

Saving Sam: Sleeping Sophomore

CEP 832: ABC Project

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Problem Identification**Description of the problem**

My ABC case study has been on a 15 year-old African American male student named Sam*. Currently, Sam is completing his sophomore year at an urban high school that is in an impoverished part of the city. In recent years, the school has had low-test scores and general performance issues with its students. The presenting problem that Sam was having was that he had been falling asleep in his classes. This singular action resulted in him receiving unsatisfactory grades, causing disruptions in the classroom and general acting out from him. Sam fitted the description of a hostile-aggressive student by his ease of anger, throwing of objects and disruptive behavior in the classroom (Brophy, 1996, p.171). In general, Sam fell asleep in his classes 3-4 times each week and had been doing so since the Fall of 2014. This was very different than Sam's behavior as a freshman. Sam was identified as being polite and well liked by both staff and students. Therefore, his change in behavior had been considered severe by the school staff as he was so different from who he was the previous school year. It had been reported that Sam fell asleep shortly after arriving to each of his classes and when prompted by teachers to wake up, he tended to be upset and would be verbally rude to his teachers. In addition to this, classmates laughed, made jokes or threw things at him while he slept in his classes. When he was awake by his classmates (following one of their jokes), he would lash out and respond in anger by using profane language and/or throwing things back at the students. There were times when instead of using anger, he would respond to his classmates jokes by making jokes and causing his classmates to laugh; in either circumstance the event was disruptive to the teacher's

instructional lesson. In addition to this, the times when Sam was awake, he generally joked around and did not pay attention to the lessons, which in turn contributed to his poor grades.

Professional Stance

My professional stance in working with Sam had been to help identify and understand him and his current life situations. As Brophy (1996) describes the role of a professional in socializing the classroom, I had found that “consistent projection of positive expectations, attributions and social labels” (p.20) were definitely effective in helping students build positive and healthy self-concepts. More specifically, I use positive reinforcement and the projection of positive expectations as a means of connecting with the students and building my own “social attractiveness” (Brophy, p.22). In terms of Sam, I was able to easily build rapport by previously having established social attractiveness with other students, which resulted in Sam’s desire to quickly open up to me. My professional stance of being accepting of students but not accepting of their negative behavior has fared well with students (Brophy, p.23). This has been proven in my working with Sam as he confirmed what I previously thought (i.e. that students do not see me as judgmental and have recognized that I strive to understand them and their life circumstances). One particular professional challenge that occurred while I worked with Sam was the challenge of working with a student who could be deemed assaultive. This was a challenge because students can have police charges brought against them by other students, which can cause them to have issues with pursuing post secondary degrees. I found this to be a challenge because when a student gets involved in the legal system it creates more challenges for both them and the professionals that are attempting to work with them. Fortunately, no charges were ever brought against Sam so this case did not result in any legal issues. In working with Sam, I hoped to improve my skills in making students comfortable with sharing with me. In doing this, it would

allow me to have a better understanding of their life outside of school, which could help me aid them in not making decisions that could cause them to have legal entanglements. In terms of working with Sam, I worked on learning more about him and his ecosystem so I could have the best understanding of him, which helped me help him during this process. Which in turn helped me to build on my own skillset of working with the student and his family. Overall, I believe that when working with any challenging students it is important to look at a student's ecosystem in order to best assess the situation.

Understanding the problem

Methods

The specific behavior that I targeted was the core behavior that I believed was causing all of the behaviors to take place; Sam's falling asleep in his classes. I believed that because he was falling asleep in his classes, his other behaviors were subsequent or confounding to that one behavior. If this behavior could be eradicated then I believe the other behaviors would diminish with time.

During the time of this course, I worked on my positive interactions with Sam (i.e. an informal way of collecting data). Initially, I engaged him daily by giving him some form of praise for that specific day (Brophy, p.23). As the course continued on, I implemented *providing friendly reminders* (in the form of praise and positive reinforcement) and *maintaining open communication* (by speaking to Sam daily) (Brophy, p.38).

In addition to informal methods of data collection, I had a more formal method through the creation of a simple form. I created a simple form for his teachers to complete by the beginning of 7th hour each day. This form allowed the teachers to quickly comment on Sam's behavior without having to spend additional time working on one student and therefore taking away time from their classroom lessons and other students. I would go to each of the teachers classrooms

and check my mailbox (as some teachers would drop the forms off) and would gather the forms for the day. (Also, picking up the forms from the teachers allowed me to get verbal feedback from them in the event that they did not have time to complete the comments section for that day).

Data Patterns

Throughout this case, the informal praise data collection resulted in positive results. The aforementioned strategies were beneficial in building a strong foundation with Sam so we could continue to build our rapport. My professional stance increased in *patience and determination* (Brophy, p.22) while working with Sam as in the beginning I had to push myself to seek him out each day. In doing this, I noticed that he was learning that “inappropriate behavior [could be] self-defeating” as he began to choose different reactions to situations (i.e. the time he responded positively in the lunch room) (Brophy, p.38). In changing his behavior, Sam knew he would be rewarded with praise so he chose to do something that would be positive for him rather than negative.

The formal data collection (i.e. the forms/verbal feedback from teachers) provided me with a way of observing Sam’s interactions at times that I could not. Though these observations are from a second-hand party, these parties were the initial reporters of Sam’s challenging behaviors and therefore provided valid insight into his behavior when I am was unavailable to observe it myself therefore, allowing me to track Sam’s behaviors in each of his classes daily. Through this data collection, I discovered that Sam’s less than positive behaviors were not occurring as frequently during his first two classes (i.e. they occurred only once a week in these classes). I noticed that as the day progressed it seemed as though Sam would get into arguments with his

teachers or classmates. When I probed to why this was the case, it appeared as though Sam was more likely to be awake during his first two classes and more likely to fall asleep as the day progressed. I pondered why he would be the opposite of most students (i.e. students tended to be sleepier during the first few hours of school rather than the last hours). I also considered if he was more engaged with the teachers, the subject content or even his classmates during those first two hours. All of these things are possibilities, so I then considered which teachers may be using some (or any) of the attributes from Brophy's list and noticed that those two teachers were taking on a stance similar to my own. These teachers tended to provide all of their students with direct individual feedback albeit positive or constructive. As well, they *established their roles* early on with their students and are some of the more *well liked teachers* in the school (Brophy, p.22). So this form of data collection not only identified which courses Sam was having the most behavioral issues in but it also disclosed which teachers were using what type of strategies that were effective with students.

Data Use for Intervention

I believe that Sam needed positive reinforcement in order to be more engaged and active in his classrooms. Once Sam was aware that a teacher would give praise then he sought it out. In addition to this, it appeared that if Sam believed that a teacher *accepted him but not his poor behavior* then he was open to individual constructive feedback for that said behavior (Brophy, p.23). This demonstrated that Sam was open to dialogue and changing his behavior. Therefore, the data collected helped me to decide on the specific interventions that I thought would best work for Sam (i.e. partner work and praise/positive reinforcement from teachers) as a student who is deemed hostile/aggressive can use encouragement to aid in their aggression (Brophy, p.180).

Plan Development and Implementation

As previously mentioned, the core of Sam's issues seemed to revolve around him falling asleep in his classes. I believed that this singular action is the springboard for his other actions (i.e. throwing items, inappropriate language towards classmates and/or teachers). So in terms of intervening, I chose to focus on helping him decrease falling asleep and increase staying awake in his courses which in turn would reduce his disruptive behavior of throwing objects, using profane language and/or joking about in class. Initially, Sam would fall asleep about 80% of the time (4 out of 5 days in the week) in his latter courses and was just the opposite in his music course where he stayed awake each day to be an active participant in this course. As well, during his latter classes, he continued to get into verbal disagreements with the teachers and students within those classes. Due to these things, it appeared best for Sam to be paired with another classmate in order to help him remain attentive while in those classes. This could in turn help him to stay awake which would result in him performing better. As well, discussing effective strategies like praise and positive reinforcement with his teachers aided in his ability to stay awake in their classes as he continued to seek positive affirmations regarding his behaviors, which in turn helped him increase his grades.

In order to address this issue, the strategy was called the "The Three P's: Praise, Positive Reinforcement and Patience." The strategy was three fold: 1) Sam's teachers worked on building a united professional stance that worked specifically for the positive development of Sam (i.e. feedback complete with praise and positive reinforcement); 2) pairing Sam with another student in each of his classes and 3) working with Sam's mother.

Strategy One: Strategy one was effective because it helped Sam to see that other people recognize his strengths and remember him for being that polite, strong student that he was the previous year. Sam was in need of positive reinforcement and praise (the first two P's) from his teachers in order to aid him in altering his response to negative comments/circumstances, so, both Sam and the teachers took on the stance of being patient (the last P). Patience was required on both parties part because Sam needed to be patient in seeing the results he desired and the teachers had to be patient in not only seeing desired results from Sam but in continuing to implement the strategy, knowing that there may be times where they did not see any results. In order for this strategy to work, the teachers all agreed that they would work towards taking on the stance of patience and recognized that it is not Sam that they do not agree with but it is his poor behavioral choices (Brophy, 1996, p.23). Therefore, in order to minimize his poor behavioral choices, they needed to give him praise on the positive behaviors. In order to do this, each teacher completed the form in appendix A. Over time, the teachers were able to discuss both the items in the negative column and positive column as they continued to build a relationship with Sam.

Strategy Two: Since Sam is a bright student, pairing him with another student allowed him to continue to get positive feedback from his teachers (therefore building on strategy one). Sam was able to assist other students in his classes with their work and understanding the lesson which in turn assisted him in staying awake and hence, increasing his own academic performance. I aided the teachers in identifying pairing partners students for Sam. As well, I continued to be a support for the teachers in giving feedback (praise/positive reinforcement) to Sam.

Strategy Three: I worked with Sam's mother to help uncover why he had been falling asleep in his classes. In talking to his mother, she disclosed that Sam had to help financially support the family and in order to do so he had a paper route that he did prior to coming to school everyday. Initially, Sam's mother did not want to share this information because she was afraid of the judgment that came with her financial issues. She was unaware that Sam had been falling asleep in class because whenever he would get disciplinary reports that mentioned him throwing objects or being verbally disruptive rather than the core issue of him falling asleep. In talking to Sam's mother, this provided some vital information in understanding why Sam has been falling asleep and helped the other teachers be more empathic and therefore more patient and understanding with him. Following this discovery, I began to work one-on-one with Sam to discuss how he could balance work and school. One of the things we implemented was including a study hour in his schedule so he could complete his homework in school to alleviate more free time when he went home. As well, I am working with him to find him an after-school job so he can try to formulate a normal sleep schedule. The only issue with this is that he needs to be home in order to help his younger siblings with their schoolwork prior to his mother returning home from work. Therefore, I am still in the process of working with other educators to find alternatives to this option.

Plan Evaluation

Throughout the implementation of the aforementioned strategies, I noticed that many of the teachers changed their stance towards Sam and adopted the stance of patience. This was important because it created the united stance that I previously mentioned. During the course, I had to adopt a different strategy for some teachers who were struggling with the form and offered them recorders so they could just voice record their feedback and give it to me. If the

teachers had iPhones then I suggested that they use the voice recording feature and then asked that they text or email their feedback to me. This change in strategy was such a success that all the teachers adopted this tool rather than the form version. I continued to be patient with him, maintain a positive rapport and be a constant in his life and to be consistent. I have found that being consistent seems to be the most essential stance that I take. I have discovered that no matter what other stance I take (i.e. patience, positive rapport, praise/positive reinforcement) that these stances were not truly effective if I did not remain consistent.

Overall, these strategies have been very effective in addressing Sam's presenting problem of falling asleep during his classes. I have found that other than being consistent in your stance that the other essential thing is to be adaptable whenever you are implementing a new strategy. I knew that the one strategy of asking the teachers to take on a stance of patience would be a challenge. However, I also could see the reward if this strategy was successful (which it appears that it was). In terms of Sam's behavior, he has been doing well. The implementation of the partner pairing has really helped with Sam's ability to stay awake in class (especially on the days where he is in a small group and is the facilitator). In moments like this, he appeared to be back to his normal, polite self. As well, the positive feedback helped Sam to build his confidence and has reduced his maladaptive behaviors of throwing things and using profane language in verbal disagreements. I think the use of all of Sam's teachers in the plan, using strategic partner pairing (i.e. having the teacher and me choose partners that we thought would be benefit both Sam and the other student) and *modeling acceptance* of Sam through me initiating positive reinforcement and praise have all been beneficial to his success (Brophy, 1996, p.38). I believe that my interventions were student focused and attempted to involve all aspects of the school setting (i.e. the involvement of teachers, students and other staff members), which helped to ensure that my

strategies were a “best practice” intervention. Brophy’s (1996) key elements of socialization are being implemented in my daily interactions with Sam through modeling and reinforcing desired behavior (p.20). My strategies have been using these approaches and have found them fruitful in assisting Sam with his issue.

I think the best strategy was working directly with Sam’s mother and helping her feel comfortable with me so she disclosed this information. I believe in knowing this information this completely changed the way Sam’s teachers viewed his behavior. This also is the one strategy that I wished I had implemented early as completing this at an early time in his intervention plan would have resulted in him having less disciplinary actions on his record and would have remedy the matter sooner. I would definitely recommend this strategy to a colleague as I believe that it is easy to use and can be implemented by anyone.

Professional Stance

I believe that throughout this process my professional stance continued to be refined. I continued to grow into a more patient and determined professional. This is so because I was dedicated to working with my student and invested in his success. I believe that through my increased awareness of my stance that I realized that this is a core thing that all educators need: a desire to be completely invested in their students. When this desire is lost then it creates room for our students to get lost and overlooked in the educational system.

I believe that educators can use breathing techniques and journaling to help them debrief and remain focused on their stances that they have found effective. I say this because it is easy to get off track with these things when students become more challenging and even frustrating. So while I continued to build a positive rapport and be patient with my student, I also had to be honest with myself and recognize when I had moments of frustration and determine the best way

to deal with them. Overall, I maintain my positions that building a healthy, positive rapport, staying invested/determined in the students and giving feedback are the more effective stances that have worked for my student and me.

References

Brophy, J. (1996). *Teaching problem students*. New York: Guilford.

Appendix A

Please complete the following document by the end of your 6th period on the specified student. Please note the behaviors that took place today in the ☹ or ☺ column. *Note: If you would like to send this information to Mrs. Tabb via voice recording, please include the student's name, teacher's name, class/period and date of the recording at the beginning of the recording.

Excellent Positive Behaviors (☺)

Behaviors that need improvement (☹)

