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Case Study

There is a little girl in my kindergarten class, who I will refer to as Lucy that faces difficulties with academics, as she is a low-achieving student. She has a hard time staying focused in the classroom during instruction and independent work time, as well as problems with building and maintaining social relationships.

Lucy is performing below grade level, and in the beginning of the year she lacked many basic skills that the majority of her peers knew when they entered kindergarten. At the beginning of the semester, she had a hard time applying skills and concepts, which was largely due to the trouble she experienced focusing during mini-lessons and class discussions. Often, when I would look over at Lucy while we were on the rug, she would be lying down, sucking on her fingers, and gazing around the room. Then when the students proceeded to work independently or in a group, Lucy was unaware of the directions that have been given, even after directions have been restated. Difficulty following directions and completing work are common traits of low-achieving students (Brophy, 1996, p. 61). Lucy would not seek help when needed, but would instead lay her head down at her seat and just sit and fiddle with her things until I came over to redirect her. I do not believe that Lucy's issue was motivational, as much as it was a lack of readiness and limited ability, which caused her to make slow progress. However, as Brophy states is common with many low-achieving students, Lucy seemed to develop some motivation problems due to her continual feelings of frustration and failure (Brophy, 1996, p.

59).

This was very challenging for me as Lucy's teacher, as I found myself re-explaining directions and re-teaching concepts all of the time since nine times out of ten, Lucy was unsure of what she needed to be doing. She rarely understood new concepts and skills because she was seldom listening and focusing during my lessons. Lucy's behavior definitely made me move into an awkward stance in my teaching as I felt like I was making efforts to help her, but nothing was proving to be effective. For example, I make my lessons engaging and relate concepts to the real world and to my students' interests and lives. I try to keep mini-lessons focused and concise to appropriately match the average kindergartner's attention span. I incorporate cooperative, hands-on learning activities into each day to engage my students and help them better understand material. Despite my efforts, Lucy's difficulties with focusing and listening were a daily issue in the classroom and affected every subject area. I was concerned about Lucy meeting the kindergarten standards and knew I needed to come up with some new strategies to help her be more successful.

Lucy also faces difficulties forming relationships with and interacting with her peers. She displays some of the characteristics Brophy identifies that are common in children who are rejected by their peers, such as lacking social skills and being forced to play and work alone (Brophy, 1996, p. 347). Some of her behaviors in the classroom that I described above, as well as her awkwardness walking through the halls and out on the playground, are noticed by her peers. She is not teased by her classmates, but does not take the initiative to ask others to play or work with her, which is one contributing factor to her lack of positive peer relationships.

Having concerns with Lucy's academics, attention and focus, as well as social skills, I thought it would be most effective to focus a bit on each of these areas in order to make significant progress with Lucy and help build her self-efficacy and feelings of competence in and outside of the classroom. I also knew that by helping Lucy learn ways to focus better, I would help her get up to speed with her basic reading, writing, and math skills. Likewise, teaching Lucy social skills and guiding her to effectively communicate with her peers would more than likely boost her confidence, which would impact her performance in the classroom.

Teaching Problem Students refers to ten attributes of effective socializers (Brophy, 1996, p. 22), which have served as a good gauge for me to see how I am doing with this child in my class who is facing many difficulties. Some of my strengths include establishing a positive classroom environment and developing rapport with each and every child in my class. I get to know all of my students personally, making them feel cared for and valued members of our classroom community. I focus on student strengths and help my students understand what each child has to offer. These practices are especially beneficial to students like Lucy who are experiencing frustration and lack positive peer relationships. I believe that by taking an interest in a student like Lucy and pointing out her strengths to the rest of the class will lead to increased self-confidence in Lucy and other children also noticing what she has to offer. Ego Strength, taken from Brophy's list of attributes of effective socializers, is the one area that I see as an area of growth for me. Ego strength is defined as a teacher's self confidence that enables them to remain calm in crisis, listen actively without becoming defensive, avoid win-lose conflicts, and maintain problem-solving

orientation rather than resorting to emotional overreactions (Brophy, 1996, p. 22).

There have been times in the classroom that Lucy's behaviors frustrated me to the point where I have lost my composure and was not as effective as I could have been in helping her see the problem and re-focusing her. Being conscious of this helps me keep an effective stance during times Lucy is struggling to remain focused on her work or the directions being given.

I have made some changes in my teaching practice to help Lucy with her academics to ensure that her needs are being met. When teaching reading to my class, I pull Guided Reading groups while the rest of the class is doing Literacy Work Stations. I am able to do focused lessons with a small group of children on books at their instructional level. Lucy does very well in the small group setting and participates, is fully engaged, and makes progress. She is in a group with one or two other children that are at her same level, which allows her time to engage with her peers, developing her social skills. Since I knew how well Lucy performed in this type of setting, I decided to utilize small group and one-on-one time more often and in other subject areas. For example, after giving a mini-lesson in Writing Workshop, I confer with students individually. Some days I will sit with Lucy and assist her with stretching out words after having her tell me what she plans to write. The smile on her face and improved quality of her work show me how much she thrives in this time of work environment. Lucy's success is largely due to the fact that instruction is at her level, taking learning style into consideration. The high-rated teachers referred to in Brophy's chapter about low-achieving students met their students at their level, adjusted assignments accordingly, and helped them move

forward by progressing through successive approximations (Brophy, 1996, p. 63).

When working with Lucy one-on-one, I deliver frequent, focused, and positive praise to help motivate her and understand exactly what she is doing well (Loveless, 1996, p. 60). Like most students, Lucy responds very well to positive recognition.

Much like meeting individually or in a small group with Lucy in order to meet her at her level and instruct her from there, I take many measures to differentiate instruction in my classroom. Lucy especially benefits when content is differentiated based on readiness, meaning she might be learning about a new concept in a concrete and simple way to help her first gain understanding of the big picture and the basics while students who already know the basics of the new concept are learning to think more abstractly about it (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 46). One example of a way I have differentiated instruction in this way is during our money unit in math. Lucy was one of my students who were learning to identify the coins by name and value while I had some children who were able to make exchanges with coins and show various money amounts in different ways. Simultaneously, some children would be doing coin rubbings and sorting coins in order to get familiar with how each coin looks while some of my higher-achieving students were playing a money exchange game where they would roll a die, take that many pennies, and then exchange pennies for nickels, and nickels for dimes and quarters whenever possible. We would begin the class together with a mini lesson that would give me valuable information about the students' prior knowledge, and then the content portion of the lesson was differentiated so that all students were working at their instructional level (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 72). Differentiated instruction benefits all students and

allows me to challenge each child at his/her instructional level.

While I make use of small group learning and one-on-one instruction as often as is feasible, a goal I have for all of my students, including Lucy, is to support and guide them to becoming more independent and self-sufficient learners. It is not practical for me to always sit with Lucy during writing time as I have twenty other students to attend to. So another method I have tried is using a timer with Lucy and breaking assignments into smaller parts (Brophy, 1996, p. 67). One example of this is after having Lucy tell me out loud what she plans to write, I draw lines on her paper showing how many sounds she should hear in each word. This makes her job more focused and manageable in contrast to having an entire paper to write on, which can feel intimidating to Lucy. I will sometimes set a timer or tell her to raise her hand as soon as she finishes writing the sentence so I can come back and check her work. While these strategies have proven effective and have helped Lucy stay on task and complete her work, I still struggle with finding the time to break assignments into smaller chunks each and every day. It is also a challenge to check in with Lucy as often as she requires when I want and need to give attention to all of my other students as well.

Another suggested strategy Brophy recommends for low-achieving students is to provide the student with a tutor (Brophy, 1996, p. 67). I have done this for Lucy in a number of ways. We have a tutoring program at our school where parent volunteers come in once a week to work with a child for half an hour. Lucy recently started working with a wonderful parent volunteer who provides her assistance with completing tasks and gives her a lot of positive feedback to help motivate her.

This helps Lucy successfully complete more learning tasks and is a way to provide her with re-teaching of concepts and skills she doesn't fully understand. Her tutor also gives her frequent and immediate feedback to ensure that Lucy is not developing misconceptions. I have also had Lucy work with or near higher-achieving students that help keep her "on track" with her work and provide her assistance when necessary (Brophy, 1996, p. 67). Lastly, my class is paired up with second grade buddies that we meet with every other week to complete fun learning tasks together. Careful thought was taken to ensure successful buddy matches for all my students. The activities we do range from creating commercials together when learning about persuasive writing to listening to our older buddies read fluently to us to making seasonal art projects to hang in our windows. Buddy time not only motivates Lucy and makes learning fun and accessible for her, but also helps her develop social skills.

When teaching Lucy new skills and concepts, I try to use concrete manipulatives whenever possible to help her gain a solid understanding of new concepts. I also incorporate many learning games and hands-on activities where students can interact with material to gain new understandings. (Brophy, 1996, p. 82). I relate content back to my students' lives and the real world and help them understand the relevance of what we are learning. I have found that when I explain why we are learning a particular concept or why we need to master a skill, the students' interest rises and there is a newfound motivation to learn. This method makes sense to me when I think about it in my own yoga practice. When my instructor explains the benefits of a certain pose, whether it helps your digestive system or is highly

beneficial to runners, this helps me stay more focused in the pose and motivates me to get stronger in my own practice. I try to remember this as I teach my students and whenever possible give them an explanation of the significance of what we are learning.

An additional strategy I have used to assist Lucy this semester is communicating effectively with her parents. I have met with them several times and consistently provide them with feedback on how she is doing in school. I have communicated to them the basic skills she is lacking and showed them specific ways they can assist her with these skills at home. Along with our Early Intervention Program teacher, I have met with Lucy's parents to show them work samples and let them know how imperative it is that they work with her at home. Knowing the family situation and having experience with their older child made us realize that while we wanted to stay positive and focus on the progress Lucy has made, her parents needed to be made aware that she is lacking many basic skills that other kindergartners came to school knowing well. After communicating this to Lucy's parents, I have continued to stay in contact with them, sending notes or emails home when Lucy works exceptionally hard or makes gains in school. This has helped the parents realize that we are taking measures in school to assist Lucy in every way that we can and are noticing the progress she is making. I have noticed a difference in their attitude and think they now realize that if we work together to support Lucy both at school and at home, she will make significant gains.

Another issue Lucy has had this year in kindergarten is focusing while I am giving instructions or teaching a new concept and while completing her work. In terms of

making lessons engaging, relating content to my students' lives, and allowing them to be active learners and engage with the content we are learning, I feel that I already do these things pretty well. In the beginning of this semester while the majority of my class was engaged, sharing ideas, and relating ideas to their own lives, I noticed that many times Lucy was still daydreaming so I knew I had to take new measures to address this. Brophy refers to Abbott's list of strategies for low-achieving students, which suggests that teachers seat these students toward the front of the class and make eye contact often. She also recommended keeping directions short and breaking assignments down into smaller segments (Brophy, 1996, p. 67). I have made an extra effort to do these things with Lucy and have seen some improvements in her ability to focus. The one area I have become more conscious of is keeping directions short and simple. It is so easy to go on and on when giving directions as an additional reminder my students need often pops into my mind, but I try to remember that they are most likely not retaining most of the information I am giving them when I ramble on so it is better to keep directions concise.

An intervention I have used to help Lucy focus during work time is to have her repeat directions back to me before she begins. Breaking assignments down into smaller chunks and checking in with Lucy frequently has also helped improve her focus. The combination of ensuring Lucy understands her job and is able to be successful while concurrently providing her with continual praise and feedback has helped her make significant gains in her academic progress as well as her focus.

The last area I identified as a struggle for Lucy is her social skills and ability to

interact with her peers. In the beginning of the semester, she hardly ever initiated conversation with her peers and rarely joined in on playground games. She appeared to enjoy playing by herself, which is why the other children let her be and did not often ask Lucy to join in on their games. Lucy is a bit awkward and unaware of how she is perceived by others when she is walking through the hall, sitting (or lying down) on the carpet, or talking/singing to herself. She has not had the experiences some of my other students have had prior to kindergarten interacting with peers in and outside of the school setting.

To address Lucy's issue with social skills, I referred Lucy to our school counselor to begin in our school's brand new Social Skills training classes. She and another child from my class go with about five other kindergarten students and our counselor once a week to role play and get explicit instruction about various social skills. The girls have seemed to really enjoy it and think of it as a privilege to get to leave class to go to their small group. I have also done some social skills training with my whole class and explained to them exactly what to say and do when someone annoys or hurts them, for example. We have done some role-playing and when situations arise out on the playground or in our room, I remind students how to begin an I-message or how to respond when someone delivers an I-message to them. All of my students have enjoyed this and have gotten really good at communicating their feelings to one another. I have also worked to give Lucy instruction on how to handle various social situations when the need arises. Sometimes in the classroom and out on the playground, I will pull Lucy aside and talk to her about how to ask other kids to play when I notice her roaming around by

herself. I have asked her who she would like to get to know better, and then told her exactly what to say to them. Many times teachers assume that all of our students come to us knowing how to talk to others, but they really require training on how to perform different social skills (Brophy, 1996, p. 354). We need to break social skills down to the most finite point and take social skills errors as an opportunity to learn.

I have also incorporated more cooperative learning into my classroom. As Brophy states, "Peers who collaborate in pursuit of common goals tend to get to know and value one another, so that well-structured, cooperative learning experiences can lead to the development of friendships (Brophy, 1996, p. 353)." I have paired Lucy up with friendly, well-liked children who are patient and kind. An example of a cooperative learning lesson I recently did was on Saint Patrick's Day where the students learned a shamrock poem with the whole class, and once they knew it well, I assigned them a partner to work with to put their line of the poem back in order. The pairs then had to practice reading the poem fluently, so "it sounds like talking," and then illustrate it. At the end the children all lined up and performed the poem. I remember Lucy reading along with her buddy so proud and confident. This is just one of many cooperative learning lessons I have used in my classroom, but it goes to show how effective pair and group activities can be. Students can learn from each other, are held accountable, and develop social skills along the way. Fister discusses the potential of cooperative learning to increase peer relationships, and also says that this learning method increases unmotivated students' self-esteem and academic achievement (Fister, 1996, p. 14).

To assist Lucy in forming positive peer relationships, I have also tried talking with

other students in my class about asking her to join their group. I try to help them understand where Lucy is coming from and have explained how some children are shy about asking others to play. I make sure to approach friendly, kind-hearted children and talk to them in a way that will help them empathize with Lucy. The chapter on children with social relationship problems in *Teaching Problem Students* states, "Sometimes we underestimate how much children can understand or empathize with other people. Lots of times they don't really stop and think about what is happening to that other child whom they exclude or leave out (Brophy, 1996, 358)." The students I have talked with have eagerly made efforts to ask Lucy to play and work with them and to help her feel comfortable. This has definitely given Lucy a self-esteem boost.

I have a "bucket filler" system in my class where my students can fill out a slip to identify someone who has "filled a bucket," or done or said something nice for someone else. I read these notes aloud each Friday morning. I make sure that every child gets nominated every so often and have at times pointed out when Lucy (and other students) has been a bucket filler to other students so they can make sure to recognize her. This is one method I use in my classroom to create a community feel where strengths are emphasized, and where students are recognized for their accomplishments and for being good citizens. This positive classroom atmosphere really is key for all students, but especially those like Lucy. I am reminded of a quote I once heard and took to heart by Richard Lavoie: "Our job is to simply make sure every child that crosses our paths has more poker chips than when they came to us."

Overall, I feel that the many methods I have used with Lucy have been very

effective. I haven't found any techniques to be unsuccessful. Lucy has made strides in her academic progress and has shown an increased motivation to not only get her work done, but also to contribute to group discussions. She still has a ways to go and still has times when she lacks confidence and doesn't give her work her best shot, but I believe that by continuing to differentiate instruction, utilize learning models that are conducive to Lucy, and instruct her on how to socialize with her peers, Lucy will continue to make gains in her learning. I have also noticed an improvement in my overall teaching stance. I have found myself to be more patient and confident that the techniques I am using are beneficial to all of my students. Seeing improvements in Lucy's academic abilities as well as social skills has given me confidence that what I am doing is working. I still have days and times that I become impatient and frustrated, but I realize that when I am calm and collected and take things slow with Lucy, she is the most successful and everyone learns more. When I begin to lose an effective stance in my teaching, I remember what I have found to work and go back to that. I also always try to remember that at the end of the day, the most important thing is that my students leave school fully confident and with a full bucket. I help foster my students' self-worth and want to make sure each and every one of them leaves school excited about learning and feeling good about themselves.

References

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