

Case Study, EDU 615

Introducing Jimmy

My case study involves Jimmy, a 7-year-old first grader with a history of behavior problems in school and at home. He is currently under an Individualized Education Program that includes daily behavior reports and a biweekly hour-long meeting with the teaching, special education and behavioral staff. He gets weekly sessions with a speech therapist, occupational therapist, and behavior specialist. He is under a token system of rewards and I and the head teacher are currently watch-on-watch with him to make sure he does not get too out of control. I also am keeping tabs on his behavior at recess, with 30-second interval behavior checks recorded on a clipboard.

I chose this student for two reasons. The first is that, since I must devote so much time to working with him, he is an ideal subject for study; I do not have to take time away from other students to watch and work with him closely. I spend a good deal of time with him, and am able to both apply motivational theory to our interactions and to closely observe the result. The second reason I chose Jimmy is that I believe he will be quite responsive to motivational intervention. He has already shown the ability to modify his behavior to some degree, both immediately and consciously and long-term and subconsciously. Our relationship has developed over the past few months to the transference stage not uncommon in young children, in which he occasionally refers to me as "Poppa." This means that there is enough of a connection both at the formal teacher-student level, as well as at the emotional level, which should make our work quite productive. Jimmy had a history in kindergarten of aggressive behavior with poor control and a tendency to act out. He was often called out for being much farther into the other student's faces than they were comfortable with, leaning very close and being very loud. He often would grab and hit the other students and his teachers. In difficult situations, he would run from the room, hide under his desk, etc. His frustration level is still low, though there has been a marked improvement from last year, and even from the beginning of this year. His behavior is clearly a result of poor social skills rather than innate "badness" or insurmountable emotional problems. Also, his reputation has sometimes been due to misunderstanding by his teachers and fellow students. For instance, he often got into trouble in kindergarten for spitting at students and teachers. I have discovered that he does suffer from an excess of drool; he simply has a lot of saliva, which escapes fairly often, bedewing his group table, papers, me, and anything else in the direction of the flow. Not pleasant, but hardly worthy of punishment. Also, he is extremely awkward and clumsy and has a poor sense of his own and others' personal spaces. He tends to bump into or push past people, even more than most first graders. This often gets misinterpreted as being purposefully aggressive.

Besides the above, Jimmy has extreme difficulty with transition times, inappropriate focus and obsessive attention to detail as well as high distractibility. He

often fails to complete his work, is usually the last to gather or to get into line. If this is mentioned, he can get very self-denigrating, saying things like, "I want to write 'STUPID' instead of 'Jimmy' on my paper." Jimmy has a very strict mother, rigid both in her religion and social requirements for her son, and I believe that she has already imprinted him with a strongly negative self-image that he projects onto his classmates when he does get into spats with them. He is very intelligent, but so uncertain of his own abilities that he is endlessly asking how to do every aspect of every problem present, needing many repetitions of both directions and reassurance that he is working well and correctly. His motivation to do class work and participate seems to be directly related to his sense of his ability to do the work. For instance, he has a great deal of trouble reading, so any independent reading assignments he will try to avoid, claiming tiredness and that the work is too hard, that he has allergies or is sick, etc. I plan to work on his sense of self worth and ability using concepts from both self-efficacy and self-determination theory and especially attribution theory. Success will be determined by the extent to which he can wean himself away from needing Teacher's support, to working more independently and with more self-confidence and seeing a reduction in the number of self-depreciating statements made when he does make a mistake or need correction.

Jimmy works well with most of his teachers and specials, as long as he is working one-on-one. He is fairly self-aware, responding appropriately and accurately when asked to report on his feelings or behavior. In groups, however, he often loses control fairly quickly and his behavior can degenerate into silliness or aggression. He seems to have a sparse set of tools to help him deal with complex social situations.

Jimmy in the Classroom

Listening to instructions – Jimmy has a difficult time paying attention during presentations of task instructions, becoming bored and fidgety almost immediately. He will fade in and out of attention, calling out comments, responses and questions inappropriately. He will play with his clothing, make silly faces and noises and distract the students at his table or on the gathering rug. At the end of the instructions, Jimmy will often say that he doesn't get it and demand that the instructions be repeated. If he thinks he understands, he will pay attention more closely, but will call out answers and comments inappropriately.

Working with other students – Jimmy can work well with other students as long as he feels that he is in charge or he thinks the work the other students are doing has value. He does work well at all when he wants to do something that the other students are not interested in or wants materials that the other students are using. He may demand a vote, but will pout and cease to engage if he loses the vote, saying that the situation is unfair. For example, recently the students were doing a May Day project which involved a word search and coloring paper. Because of his reading problems, he refused to join with the other children at his table in doing the word search, concentrating on the coloring. He let the other students do the search, then demanded that they help him circle the words. I was teaching search strategies to the other kids at the table. Jimmy paid no attention to my instructions, but then demanded that I go over the strategies again. He

also grabbed the various coloring pens at the table without asking the students who had gotten them from the pen drawers if he could share, generating some anger and fighting.

Testing – We recently administered the grade-level reading test. This is a test which must be finished, though not in any particular time frame. Parts of the test were quite basic and Jimmy did well on those, although he continuously asked for help, which we were not allowed to give. Other parts involved reading some short stories and answering questions about them. Jimmy did very poorly there, as he was hampered both by the difficulty of the task and the fact that he was expected to try his best without help. (Jimmy suffers from an extreme literalness; in reading this means that he is not able to guess a word from context, modifying his guess as to the meaning based on his reading of the rest of the sentence. He said many times during the assessment that the test was full of stupid, fake words that made no sense.) While all of the other children finished the assessment, Jimmy got very frustrated and stopped work. It actually took a week of doing one small bit at a time for me to get him to finish the assessment.

Phys Ed – Jimmy does poorly in Phys Ed, often being made to sit out due to inappropriate behavior. He is not very coordinated (although he is large and strong), affecting his frustration level when he can't perform a task. His distorted sense of fairness is exacerbated when he is not chosen to lead an activity or to be "it." In any activity, his excitement level goes up rapidly, while his ability to control his behavior drops as rapidly. If other students do something he thinks was wrong or unfair, he is much more likely to act out against them than at any other time than recess.

Jimmy's very strongly developed critical sense and rigid attitudes affect his work in school and his relations with his teachers and his peers. His motivation is not to learn the material presented in school or to improve his social skills, but to get marks showing that he has done the right thing. He also has a good deal of trouble controlling his behavior. The first program we put into place was to develop a token system to allow him to earn points for appropriate behavior. This has developed over the year into a system of receiving pennies for behavior. He is signaled with the "OK" sign, then a penny is transferred by the teacher from the source to the earned pocket. To minimize disruption to the rest of the class, Jimmy is not handed the pennies. At the end of the day, he gets to tally them. Once a week, he is allowed to exchange them for a small prize. The motivational theory behind this is that he develop a sense of self-efficacy by proving he can achieve a goal by controlling his behavior. The token system is in use by all his specials teachers, as well as in the classroom. Also, the system brings both Expectancy X Value and Self-Determination into play, the former because he receives continual reinforcement of his success through the rewarding of the pennies, and the latter because he chooses what prizes go into the prize box, and whether he wants to spend on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. (We limit his savings to 3 weeks to make certain he is getting the more tangible reinforcement of the prize often enough for the system to be effective.) By allowing the saving up for pennies over a period of time, we are teaching him to be able to set and work towards goals.

While these strategies are mainly directed towards helping Jimmy control his disruptive and inappropriate behaviors, we feel that they help him academically, as well. Since he is not being constantly chastised for poor behavior, he can concentrate on his class work and begin to increase his skill here. His main problem academically is reading, and I take him aside for skills practice. During these times, I teach him from a set program, but also work with him on interpretation strategies and simply praise and support his progress and his effort. These special one-on-one work periods give Jimmy a sense of caring that helps his insecurity with his own self-image.

Motivational Strategies

The most difficult challenges Jimmy faces are his own self-criticism and his extreme literalness and inflexibility. His teachers must work with him continuously to increase his sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. Also, he must be given tangible goals to back up the less tangible goals of academic achievement, at least until he develops a belief in his own ability to succeed at a task which is complex and difficult. Special token systems will not work as he gets older, but some sort of reward will help him mark his own progress in a way that mere praise does not. For instance, his mother has demanded daily reports on his behavior. These began as highly detailed, 2-page forms which we filled out every day. One section included a set of faces ranging from “frowny” to “happy.” These were circled to indicate the sort of day Jimmy had had. As time went on, the mother stopped reading the reports, and they became more of a way for Jimmy to track his own behavior. Now the forms just have one set of faces for the morning and one for the afternoon. This has become a very important gauge for Jimmy. The use of a chart to track behavior and academic progress may be important for Jimmy for some time to come. Also, his teachers must work hard to form close personal relationships with Jimmy, giving praise and a sense of caring to help him increase his sense of worth. I believe that, once Jimmy believes that he can accomplish a task and if he feels that his teacher cares about him and his concerns, the value that the teacher puts on the task will be something he will accept readily. If he lacks confidence in either area, he will be far less likely to become engaged.

Also important in motivating Jimmy for a while at least, will be very strong and frequent positive attributions to counteract the strong negatives he gets from home and, consequently, from himself. At this stage, he actually rejects positive feedback, as his self-image is determined by the inflexible and judgemental feedback he gets from home. This will be a delicate matter to handle, as one cannot appear to be contradicting his parents. Jimmy must be allowed to believe in his own abilities and innate goodness, and the best way to effect this is to give as much positive feedback as can be given. Even though perhaps not inclined to do this because of his acting out, the teacher must feed that little ego to a point where it can approve of itself. This will hopefully have the added effect of making Jimmy less jealous of others and more tolerant of their foibles, leading to less conflict with other students.

One strategy that should be used cautiously with Jimmy is to be too free with self-determination, at least until his social and academic skills and his confidence in his own

abilities. His anxiety to do the right thing is so strong and his belief that he can do so is so weak that to ask him to make any significant self-decisions could overwhelm him. It is an area in which he needs to be carefully watched. He is not currently the sort of student that you could send alone to the library, or allow too much choice as to work or activity. Nevertheless, his sense of responsibility, currently distorted into a sense of guilt, will be a powerful force in this student if carefully nurtured.

In Conclusion

Working with Jimmy has made me believe that the most important motivating factor for most students is to feel that their teacher cares for them and likes them and also is passionate about his teaching and his subject(s). This is the *sine qua non* of classrooms. All other factors considered, it would be the rare student who will excel in the face of a teacher who seems not to care, either for him or for the material presented. This can be expressed as enthusiasm, as willingness to listen, and especially as willingness to learn from students as much as they learn from the teacher. The learning process cannot be seen as one-way only, but as adventure shared. At the same time, the teacher must be able to project competence and mastery in many aspects of life that the students find meaningful. The teacher must be able to relate to concerns of the students that do not relate to her subject matter, in order to create as many links as possible with them (In my case, I had to learn more than I ever thought I would want to know about Bakugan and Pokemon) At the same time, the teacher must be a person the students can look up to, both as a source of valued information and as an authority figure who can set and support appropriate limits. In other words, the ideal teacher is the ideal adult, warm and caring, willing to learn but a fount of knowledge, with high ideals and expectations, and most importantly, the belief that each of his students can meet those expectations successfully.