

The Case of Joe

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Joe has been enrolled at my school for two years and entered the second grade mid-year speaking no English. Prior to moving to Chicago, he lived in Zambia where he and his family were refugees and experienced great hardship, including the death of his eldest sister. Obviously, his difficult past has had a huge impact on Joe and is likely responsible for some of the problem behaviors he displays. I would also like to note that there are four other students from Joe's family at my school, one of whom I had in my class last year, and they are all extremely bright and high achievers. Joe's parents are not shy about commenting on their son's inability to match his siblings' academic excellence.

Joe's biggest problem behaviors include making sounds with his mouth or incessantly tapping his desk during instruction or quiet work time. If he succeeds at irritating his classmates, he smirks and continues unless told to stop, sometimes more than once. Also, while I am teaching, he regularly fails to raise his hand, and instead, blurts out answers even when I have called on another student. These actions have isolated him from his classmates who constantly complain to me about their dissatisfaction in sitting near him and working with him in group settings. Because Joe's blurting out and noise-making happen on a frequent basis, and draw the most negative attention, these are the areas I focused my intervention.

Joe's behavior is inconsistent and encompasses many different characteristics described by Brophy in *Teaching Problem Students*. He demonstrates some attributes of hostile-aggressive students with his intimidation, pushing, and antagonizing of other students (p. 171). As well, he may qualify as "passive-aggressive" considering his marginal compliance with rules and surreptitious disruptions (p. 201). While I don't find Joe to be overly defiant, he will often look away when spoken to and laugh at inappropriate times (p. 227). Finally, he also demonstrates qualities of an underachiever. Schaefer and Millman (1981) describe underachievers "as children

who do not see personal meaning in the school curriculum or who have not developed achievement motivation and related goal setting and success-seeking behaviors” (Brophy, 1996, p. 142). This certainly aligns with what I observe in Joe and all of these behaviors combined make it very challenging for me to teach Joe and for his classmates to receive undisturbed learning time.

When I teach, I often pick sticks with student numbers on them in order to elicit responses from all students and to ensure attentiveness. Some students struggle with blurting out occasionally, but with Joe, it is nearly an every day occurrence. Repeated reminders to raise his hand or wait to be called on have failed to better the situation. Oftentimes, Joe blurts out incorrect answers and gets satisfaction from the irritation that arises from his classmates. This is usually a situation when I would remind Joe what I expect from all of my students and in response, he would simply smirk before displaying the problem behavior again. If he is not getting attention in that way, Joe will wait until the classroom is quiet, and gain it through drumming on his desk or shuffling with paper repeatedly. Sometimes, I try to ignore the behavior in hopes that the lack of focus on him will decrease his motivation to behave that way, but a few times, when he does not stop himself, my patience dwindles and I yell.

Joe’s tactics in these situations seem to fall into the category of passive-aggressive and researchers Berres and Long “interpreted these behaviors as indirect expressions of anger by students who have a great deal of it bottled up inside of them but cannot accept it or express it directly” (Brophy, 1996, p. 206). While I try to remember there are many underlying issues and stress factors that could be contributing to Joe’s behavior, it is still challenging for me to maintain an effective teaching stance. I fall into a power struggle trap and “drift into counterproductive modes of interacting – yelling when exasperation boils over, nagging

regularly, distancing, or labeling in ways that suggest no change in behavior is expected” (p. 206). This is obviously an issue I need to overcome and need to employ more effective, consistent strategies that will help Joe to clearly understand what it is I expect of him. Berres and Long offer suggestions designed to break the conflict cycle which include showing Joe that I’m aware of his tactics and to assist him in becoming aware of them himself (p. 208).

Joe’s problem behaviors arise multiple times per day and require a large commitment on my part to curb them. Although he has improved slightly since the beginning of the year, the fact that he still exhibits disruptive behaviors indicates my lack of effectiveness as his teacher. I believe Joe views me as an authority figure though he is quite guarded when it comes to teacher-student interaction and how to adequately fit his role as student, displaying only behaviors I value. It also seems that Joe respects my ability to stay calm when I do, as his experience in third grade was one in which frequent yelling and humiliation were the methods utilized for discipline and problem solving. Lastly, I think I make it evident that I enjoy having Joe in my class and am able to separate his behaviors from who he is as an individual, as well as acknowledge his difficult past, which will be vital to his success as the year progresses.

There have been many days that Joe tests my patience and determination. Some days seem like an uphill battle and my frustration in working with Joe overtakes my good judgment in utilizing strategies that are effective in curbing the unwanted behavior. When Joe blurts out, I try to avoid using negative statements, but also need to practice consistency in providing “positive guidance” (Brophy, 1996, p. 23) and praising his attempts to model appropriate behavior. Joe’s smirk following a comment such as, “Please raise your hand in order to share your ideas” possibly indicates his satisfaction in receiving attention at the wrong time. Projecting positive expectations is also an area of improvement for times when Joe challenges me. As Brophy points

out, “Often, children literally “don’t know better” than to act as they do so they need adults’ help in learning to do the right thing” (p. 23). This was imperative to keep in mind so my view towards Joe would not be clouded by negativity and hostility and prevent me from being an effective solution to the problem.

Understanding the Problem

Joe is in my classroom all day with the exception of a forty-minute block during which he receives Title I instruction along with nine of his classmates. I also attend lunch and recess with my students so I am able to observe Joe outside of the classroom. I have made an effort to observe Joe closely and take note of his behavior, both positive and negative, and how I reacted to him in these situations.

Even when Joe has difficulty behaving appropriately, which is often, I try to use him as a positive example for the class any time he is on task with comments like, “I really like how Joe is working quietly as he completes his work.” When Joe is able to work independently, he tends to display better behavior. He seems to appreciate going at his own pace and will politely ask for help when needed. Once he finishes his work, however, his impulsivity drives him to behave in unpredictable ways, frequently disturbing those around him and creating disruptive situations.

Following a lesson on irregular verbs in the past and past participle tenses, I broke the students into small groups placing Joe with two of my newer students. In making this decision, I realized it would be beneficial for Joe to avoid working closely with students who he has conflicts with, which is generally the norm for group work. Students were asked to come up with as many irregular verbs as they could think of in three minutes and display them on their chart paper. Before beginning this activity, I pulled Joe aside and asked him if he could take on a leadership role and help the new students who struggle with English. Joe smiled and it was clear

he enjoyed the fact that other students heard my request. The behavior and work that followed was rewarding to observe. Joe took on the responsibility of teacher and remained patient despite the fact that it was a competition. His calm demeanor and ability to communicate with the students was extremely impressive. I realized this was a perfect opportunity to offer praise, and rather than announce it in front of the class as I had earlier, I knelt down in Joe's group, offered a smile, and told Joe how much I appreciated his ability to teach the other students in a way they understood. I then added, "I think you're doing a better job of it than I did!" As Brophy points out, "praise is most likely to be effective when it is delivered simply and directly, in a natural voice, accompanied by nonverbal communication of approval but without gushing or dramatizing" (p. 29). Joe nodded, gave a quick smile, and quickly returned to the task with even more enthusiasm than before.

I realized one of Joe's strengths is his ability to work with students who don't understand certain topics, and I've made sure to call upon him for that more often. It has been a useful task for him after he completes his independent work to prevent him from acting out instead. I also took time to acknowledge how much better I felt in my stance with Joe when my focus was on his good behavior and not on my usual exasperation with his disruptions. Though I wasn't sure Joe would be the best person to use for this particular situation, I projected positive expectations and I think he recognized and respected that, which contributed to his desire to do well and please me.

To collect and analyze data on Joe, I closely observed him over three days, noting the number of times he blurted out without raising his hand and/or made sounds when the rest of the class was working quietly. Because Joe has also recently been taking items from classmates and claiming they're his with more frequency, I also included those incidents on the chart below.

Date:	Subject/Activity:	Frequency of Blurting Out:	Frequency of Noises:
2/12/14	Morning Bell Work – Independent work time and reviewing answers as a class	3	2
2/12/14	Science – Small group activity/presentation	2 – interrupting group members	0
2/12/14	Silent Reading	0	2
2/12/14	Math	5	2

* Today, Joe also “found” a classmate’s pen, used it for a while, and when confronted, claimed he had brought it from home. He then became very argumentative.

Date:	Subject/Activity:	Frequency of Blurting Out:	Frequency of Noises:
2/13/14	Morning Bell Work – Independent work time and reviewing answers as a class	2	1
2/13/14	Writing Center	1	3
2/13/14	Peer Editing	0	0
2/13/14	Silent Reading	0	1
2/13/14	Math	3	0

Date:	Subject/Activity:	Frequency of Blurting Out:	Frequency of Noises:
2/14/14	Morning Bell Work – Independent work time and reviewing answers as a class	4	3
2/14/14	Science - quiz	0	1
2/14/14	Writing with dialogue lesson	3	0
2/14/14	Conferencing	0	0
2/14/14	Valentine Math – adding and subtracting fractions with conversation hearts	6	0

2/14/14	Bullying Assembly	4	0
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*Today has been a rough day for Joe, probably due to the excitement surrounding Valentine's Day. Two students sitting near him reported that some of their candy went missing. I asked everyone to make sure they had only their candy, but didn't want to press Joe too much. The day ended with me giving the students who had candy missing additional pieces.

Based on my observations, I was able to draw a few conclusions that assisted me in determining a suitable intervention. First, it was apparent that Joe's problem with making noises was most prevalent during quiet, relatively unstructured, independent work time. Blurting out was most common during class discussion and when I was seeking responses from individual students. While Joe worked pretty well with his small group during the science activity on February 12, when presenting their findings, he seemed to have no sense of when it was his turn to talk, nor was he receptive to his group members' pleas to "stick to the plan." This seemed to support my initial suspicion that Joe derives some pleasure from irritating certain students in the class. I have made special note taking into consideration the students with whom he has the most friction, and will avoid putting them into the same group in the future.

In addition to what activities tend to stimulate the most disturbances from Joe, I also observed the classroom environment during these times and how it related to his behavior. Joe seemed to struggle with whole-class, quiet work time. He likes attention to be on him, hence what causes him to make sounds when others are focused on their own work. Joe is most disruptive in very unstructured activities that are not part of the regular routine. He had tremendous difficulty participating in the math activity on Valentine's Day and the assembly, which was in the cafeteria with approximately 100 other students, simply seemed to overly stimulating for him.

When working in small groups or with a partner, if Joe feels his contributions are well received and he is able to offer information or support that others cannot, he works very well for

sustained periods of time. This was evident during the science group time, and especially during our peer-editing block of writing center. Considering Joe's interest in working with the new students who struggle with English, I again chose to partner him with Davin, and asked that he help him develop and write a short story. He consistently thrives in this role, and it was certainly a condition to deliberate as I created an appropriate intervention. It is apparent he enjoys helping others, possibly due to the fact that he felt he lacked support when he transferred into second grade. Also noteworthy was Joe's behavior during one-on-one time with me. When I conferenced with him about his personal narrative, he thoroughly enjoyed the personal attention and the time was well spent with a balance between my suggestions and his input and questions for improvement.

Plan Development and Implementation

Based on Joe's behavior and my observations, I decided to focus the intervention on strategies to significantly reduce Joe's frequent blurting out and tendency to make noises at inappropriate times. As mentioned in *Teaching Problem Students*, this will be most effective if, "in setting behavioral goals, [we] emphasize behaviors that support learning, not just behaviors to avoid" (Brophy, 1996, p. 273). As a result, the two goals for Joe are to raise his hand with consistency to ask questions and share responses in addition to gradually increasing the amount of time he is able to work quietly without making disruptive noises. For this to be a realistic goal, we will start with five minutes and increase weekly in five-minute increments.

First, Joe and I met individually to discuss a plan of action. I shared my concerns and made it clear to Joe that his behavior not only affects academic ability, but has also negatively impacted his relationship with his peers. Karlin and Berger (1972) recommend, "that you help these students to understand the undesirable effects that their behavior has on you and their

classmates. Without blaming them, make them realize that classroom disruptions take away time from instruction and that hyperactive behavior turns off peers and impedes the formation of friendships” (Brophy, 1996, p. 271-272). I also wanted to make sure Joe felt heard and understood I would be there to support him each step of the way.

Next, with Joe’s help, we worked to develop a behavioral contract with “behaviors that can actually be seen and measured” (Reavis et al., 1996, p. 67). This included a written component highlighting the expected increase in hand raising and times of continuous quiet. Additionally, Joe utilized a Self-Recording Form, much like the one found on p. 119 in *Best Practices* (see Appendix A). Research outlined in *Teaching Problem Students* revealed that “self-monitoring of attention during academic work led to increased attention and academic productivity” (Brophy, 1996, p. 300). We reviewed and discussed the form each day before it was sent home to his parents.

To help Joe succeed, I began by affixing a daily schedule to his desk to prevent any major setbacks when the schedule does not follow the traditional routine. Joe’s desk was also moved closer to my desk and more out of sight of his classmates. Other changes included my movement towards his desk to indicate when he was behaving inappropriately so he could record it and allowing more opportunities to get out of his seat throughout the day so he did not resort to other methods for exerting his energy or seeking attention. Data reported by Brophy and Evertson (1981) revealed that “Restless students not only were more active in the classroom than their classmates but were more likely to misbehave; to do so in a way that involved disrupting the class; to project a sullen attitude when corrected; and to gripe, sass, or defy the teacher” (p. 291). I also increased Joe’s participation in peer tutoring based on prior success.

Joe's self-recording sheet allowed him to write a plus or minus signs indicating success or failure in raising his hand and to keep track of each five minutes of work time Joe was completely quiet. We collaborated to discuss rewards and consequences and Joe decided that each tally for quiet work time and each plus sign for raising his hand would earn him one minute of free drawing time at the end of the day. His consequence occurred with each minus sign equating to one minute taken off of recess.

Plan Evaluation

We initiated the strategy beginning February 18th and have continued each day since. In the first week, Joe was expected to maintain complete quiet for a minimum of five-minute work sessions and increase in five-minute increments. The first couple days were a challenge, with more missteps than successes, but Joe soon learned what was expected. During morning work time and other quiet work times, he has improved dramatically. He has worked for the agreed upon durations, and then may get up to sharpen his pencil or select a silent reading book before participating in another segment of time. His success rate has increased from 80% initially to about 85% at this time. The hand-raising is still a work in progress, both in terms of doing it with consistency and accurately recording the results, but I have seen slight improvements. We decided upon the signal of me touching my right ear for each time he successfully raises his hand and waits to be called on to share his response. At this point, his success rate is about 70% of the time.

I would say Joe's intervention plan is working better than I had anticipated and continues to improve each week as the expectations increase. While there have been bumps in the road along the way, I am proud and impressed by Joe's dedication to the plan and his willingness to change. Having said that, there are still a few problem areas that I would like to see improve

through alterations to the plan. First, during his quiet work sessions, Joe began to obsessively check the clock and calculate the amount of time remaining, which somewhat defeated the purpose of sustained, quality work. In order to combat that problem, I placed a small timer on his desk that helped to decrease those interruptions. Also, Joe's parents have not been as supportive of his efforts as I had hoped, and it is evident that this impacts his behavior. They were quite harsh when he did not earn his reward and loses recess, and as a result, Joe incurs further punishment despite repeated reminders that I would like to stick to the arranged behavior plan. When Joe has a difficult night at home, the next day of school is decisively worse, and this is when I notice some of his initial problem behaviors occurring more frequently. Since my most recent meetings with his parents to discuss his progress, they have improved in supporting our arranged plan, and allow his consequence at school to serve its intended purpose.

I would still deem Joe's behavior a work in progress, but I feel much better about the relationship we have and Joe's ability to trust and view me as a person who truly wants to help him. I have made an effort to consistently project positive expectations, attributions, and social labels as mentioned by Brophy, as "If students are treated as well-intentioned individuals who respect themselves and others and who desire to act responsibly, morally, and prosocially, they are likely to develop these qualities" (Brophy, 1996, p. 20). Prior to beginning this plan, I think I allowed Joe's poor behavior to negatively affect my opinion of him as a person, which certainly did not help the situation. Working with him was often a trying experience on the days he displayed his problem behaviors in excess and when no correction seemed to help.

Unfortunately, it was easy for me to slip into a mindset of helplessness or impatience on the bad days, but I tried to remember that stance did not improve Joe's behavior, nor did it help him to trust my intentions.

This intervention has not only been helpful in improving some of Joe's problem behaviors, but has also helped my stance toward him. I feel much more in control now that there are clear expectations, follow through and results. Joe seems more trusting and receptive to my corrections, and while he's disappointed when he doesn't get free draw time or loses recess, it is clear that he's making a concerted effort to do better. This has helped me view him more positively and remain patient and supportive of him even in some of his more challenging moments. He also seems to appreciate the added personal attention in addition to the self-reporting he's asked to complete. Joe has been working more with Davin, which has been mutually beneficial and a big confidence booster for Joe. Not only have there been positive developments in Joe and me, but his classmates seem less bothered by his nuisance behaviors, as they are occurring far less frequently. Joe does still like to get a rise out of a few classmates with whom he doesn't get along, but he is getting better. As we move forward, I would like to improve my basic socialization and helping skills, especially with regard to assisting Joe in rekindling his relationship with his classmates and work with him to recognize his behaviors that are perceived as undesirable. It is also my goal, in partnership with his parents, to help Joe realize the importance of education and further improve his motivation and effort on assignments.

Appendix A

Self-Recording Form

Name: _____

Date: _____

Give yourself a plus sign (+) each time you:

- Raise your hand and wait to be called on
- Work independently and quietly for the agreed upon amount of time

Give yourself a minus sign (-) each time you:

- Speak out without being called on
- Make noises (with your mouth, drumming on your desk, etc.)

Morning	Afternoon

Total number of + _____ = _____ min. of free draw

Total number of - _____ = _____ min. off of recess



Student signature: _____

Teacher signature: _____

Parent signature: _____

*Please return this signed form tomorrow

References

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