

Generalized Anxiety Disorder in a First-Grade Student

Part One: Problem of Practice

I am currently teaching first grade in a small, private Catholic School in Otsego, Michigan. My classroom consists of nine students, four boys and five girls, who are all learning at the first grade level in all subjects, with a few learning above grade level in reading and mathematics. St. Margaret School has a total of 80 students and 8 teachers for grades K-8. We have a tutor for our students that require extra assistance with reading/ELA and math. We do not have any special education teachers on staff at our school, but we do have two students that receive services from Otsego Public Schools and any other students that qualify for special education would also receive services from Otsego Public Schools. We also utilize Otsego Public Schools for the observation and testing of students that the teachers feel might need special education services. Although we receive services and utilize the special education teacher for observation and testing purposes, it seems that because we are not directly in the public schools it seems to take longer for our students to be observed and /or tested, or even sometimes for our questions to be answered via email. It seems that since we do not get responses in a timely manner for our students, most of the time the teachers need to research concerns on their own or conference with one another for ways that we can help accommodate students in our classroom.

At the beginning of the school year we are asked by our school tutor if we have any students that we feel need assistance in reading/ELA and/or math. I had one student who I felt could use some extra help in reading but the student that I had a

number of concerns with could not receive any assistance that would be beneficial to her. The student that I am referring to is Cassidy.

The reason that I chose to focus on Cassidy is because she is a very bright student, in fact, she often thinks outside of the box compared to the other students. Academics are not an issue with her, in fact, she is above the first grade level in both reading and math. The concern is that she has a difficult time completing her work in a timely manner. I have been very stumped at trying to figure Cassidy out this school year, in fact, I often thought she was unmotivated to do her work or she was easily distracted by the extra activity that may be going on in the classroom while she is working.

I decided to first tackle the problem by referring to our course book *Teaching Students Who Are Exceptional, Diverse, and at Risk* and looking up how to motivate students. The book gave examples of “using language as an intrinsic motivator”. Even though I was already practicing some of the tips that they gave, I decided to practice the ones that they listed that I was not already practicing. Out of the tips that they listed that I normally do not do, which I thought would be most beneficial to Cassidy, was being brief and specific when giving directions. The reason this one stuck out the most to me was because maybe I was giving her too much information to process at one time and if I shortened the directions, or even went over them with just her, then maybe she would be less confused and have more time to spend on her work. The other accommodation that I made was I moved her desk to the front row and on an end so that there were less distractions around her.

Even though Cassidy seemed to love the individual attention and having her

desk in the front of the room, these accommodations did not seem to make a difference after the two week trial period. I decided that I would still give her individual instructions and keep her desk in the front of the room since she seemed to soak up the extra attention she was receiving. Since I had already been doing the other tips that the book suggested, I decided to talk to one of the course instructors for further assistance. The recommendation that I received from Jeanne was for Cassidy to have a functional behavioral assessment. When I mentioned this to my principal he said that he would send over an email to the special education teacher and he would like to do an observation of Cassidy on his own so he could document what he had seen. He also asked me to get some information on a functional behavioral assessment, which according to our course book is “a method of gathering data to design the most effective positive support plans and to monitor their progress” (p. 503).

When the principal came in he told me that he did notice Cassidy having difficulty staying focused on her work and that he also noticed the amount of time it took her to answer questions, even when I gave her prompts to let her know that it would soon be her turn. After he left my classroom he sent over what he gathered during his observation to the special education teacher.

Since we do not have a special education teacher on staff, which is a problem/concern at our school, I continued to make accommodations for Cassidy. Those accommodations included giving her more time to complete her work and for writing assignments and board work for math I would give her a more structured outline/sheet to fill in instead of having to write everything from the board.

Part Two: Problem of Practice Analysis

At the end of the last school year I spoke with the kindergarten teacher to get an idea about the students that would be coming into my classroom in the fall. I asked her the basic questions relating to academics, meaning if there were any students who were low in the group or if there were any students who were high in the group; if she thought there were any students I should keep my eye on who may require special accommodations or even testing for special education services; were there any students that displayed behavior problems more severe than a typical kindergarten student; and were there any students that were not socially accepted or just not socially involved with the other students. At that time she felt that there were no students with academic concerns; although she did mention a couple of students had a difficult time completing their work in a timely manner, there were no outstanding behavior concerns; other than the normal behavior of five and six year olds, but she did have a couple of students who not as social as some of the other students, but she thought it was only because they were a little shy. Of those students that were “shy”, one of them was Cassidy. Cassidy was also one of the students that she said had a difficult time completing her work in a timely manner.

Since kindergarten is such a huge transition for some children, being less sociable is not usually a concern unless the teacher feels that there may be a cause for it. The only thing that the kindergarten teacher mentioned about Cassidy is the fact that her parents were going through a messy divorce. She said that the parents could not even put their differences aside to sit in parent/teacher conferences to talk about their daughters academic progress. I kept this situation in mind and made a mental note of it because I know how much divorce can affect a child, especially if the child feels they

are put into the middle of it.

In the fall Cassidy came into my classroom ready to begin a new year. She seemed a little shy at first which is understandable since other students displayed the same type of behavior. I decided to treat her and observe Cassidy just as I did the other students because maybe the situation of being put in the middle of her parents had changed over the summer. After the first week of school I quickly realized that Cassidy would need some extra attention and possibly some academic accommodations but I just wasn't sure how to make those accommodations because she was performing at, if not above, the first grade level expectations but the timeliness that her work was completed in was significantly slower than that of her classmates.

From mid-September until the end of the first semester, October, I just observed Cassidy as closely as I could without it being obvious because I did not want her to feel uncomfortable in the classroom. The first thing that I noticed was that she had to have her crayons and colored pencils in the boxes that they came in in a certain order; even when she had them out on her desk they had to always remain perfectly lined up and in a certain order. Another thing that I noticed was that she "zoned out" while she was doing her work. What I mean by that is she would often just look up and stare for a long period of time. The other thing that I noticed was that she seemed tired all of the time. Since she seemed to be lacking sleep, I figured this must be why she takes longer to complete her work and why she "zones out" at times during the day. The only thing that I could related the ordering of her crayons and pencils to was Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), so I decided to do a little research on it. I found out that children with OCD can have a very stressful life and that it takes a lot of their time and energy. It also

makes it hard for the child to finish things like schoolwork or homework (Fruehling).

After reading that I figured this was what she was displaying and decided to deal with it the best that I could in the classroom since there are no special education services that could be offered in the school outside of the ones that I would provide her with in my classroom.

During the second semester Cassidy's behavior began to get worse. The amount of time she spent "zoning out" had increased and when we did our group discussions she had a great deal of difficulty answering the question when it was her turn. As I mentioned before, I gave her prompts during group discussions but I still did not know what to do in reference to the "zoning out". I decided that it was time to talk to her mom about the timeliness of her work since I was beginning to send home the work that she did not complete in the classroom. Because Cassidy's behavior continued to get worse, I approached her mom with my concern of her timeliness in completing her work, her mom responded to me about how she had difficulty getting Cassidy to get ready in the morning in a timely manner and that she began using a timer for each thing that she needed to do. She said that the timer was working very well and that she would bring one in for my classroom. I was finely hoping that some progress would be made, but after trying the timer for two weeks during our morning work I noticed that she seemed to be distracted by the timer, even though it was not visible to her, because she began asking me how much time was left on it and when I told her how much time, she seemed to get nervous that she would not complete her work. I decided not to use the timer and to continue to give her more structure and support and to move her desk to the front row so that she had less distractions.

The third semester showed the same behaviors and I still had no observation set up with the public schools special education teacher. It was time for our individual chatting for the final project for the course. Since I had been observing Cassidy and recording what I had seen I decided that she would be my focus but I felt that so far I had been focusing on motivation and did not feel like this was the right area. After talking with Jeanne, she suggested that I look into anxiety disorders in children. Once I began researching this topic, I was able to see how Cassidy could possibly fit into this category. One of the articles I found was especially helpful, *Selective Mutism--Tips for Helping Teachers Deal with this Anxiety Disorder in the Classroom*, gave suggestions that I could use. Finally in April the special education teacher came to my room to observe Cassidy. After her observation we set up a meeting to discuss what she saw, to talk about Cassidy's behaviors in the classroom, her home life, and to talk about ways that I can make accommodations in the classroom. At the meeting she told me that she did not think that Cassidy had any learning disabilities or AAD/ADHD. I explained to her about her parents divorce and she said that from her observation and this information that she could have a Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). "Family issues" is listed under the *Anxiety Disorders Association of America's* list of things that can cause anxiety in children between the ages of six and eleven .

Three major goals that I have for Cassidy are: 1) to complete all of her morning work at least one day per week, 2) to participate during group discussion in a timely manner at least one time per week, and 3) complete given reading assignments during the allotted time at least one time per week.

Part Three: A Plan of Action

Some of the suggestions that the special education teacher gave me for Cassidy were also tips that can be used with other students as well. The following are a list of those tips: provide her with fill-in-the blanks for writing exercises, provide her with a shorten list of choices instead of a whole board of words, give her a lot of love and attention, do not use the timer, instead, give verbal warnings, and when the time is complete, have her put her work away and if there is time allow her to go back to it at a later point in the day. Along with using these suggestions, I also decided to implement some of the suggestions from the *Selective Mutism* (Clarke) article. Of those tips, I would incorporate the following: be patient, reward and praise her for responding during group discussion, let the class know in advance about changes in routine/schedule, and not to force her to speak. Another tip that I think I can incorporate based on information from the *Anxiety Disorder Association of America* is to let her know that it is alright to make mistakes and to let her see me make mistakes, because “children with GAD tend to be very hard on themselves, striving for perfection, sometimes avoiding tasks repeatedly. They may also seek constant approval or reassurance from others”. This would explain why sometimes in her journal she erases her mistakes so hard that she almost goes through the paper and why she is always looking at me when she turns in her work for approval of completion.

In addressing the goals, I decided to create a sticker chart for Cassidy. Each week she would be given a sheet. Each time that she completes one of her goals, she can put a sticker in the box. Under each sticker box is a space for me to write the date so I can monitor if she is completing her tasks at an earlier part of the week. If she

completes all of the goals by the end of the week she can pick a prize from the prize box. After giving her the goals for two weeks, I will then increase one of goals to two times a week. I will continue to increase the number of times the goals need to be met each time she seems to be making progress towards her goals. If she seems to become anxious because of the increase, I will then lower it back down one step and we will work up to the increase once again. Each time she completes a goal, she will be able to put a sticker in the box. I decided not to attach the sheet to her desk because symptoms of anxiety are trouble concentrating and restlessness (Iannelli) and I already experienced this when the timer was used for the completion of lessons.

Another way that I will address the goals is that I will continue to give an extended amount of time to complete morning work than the rest of the students but I will not extend the time long enough for her to complete all of the morning work tasks or the reading assignments. For morning work I will create a checklist for Cassidy that lists the five tasks that need to be completed each morning. The tasks are: Today's Question, Handwriting, Math Sheet, Journal, and a daily ELA task that changes each day of the week. At the end of the time allotted for morning work I will go over the checklist with Cassidy and we will see how many of the five tasks she completed. The checklist and remaining tasks will be put on the circle table in the front of the room so that she can work on them later. Next to the last completed item on the checklist I will put a star to indicate that is the last item that she completed. This checklist will give me insight as to whether or not her timeliness is increasing or not. If she has not completed morning work or the reading assignments, I will allow Cassidy to work on completing them while I am reading to the class or during a specified period during the day when

everyone else has a “catch up” time for work that was unfinished during the day. I will continue to give her verbal warnings of how much time she has, such as “five more minutes to work” but I will not use the timer.

Along with giving her the checklist and sticker chart for completing her work in a timely manner, I will also continue to give her extra praise when she participates during group discussions within a specified time. I started giving her verbal clues as to when it would be her turn and this seems to help. I am also going to start counting back in my head from ten to give her some “think time”. If she does not give a response after the ten seconds of “think time“, I will give her four choices that she can choose from for her response. I will then start the “think time” over again. To monitor how long she needed for “think time”, I will keep a chart and record the number of seconds it took for her to come up with a response, if she needed four choices, and then the number of seconds it took for her to answer from the four choices. If I notice that she does not need as much “think time”, I will shorten the number of seconds in by two seconds, giving her eight seconds of “think time” instead of ten.

Below are the evaluation forms that I am using with Cassidy:

Cassidy's Completed Work Chart

Week of _____	Morning Work	Reading Work
Monday (date completed)		
Tuesday (date completed)		
Wednesday (date completed)		
Thursday (date completed)		
Friday (date completed)		

Cassidy's Morning Work Checklist

- Today's Question
- Handwriting
- Math Sheet
- Journal
- _____

Cassidy's "Think Time"

Date	"Think Time"	"Think Time" with Choices

In the end, my overall goal is for Cassidy to complete all of her morning work two mornings of the week during the allotted time frame, her reading work two times a week during the allotted time frame, and for her "think time" to be at six seconds for each response and only needed four choices two times a week. I will evaluate her progress each week by looking at the sticker chart, checklist, and "think time" sheet. Since I just started the entire process we have not increased the expectations but I am hoping that by the end of the school year we are able to reach at least one of the goals successfully, if not all of them.

References

- Anxiety Disorders Association of America. Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents. [Online] Available: <http://www.adaa.org>
- Clarke, A. (2006). Selective Mutism--Tips for Helping Teachers Deal with this Anxiety Disorder in the Classroom. Education Articles. [Online] Available: <http://www.edarticle.com>
- Fruehling, J. (2006-2008). OCD in Children. Obsessive Compulsive Foundation. [Online] Available: <http://ocfoundation.org>
- Iannelli, V. (2008). Anxiety Symptoms: Mental Health Basics. Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics. [Online] Available: <http://pediatrics.about.com>
- Vaughn, S., Bos, C.S., Shay-Schumm, J., (2007). Teaching Students Who Are Exceptional, Diverse, and At Risk in the General Education Classroom. Pearson Education, Inc.