

Mark: A Study of Failure Syndrome in Private Tutoring

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Problem Identification

Mark is a 3.5-year-old native Cantonese speaker who lives in Hong Kong. Several months ago, his parents asked me to begin tutoring him in pre-literacy skills in English. While he speaks English quite well, Mark's parents are concerned about his ability to read, write and speak English properly since it is not his native language. Mark's parents previously enrolled him in a phonics class, but they told me Mark would cry and shut down in the class. While Mark does not cry when I work with him, he has shut down at times and silently refused to do anything, or said that he cannot do what he is being asked to do. I found this happened if I asked Mark to write or read anything, or if I asked him any questions about a book we were reading. I tutor Mark for one hour at a time, and behaviors such as these generally happened a few times during a one-hour tutoring session.

A luxury that I have in the role as tutor that I rarely had as a classroom teacher is being able to focus all my attention on one student at a time. This makes it much easier to tailor instruction to Mark's needs and maintain a positive professional stance. I am able to be consistent about my expectations, while also being flexible about which order we do activities, which can make a great difference in Mark's attitude. I do have to make a point to maintain my role as an authority figure, as Mark is accustomed to being able to control his nannies to a great extent. In the role of tutor, I do not feel as though I have as much authority as a classroom teacher. This is mostly because the tutoring is conducted in Mark's home, with nannies (and sometimes his mother) also in the apartment, and sessions are merely an hour at a time. While I feel as though my overall authority is not as high of that as a classroom teacher, I do feel I have just as much responsibility to aid Mark's social development and self-regulatory skills. Mark's parents only asked me to tutor him on pre-literacy skills, but I feel that part of helping Mark

learn now and become a life-long learner is helping him develop the behaviors and dispositions that facilitate learning. In order to do this, it is important that I maintain my self-confidence. Brophy stated that self-confidence is an important aspect of professional stance that can allow the teacher to “remain calm in a crisis, listen actively without becoming defensive, avoid win-lose conflicts, and maintain a problem-solving orientation rather than resort to withdrawal, blaming, hysteria, or other emotional overreactions,” (1996, p.22).

Partially because of my personality and partially because of Mark’s young age, I find it easy to separate myself emotionally from his behavior. I am able to remain calm and avoid letting conflicts turn into win/lose or right/wrong situations (Brophy, 1996). All the while, I try to maintain a warm, friendly, and encouraging demeanor, as an important goal of my tutoring is to help Mark develop an interest in literacy and learning. It can be particularly challenging, however, if my efforts to set up a risk-taking environment for Mark seem to fail, and he refuses to respond to my prompting.

Brophy highlighted the importance of parental involvement in children’s education, stating, “Family involvement in children’s education is associated with better attendance, more positive attitudes toward school, and higher academic achievement,” (1996, p.49). Since I first began tutoring Mark, I have attempted to involve his parents in his learning through collaborative relationships with them. Overall, my collaboration with Mark’s mother is very good. His dad is not especially involved in his education, but his mother is quite open to any discussions or suggestions on my part. She also contributes information regarding Mark’s experiences outside of tutoring, which help me to know him and understand his background better and maintain a realistic perception of his abilities (Brophy, 1996, p. 22).

The biggest challenge is the difference in what I see as developmentally appropriate for a 3.5 year old versus what Mark's family and Hong Kong culture see as appropriate. Mark's grandmother runs one of the top preschools in Hong Kong, so there is pressure for Mark to be top in his class in order to make the family look good. In Hong Kong, the culture is to begin sending a child to school and other activities around the age of 18 months, which is quite different than my own experience. While Mark's mother has stated that they do not necessarily agree with the cultural and family pressures for children to be pushed so hard at such a young age, she has also admitted that they have somewhat succumb to these pressures because they feel like they have no other choice if they want their children to be successful. I believe it is my professional responsibility as a teacher to try to maintain a balance between what I feel is developmentally appropriate for Mark while also respecting the culture in which he is being raised. I feel that this is ultimately what his parents want, too. In order to try to maintain this balance, I communicate regularly with Mark's mother regarding what we have been doing together, Mark's progress, and her own goals or concerns. That allows me to take her goals and concerns, as well as Mark's progress, into consideration as I plan for future instruction.

Through the study of Mark's case and my work with him, I made goals to improve my understanding of students with needs similar to Mark's, so I can better serve them in the future. I hoped to gain valuable insight into how strategies I employ and the professional stance I maintain can improve a student's likelihood of successful learning. I anticipated acquiring experience gathering and analyzing data and using that to shape and evaluate my teaching practices. I also believed this case study would improve my overall self-confidence in interactions with Mark by having a better understand of Mark and myself.

Understanding the Problem

In order to gather information about the occurrence of Mark's problem behaviors, I first observed Mark and reflected on my work with him. I found Mark's strengths to include his verbal communication skills, phonetic knowledge, energy and enthusiasm. Mark is most happy, successful, and focused on his work when he has control over what he is doing. Specifically, he loves to have books read to him and he loves to paint, particularly mixing all the paint colors together to make "rainbow colors". Mark does his best work when we are alone, with no nannies, parents, or little brothers around. At times like these, I also feel more relaxed because I know we are doing an activity that Mark will enjoy and at which he will be successful. I can enjoy my work with him more when he is enjoying himself and I feel confident that he will behave appropriately.

The times when Mark stops participating and ignores me are when I ask him to write, read, or do any of his work from his preschool (including reading school books and discussing school vocabulary words). The commonality between these activities is that Mark either thinks the activity is too difficult, which is the case for reading or writing, or he does not like it, which is the case with his school work. Sometimes Mark has told me "I can't ____." or "I don't want to ____." Other times, he simply stops and completely ignores me, not saying anything. Either way, I have not been successful at attempting to discuss Mark's thoughts or feelings with him, because he does not respond when I try to engage him in conversation about it.

I have also found that Mark has a greater tendency to be distracted or refuse to do his work if anyone else is around. Mark works best when he and I are in his room alone, working at his table. It seems as if Mark feels the need to seek attention by acting out if others around. Fortunately, this is very rarely the case, as Mark's parents are not often around during tutoring. I

think that like me, Mark's mother also realizes he is more successful and focused when she is not around, so she tends to talk with me at the beginning or end of the lesson and leave us by ourselves in his room the rest of the time.

The specific problematic behavior about which I chose to collect data was Mark attempting or not attempting to do the work/activity I asked him to do. Since I only work with Mark for one hour at a time, I chose to keep track of how many times during that hour this behavior occurred, as well as what the activity was when it occurred. I made a list of the main types of activities Mark does, including: reading, being read to, reading comprehension discussion, letter identification activities, phonics, writing, and making letters (through painting, playdough, etc.). I then kept a tally of how many times Mark did or did not participate in the assigned activity during the course of the hour. Participation, for these purposes, was attempting the activity after being asked to do so. Non-participation was Mark refusing to do an activity, which would be demonstrated by verbally refusing, saying something like, "I can't/won't," or silently ignoring me and not doing the activity. If Mark participated in the activity, I put a check mark next to the activity category. If Mark did not participate, I put an X mark next to the category. This would allow me to calculate the percentage of times the problem behavior was occurring versus compliant behavior. I also left space for anecdotal note taking regarding any other details about the occurrence of the problem behavior, such as whether anyone else was present or if there were any significant environmental factors. I collected this data over the course of three 1-hour tutoring sessions, which was how much I saw Mark over the course of the two-week data collection period.

Following the data collection, I analyzed the data, primarily focusing on what particular activity Mark was being asked to participate in, and whether he did or did not participate. When

I looked at the data, the most striking information was that the first day of observation had many more incidents of non-compliance across the board than the other two days. Mark had returned from an overseas trip a couple of days before and was very jet-lagged and tired. The problems with Mark not participating were so severe, in fact, that I ended up changing my plans for the session to include more read alouds and painting letters of the alphabet since Mark seems to particularly enjoy those.

Looking at all three days of observation together, there were patterns that stood out regarding the types of activities in which Mark was more or less likely to participate. Activities in which I asked Mark to do any writing were unsuccessful 100% of the time. I noted that Mark sometimes made comments during these activities such as, "I don't know how to write," or "I can't." However, when we worked on writing in alternative ways, such as painting letters or making letters in playdough, Mark participated in the activity 100% of the time. There were similar patterns in me reading aloud to Mark versus asking him to read. Mark enjoyed being read to and participated 100% of the time, however when I asked Mark to read he complied 33% of the time. The times he did not read, Mark did not say anything and essentially pretended to ignore me. When I tried to discuss either what was read to Mark or what he had read, Mark participated about 50% of the time. I would generally use opportunities when Mark did not participate in reading comprehension discussions to share my own thinking out loud. In regards to letter identification activities, Mark participated 100% of the time. For phonics activities, Mark participated about 83% of the time.

Because I work with Mark in 1-hour time periods at the same time (4:30-5:30pm) every session, time of day was not a significant factor in the data analysis, and not something that has the option of being adjusted due to Mark's school schedule. Additionally, group versus

individual work was not a factor since I work with him individually. We are also in the same setting every time, Mark's room in his apartment. Finally, no one else was present during these observations, so that was also not a factor in analyzing the data.

The main factors that I could adjust to help Mark be more successful are trying to accomplish some of the same goals through read alouds versus having Mark read and alternative writing activities (such as painting letters or making letters with playdough) instead of more traditional writing (such as with a pencil or marker). I cannot completely eliminate all activities Mark does not want to do and still accomplish the same goals, however I can keep from making compliance unnecessarily difficult by modifying some of the activities when possible. This will make it easier for Mark to respond positively to other strategies implemented to help increase his overall participation.

Plan Development and Implementation

Mark seems to be showing signs of “failure syndrome” or “learned helplessness”, as described by Brophy (1996). These terms describe students who “approach assignments with very low expectations of success and who tend to give up at the first sign of difficulty,” (Brophy, 1996, p.87). Mark had a previous bad experience in a very demanding tutoring class which seems to have left him feeling as though he either cannot or does not want to read or write. Additionally, Mark is being raised in a situation where his nannies do almost everything for him, as if he was considerably younger and less capable than he actually is. As a result, he is quite dependent on them and is not accustomed to attempting difficult tasks on his own. He frequently gives up immediately when I ask him to do a task he views as difficult and ignores me, says he “can't do it”, or refuses to do it.

My goal for Mark is for him to attempt each task when asked to do so. I explained to Mark that I do not expect him to be able to do everything I ask of him perfectly, but I hope to see him attempt each task. I let Mark know that learning involves making mistakes, and that it is fine to make mistakes; everyone makes mistakes, including teachers and parents! I explained that if Mark does not even try to do a task, he cannot learn anything from it. Thus, my concern is his effort. Before beginning any interventions, Mark attempted approximately 65% of the tasks he is assigned; however my goal was to raise that to 100%.

My first intervention was to change my stance in dealing with this issue. I needed to be sure to praise Mark for his *efforts* on tasks, not for completing a task correctly, so he sees that what I value is that he tried. Additionally, since I am attempting to teach Mark patience and determination in his work, I felt it would be especially important that I continue to maintain those attributes in my own professional stance with him (Brophy, 1996, p.22). I decided to also follow the suggestion of McIntyre (1989, as cited in Brophy, 1996, p.90) to read *The Little Engine that Could* (Piper, 1991) to Mark and discuss how it relates to Mark's efforts with reading and writing. I explained to Mark that it is important to have a good attitude and try really hard, just like the little engine, when you face a difficult task. I asked him what he has had to do before that was really difficult. I suggested to Mark that when he faces a difficult task, he might want to think in his head or say out loud, "I think I can! I think I can," just like the little steam engine. I made a sign with a picture of the little steam engine, with the words, "I think I can!" below it, which I hung in Mark's room to remind him. Through the changes in my approach to praise and the lesson about the little engine, I wanted to express to Mark that I believe in him and I want him to believe in himself. Both these interventions were ways for me to project positive expectations for Mark (Brophy, 1996, p.23).

Next I set up a contingency contract with Mark. “Contingency contracting involves conferring with the student about possible alternatives and then jointly drawing up a contract that specifies what the student will be expected to do in order to earn contingent rewards,” (Brophy, 1996, p.26). I explained to Mark that this contract is a deal that we will be making together. If he does what the contract says, he will get the reward the contract says. By signing his name, Mark is saying that he agrees to this deal. The goal for Mark was to *attempt* all of his assignments in a 30-minute portion of the session (half the session). If he did this, he would receive an immediate reward we had decided on together and written into his contract (such as 5 minutes to play with his toys, or getting to do an activity on the iPad). I reminded Mark what we read about the little steam engine, and explained to him that this contract would help him to try hard and not give up, just like the little steam engine. I showed Mark the simple contract I had made, we discussed it together, and Mark chose a few options for his 5-minute reward time, which we listed in the contract.

Often in contracts, one might need to step the bar of achievement up a little more over time in successive approximations, in order to make sure the goal is reasonable. I planned to do this by starting out with half of the session at a time. I did not want to say to Mark that he should, for example, attempt 90% or more of his assignments, because this suggests that it is acceptable for him to refuse or give up on certain assignments. It also sends the message that he may not be capable of some of the work, when I actually feel very confident that he is. Brophy stated, “Contracts are especially useful for situations in which students know what they are supposed to do and are capable of doing it if they put their minds to it, but currently are not conscientious or motivated enough to do so consistently,” (1996, pp.26-27). I felt confident this was the case with Mark. Once Mark had been successful at several 30-minute contracts, we

could write a new contract and try for the entire hour, however this did not occur within the amount of time allotted for this case study.

There was one slight problem with the contract that caused me to revise the plan shortly after we began. Since rewards could be earned somewhat frequently with the contract, I allowed Mark to make a menu of a few different options for rewards when we originally designed the contract. Then when he earned a reward, he could choose from the menu. This choice seemed to be motivating for Mark. The only problem was that Mark could be a bit slow to choose which reward he wanted once he earned it, which took away from valuable learning time. Therefore, in order to speed things up, I decided to let Mark draw a reward out of a bag. This saved quite a bit of time, and Mark seemed happy because he is still technically choosing the reward.

A week into the contracting, I also included two additional strategies to facilitate Mark's success. In advance of the tutoring sessions, I began to make a list of the activities we are going to do during each 30-minute period. Before beginning, I review all the tasks with Mark, and then I let him cross them out when he has finished them. While this does take away a bit of my flexibility during the session, it is beneficial for providing Mark with a visual plan for the activities we will be doing. It also seems to be slightly rewarding for Mark to get to cross off completed activities.

The other change I made was with Mark's mother. I decided to talk to her to let her know that I have noticed Mark seems to concentrate better when it is just the two of us in the room. She agreed and said that she noticed he seemed to act out when she was around. I asked Mark's mother if she might consider standing outside the door if she wanted to listen, where Mark could not see her. Otherwise, maybe she could just talk with us before or after tutoring.

She agreed that this might be best for Mark, and said she was perfectly comfortable with us working alone, which is what we had been doing most of the time anyway.

Plan Evaluation

In order to keep track of Mark's progress, I used the same data collection sheet that I originally used to keep track what activities Mark was or was not attempting. I used a new sheet for each 30-minute contract period. To date, Mark has been 100% successful in attempting all of his work since I began implementing the above strategies. Therefore, the strategies have been extremely successful. I rarely get the ignoring or "I can't" reaction I previously did from Mark, and when I do I simply remind him about the little engine, and encourage his "I think I can!" attitude. If that is not quite enough, I encourage him to give the activity a try in order to earn his reward. I believe the contingency contract and rewards have been the most motivating to Mark, and they gave him the boost he needed to attempt what he viewed as difficult tasks. However, in the long run, once I begin to phase out the rewards or offer them less frequently, the importance of the other interventions (praising for effort, positive self-talk, list of activities, and working alone) will be more apparent. The only problem I encountered in implementing the strategies was the amount of time it took Mark to choose a reward, as previously mentioned, however this problem was overcome through allowing Mark to draw a reward out of a bag. This saved valuable instructional time and did not diminish the effectiveness of the reward. An important contributor to the success of these strategies is the support I received from Mark's parents. They were very pleased with my ideas, and were happy to do anything they could to help. They were open to trying all the strategies I suggested.

The strategies I employed were very appropriate for our tutoring setting. I would recommend these strategies to a colleague in a similar individual or small group setting. However, it is unlikely that a lone teacher in a classroom of 25 students would be able to devote this much continual attention to one student. Therefore, there would need to be another way to assess the student's efforts, likely based more on products than on teacher observations. One significant change that I made through my work with Mark that any teacher in any setting could do with any student is to be more conscious of what type of praise we are giving to students. It is important to give specific, meaningful praise so students know why they are being praised (Loveless, 1996). "Describing the desired behavior also helps students to self-monitor their behavior in the future," (Loveless, 1996, p.61). I would certainly use all these strategies again myself, making the changes previously stated, but from the beginning of the intervention.

I think the data shows that the intervention was quite effective. I used a variety of strategies to address multiple facets of the problem (instead of solely setting up a reward system), which I think will contribute to long-term improvement. Along those lines, however, I do think it will be important to focus even more in the future on teaching Mark to use positive self-talk to encourage himself to attempt and persist through difficult tasks. One lesson on the little engine, in combination with reminders about that lesson, will not be enough. As Mark becomes older and more mature, I will need to continue to encourage greater metacognitive behaviors, such as self-reflection and self-monitoring.

Professional Stance

Mark's behaviors of ignoring or refusing to do work can potentially be frustrating. However, because I am able to separate myself from Mark's behaviors and avoid "emotional

overreactions” (Brophy, 1996, p.22), my professional stance does not change significantly when Mark reacts in this way. At most, I may need to take a deep breath to keep my feathers from being ruffled. Particularly when Mark’s parents have been present, I have felt a bit awkward about how to address Mark’s behavior, wondering whether she would handle behavioral issues or if I should. Insecurities like these could be unsettling and cause me to move out of an effective teaching stance if I was not careful. I had to try to remain calm and confident in my authoritative role as teacher, while also being flexible and deferring to Mark’s parents as the ultimate authorities. I also addressed this concern by talking with Mark’s mother about who would be present during our lessons, and how that affected Mark’s behavior, as described above.

Ever since I began implementing the new behavioral strategies with Mark, I have felt more empowered about the situation, which has certainly improved my outlook and professional stance. I have been working to continuously demonstrate a very patient and encouraging attitude toward Mark, and I have taken special note to praise him for his efforts and attempts. I try to praise him in specific ways that let him know what I am praising. For example, I might say something like, “Mark, I love how you tried your best to read that book, even though it was hard! Great effort!” I also remind Mark of the little steam engine and coach him in using the self-talk, “I think I can!” when I give him a task that I think might be more difficult or daunting. Having an improved understanding of Mark’s behavior by implementing this case study has given me a more thorough and accurate view of Mark’s abilities and needs. Additionally, having a well-defined plan for intervention has helped to clarify my role as Mark’s tutor (Brophy, 1996). All of these changes together have increased my self-confidence and improved my professional stance with Mark, which will improve his learning and socialization (Brophy, 1996).

References

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