be used as one strategy for all the cases. Most preferably, it must be seen as a guide/ example of one among millions of cases of teaching problematic behaviors.

**ABC Final Project**

* Problem Identification

Before start writing the description of the problematic behavior identified, it is essential to note the context and the environment under which this behavior was taking place. Understanding the social context of the child and how she was raised up and by whom are the leading factors in determining the strategy and its methodology.

I had been working in a Foundation called ‘Agia Anna’ (Saint Anna) as a teacher of primary as well as secondary school children of female sex; 21 in number. This organization is highly linked with Christianity and the Church. Norms, values and customs of the Foundation are built on the grounds of Christianity and Church. This self- funded organization has children from 0 up to 21 years old that have been taken away from their families under Court’s decision. The leader - an 80-year-old woman who leads the Foundation and is called ‘the Mother’ as well as two secretaries, one teacher, one psychologist and the serving and cleaning team. The leading figure is the ‘Mother’; moreover, the structure of the organization is rather matriarchic. Her characterization, as the Mother, derives from her devotion, in all her life, in the well functioning of the organization and the well being of the children within it. It is essential to note also that the organization described above is not- for- profit organization and is mission is driven by philanthropic theme (Heifetz R. 2009: 53).

The problematic behavior that triggered me, moving me into an awkward stance in teaching, is when one of my students (Maria), during class, started crying and arguing that she will not be able to study as she missed her parents. This behavior was quite often occurring and its effects were quite severe, first, for Maria and, second, for the functioning of class overall. This kind of behavior was very tricky and needed careful attention because those children do have serious problems with their families. Obviously, the way I responded was the way that I had been taught by the psychologist of the Foundation. More precisely, the strategy that I have adopted with those challenging situations was to ignore the fact that they were crying and continue the lesson as normal. Giving emphasis and feeling sorry for them when they are crying gives them the proof that they do have problems that eventually keeps them back in their educational progress. The actual aim is to make them pass those obstacles and bad feelings and move forward.

In the pre- intervention period I was keeping a professional stance when working with Maria based on the instructions I have been given from the psychologist of the Foundation. Based on Brophy’s general attributes of effective socializers I found myself with two attributes. More precisely, I was consistent in my interactions with all of my students, defining the roles of the teacher and the students and what behaviors are acceptable and what are considered unacceptable during class (Brophy J. 1996: 22) based on laws and regulations of the Foundation. For instance, an acceptable behavior would be contribution of each student to class by raising their hands and an unacceptable behavior would be to start disturbing the lesson by talking to one another. This was defined as ‘Clarity about Roles and Comfort in Playing Them’.

‘Patience and Determination’ needed, precisely, in the case of Maria. Some students, like Maria, persist in their problematic behavior (crying) because they are accustomed to getting their way (avoid certain tasks) if they keep it long enough (Brophy J. 1996: 22). Maria, in this case, should be convinced that she will be required to fulfill her responsibilities and will have to suffer the consequences by not doing so. I will be next to her, praising and assisting her but she has to put, also, some effort on that in order to combat her problematic behavior.

What I could have done to improve myself, on this respect, is to arrange personal meetings with the psychologist in order to remain more focused and determined. Working with such cases, needs patience but to be really effective in your teaching and learning of the students, need assistance in the form of cognitive behavioral therapy. The reason why I make reference to the cognitive behavioral approach and not in psychotherapy is rather simple. The former is short term focused on a particular issue while the psychotherapy may take up to five years.

The challenge that I faced in the case of Maria is to avoid getting emotionally involved. What I precisely mean by that? Rohrkemper and Corno (1988) argued that teachers should provide both support and challenge to failure syndrome students and not merely ensuring their consistent success by lowering their levels of demand (Brophy J. 1996: 94). This is what triggered me to move out of a helpful stance with Maria. I was well aware of what she had passed with her parents and sometimes I was finding myself ensured from her continuous success in easy tasks. I have noticed myself becoming less effective with Maria when she was resisting learning a text by heart by starting crying that her parents left her and did not take care of her.

The goals that I have put to myself for my own professional development, as a result of working with this case, were to be more strategic with my actions during class, not to get emotionally involved and provide clear standards to the students for what is accepted and what is not. I was mainly hoping to improve my skills in combating such challenging behaviors and cooperate with a psychologist for best results. I wanted to improve the ways of combating such behaviors in cooperation with a specialist. Learning how to handle such situations and try to combat them during fixed meeting hours is part of the broader skills that a teacher should have- especially those working in Foundations.

* Understanding the Problem

Informal and systematic methods used for collecting data were my daily observance of the targeted behavior. I was keeping notes when this behavior (crying) was occurring and when was not and, then, I was meeting the psychologist of the Foundation in a set place and time to elaborate on my notes and create an effective strategy to combat the failure syndrome of Maria.

The challenging behavior is not occurring when the student is not told to learn something by heart, i.e. a history chapter. Maria does have some minor problems in dyslexia and memorization but this does not entail that she is not able to understand and memorize a page or two. The patterns that my data revealed shaped the strategy adopted. Analysis of the data collected in terms of frequency of the problematic behavior helped to determine the objectives of the plan. The student seems well adapted to the classroom when she is not ‘forced’ to say/ answer a question without any tips and guiding questions. The problem situation does not occur when that student is assigned to do just ‘copying’ work. For example, when you write a verb in the board and you ask them to rewrite under the same tense another verb. Her general involvement in activities and/or outside class did not show any signs of problematic behavior.

After taking care to observe the positive behaviors of the child when she does not have this challenging behavior, I observed some strength that the student displayed. More analytically, the student appeared with more courage when she talked to her classmates as well as to me. She, also, showed willingness to study but in the way of ‘copying’, not memorizing the full text. She generally shows a good character but the challenge here is to maintain such character under any circumstance.

Maria showed underachieving behaviors (Brophy J. 1996: 59), moreover, she appeared with failure syndrome; became defeated and eventually she gave up serious learning efforts. She did not have limited abilities and that’s why will not be considered a low achieving student. Brophy best describes the type of problem behavior of Maria under the category of ‘Failure Syndrome Students’. Students with Failure Syndrome are convinced that they cannot do their work. They avoid starting or giving up quite easily (Brophy J. 1996: 84). In a stance of succeeding, they attribute it to luck or the easy nature of the task they have been assigned. In Maria’s case, as described by Butknowsky and Willows (1980), she has experienced a long history of failure (Brophy J. 1996: 88) by her parents and, therefore, had a more strong belief that she is lacking the ability to learn and succeed as her peers do. Furthermore, the achievement problem identified, in my case, is primarily motivational.

Maria had the abilities and the capacities to succeed; she just missed the motivation. In this case, the achievement behavior is Maria’s self- confidence and the behavioral problem is that she gave up when it came to a bit more challenging tasks. Maria achieved the wanted behavior (gaining self- confidence on her studying time) by vanishing the behavioral problem that she had (giving up easily in when comes to memorizing).

The data collected and analyzed with in cooperation with the Psychologist of the Foundation revealed that Maria has motivational problems and she did not lack the ability to succeed. She has passed difficult years with the zero presence of her parents and that is reflected on her continuous and persistent denial on any difficult assigned tasks. All this information, not only used to form the basis of the intervention, but also became a precondition for it. All those bits and pieces were collected, synthesized and formed a unite strategy to combat Maria’s failure syndrome and its effects.

* Plan Development and Implementation

The specific behavior I aimed to decrease is Maria’s act of crying when she was facing a difficult task (i.e. memorizing certain parts of a text). I wanted actually to vanish this behavior and increase her self- esteem and motivation towards learning. The strategy that I used, in this case, not only decreased the problematic behavior of Maria but also established a more adaptive behavior overall. She understood that by crying and exposing what she has passed, during class, would not make me exclude her from the assigned readings; although she knew I was there in order to assist her in any question.

The behavior that she had taken after my rather strict response to her act of crying made her more adaptive to the classroom conditions. I was requiring from Maria to complete a certain portion from an assignment before asking my help and allowing her extra time to think more thoroughly of the task. I was aiming for challenging her but at the same time understand that I am there for her. Applying what McIntyre (1989) suggested, reading and discussing with Maria would prove beneficial to combat her challenging behavior (Brophy J. 1996: 90).

‘Teacher praise’ is an additional scientific term to enhance what has been described above. Teaching in Foundations, where children have been psychologically and physically abused, reports the importance of contingent approval. O’ Leary (1977) concluded that teacher attention is perhaps the most basic of all influences on students behaviors and the systematic use of attention should characterize every teacher’s classroom repertoire (Loveless T. 1996: 59).

Efficacy training is what correlates the most with the strategy I have adopted. More precisely, efficacy training helps students to achieve realistic goals and pursue them with the recognition that they have the capacity that is needed to reach those goals if they apply reasonable efforts (Brophy J. 1996: 92). Verbalization of task strategies, performance feedback, setting goals prior to tasks and supply rewards after actual accomplishment of the assigned tasks are some effective practices that Schunk (1985) identified for increasing student’s self- efficacy insights (Brophy J. 1996: 92).

Before going to the next part of the paper, it is important to note the reason why this intervention makes sense for this particular problem and student. Maria has been found with underachieving behavior- implying that she was working below her abilities (Brophy J. 1996: 59)- and especially Failure syndrome. This syndrome causes certain unwanted behaviors due to lack of motivation and not lack of abilities. Maria, who was a child with lack of motivation needed encouragement as well as challenging in order for her to understand her abilities. The intervention, therefore, made sense because it aimed to Maria’s lack of motivation and the fulfillment of all the psychological/educational gaps she used to have.

* Plan Evaluation

The intervention adopted can be considered effective and successful because after its application, brought the wanted results. Moreover, Maria’s behavior changed from underachieving to self- confidence. Firstly, I arranged certain meetings with Maria and enhanced our communication. In those meetings I tried to explain her that behaviors such as the one of crying during lesson must be combated and I would be the one who will help but I want also her effort and motivation on that in order to have positive results. I suggested a combination of special support and/or assistance, encouragement as well as certain small demands- at the start- for the purpose of shaping gradual improvement (Brophy J. 1996: 106). I was from those teachers who ‘created a reality’ for students in order to combat their failure syndrome (Brophy J. 1996: 107). I informed Maria that she must change this behavior (crying and denying to memorize) and showed her how to respond to it in the future (Brophy J. 1996: 107).

In Maria’s case, if the plan adopted between the teacher and Maria proved unsuccessful, then, help from third parties would be necessary. Third parties mean a specialist in child’s psychology within the school environment. In this scenario, certain sessions each week will be arranged involving both the student (Maria) and the teacher (myself). It is crucial to note that in occasions when childhood years have been tough for the child and parents are totally absent, psychologists are essential for the social development of the child. New components, such as organized programs, may be added to the existing strategy, base on the current readings that I did not chance to implement them while I was working there.

Programs have been developed for training students, in general, study skills and in learning strategies such as rehearsal- repeating material in order to remember it more easily (Brophy J. 1996: 93). Someone studied on those techniques would have come to the Foundation, certain assigned times and dates during the week to implement the precise skills and strategies to the children in order to learn how to learn by repetition and reading.

The absence of a special education assistant may have been the main cause for ineffective intervention. Maria would have needed such strategies if the implemented one had gone wrong. This program would, also, include maintenance of concentration and task focus as well as minimization of anxiety and fear of failure (Brophy J. 1996: 93) caused in Maria’s inner world.

An extra reason why the intervention and the strategy adopted may have been proved wrong is the troubleshooting emerged from teacher praise that has been used quite extensively for the minimization of the underachieving behavior. The main attribute for this argument is that students, like Maria, may become praise- dependent, meaning that they only produce work or appropriate behavior as long as the teacher is in the immediate vicinity or is recognizing their effort (Loveless T. 1996: 61). To conclude, although a number of researchers have found the use of teacher praise and attention to be useful in the improvement of study skills and behavioral disruptions (Loveless T. 1996: 59), careful use of it is essential.

What I did well? I have identified from the beginning the precise behavior needed to be changed and clarified what strategies and plans are suitable, not only for this behavior, but for the general socio- psychoanalytic profile of Maria. I had the professional help of the psychologist of the Foundation who monitored my actions and the behavior of Maria, before and after the adoption of the intervention. We had arranged, also, meetings at certain times and dates during week to discuss; based on my notes and observations. Monitoring student progress during praise intervention is a must and is quite simple (Loveless T. 1996: 61). A sheet kept with notes and observations can give an indication to the teacher as to whether or not a student show some level of progress. Comparing behaviors and reactions of Maria before and after the implementation is a rather effective way of monitoring the effectiveness of the intervention on academics (Loveless T. 1996: 61).

Next time I may include, additionally, what I have red from the book *Best Practices; behavioral and educational strategies for teachers* about overcorrection. I will use overcorrection to improve academic performance. Overcorrection is an educational technique that teachers have used (Jenson R. W. Reavis H. K. 1996: 41). It is focused on repeating a behavior, the correct way, until it is literally over- corrected that is exaggerated. In the case of Maria, overcorrection may be applied in order to minimize her feeling of fear when she comes to learning a certain text by heart. Misbehavior is extinct by practicing the corrected behavior (Jenson R. W. Reavis H. K. 1996: 42). In Maria’s behavior, positive practice may be used as part of the intervention next time. In the positive practice, the child has to practice, the corrected behavior, numerous times. Positive practice overcorrection helps a student acquire and master the skill needed to be developed (Jenson R. W. Reavis H. K. 1996: 42). It is something, which seems useful as part of the intervention described above. It aims on an increase in academic motivation, which is actually Maria’s case. Moreover, practically speaking, I may assign to Maria to learn a certain text by heart by reading it as much as she wants clear and loud until she memorizes it. Oral reading skills may be proved an additional help for Maria; through repetition to learn a passage assigned to her to learn by heart. Overall, this method may be considered as an ‘add- on’ for the intervention used- if it was to be applied next time.

* *Professional Stance*

The aspects of the stance that I did work on, to increase my effectiveness with Maria are vulnerability through the sense of feeling sorry for this child and what she has faced in her childhood years. When Maria was crying, during class, because she could not learn a passage by heart, I was feeling the immediate need to hug her and make her understand that I am aware of what she has passed.

From the start of the intervention plan I knew I had to work on that to improve my professional stance. It was an aspect that needed amendment in order to help Maria’s misbehavior with my best. This aspect needed immediate change and through that certain attitudes and thoughts needed adjustment at the first place. More accurately, I was required to become more persistent in my attitude towards Maria. When Maria started crying, I needed to stay focused on the instructions given by the psychologist and ignore her act of crying. My stance should have been changed towards goal- orientation. It is also worth- noting that I was working with this aspect of my stance only when Maria was starting to misbehave.

The professional stance- at the end of the intervention- was, also, affected by the fact that I am young in age (23 years old) and I did not have the appropriate experience to handle such situations entirely alone. I needed the help of someone older with the precise qualifications and expertise to give me the correct piece of advice and reshape my stance. The psychologist of the Foundation taught me that students who are socially unskilled (lack of motivation) are starving for appropriate recognition from their teachers (Loveless T. 1996: 60).

My stance became more nurturing towards Maria; even though I had always been friendly towards my students and I tended to encourage them, in any case, since I am well aware of the disturbed childhood years that they have passed. Failure syndrome students, like Maria, need programming for successful completion of tasks, ensuring that they know what to do after applying reasonable efforts and by teaching them goal setting (Brophy J. 1996: 90). Thomas (1968) showed how teacher praise, when paired with a performance contingency, could be used to decrease inappropriate behavior (Loveless T. 1996: 60).

Based on the new insights that I gained from the course, my stance would become more qualified and well prepared. Reading the existing literature around tough students’ behaviors, exchanging thoughts within the group members of this course and sharing various experiences an observations, made me think ‘outside the box’ and become more prepared.

A place where the feeling of sorry about Maria can find satisfaction, instead of being repressed, is the encouragement of Maria. This was the main strategy used to maintain an effective stance without suppressing my feelings and thoughts. The use of encouragement and praise is a very strong social reinforcer (Loveless T. 1996: 60) among the ones within human beings. Encouraging Maria and praising her made me feel that I have accomplished my ethical demands, not only as a teacher, but, above all, as a human. Of course, this encouragement and praising was followed by a certain methodology.

Maria was complimented for the precise (wanted) behavior she showed at a particular moment and/or occasion. I was trying to describe to her every time the desired behavior that I was praising to her. Reading more extensively on that respect, I found out that describing the wanted behavior to her helped Maria to self- monitor her behavior in the future (Loveless T. 1996: 61).

Bibliography

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