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An Intervention For A Socially Incompetent Adolescent

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The Student

Mary is a shy and polite 14-year-old student in a girls' school. She has good attendance and appears to be attentive. In class, she causes no trouble and gets along fine with her classmates most of whom are intelligent students. She seldom asks questions or volunteers to speak. At recess, she watches others play but never participates herself. She has a classmate or two to converse briefly with.

Mary's academic performance is average but she always does better in mathematics than in subjects requiring more verbal skills. Her voice is pleasant and her diction clear. She reads when asked to but she looks hesitant and nervous. When responding to questions, she rarely answers correctly. In recitation, she just cannot memorise a verse without peeping into her book or asking someone to prompt her.

In our interview, Mary expressed a great anxiety in speaking English, talking in class or reciting a poem. Although she has prepared her lesson, she often gets so nervous that she simply cannot recall answers. She also confessed that her English is not good and there is no one who can help her. Her parents are Chinese-educated, and rarely have time for her. Her only sibling is too busy with her own school work to be available.

Mary likes mathematics but oftentimes she does not understand the problems, so she cannot solve many of them; otherwise, she is quite confident of her computational skills. She related a fall two years ago and since then, she has been afraid of running. Prior to her fall, she was rather good at sports and games.

Mary's family is not well-off. Her parents are rather protective, and forbid her from social activities such as picnics and hiking. Her

father works long hours, while her stepmother engages in card games with neighbours. At home, Mary is quite free to do what she wants. Occasionally, her parents ask about her progress in school, but never suspect the difficulties that Mary faces. In her leisure, she knits and sews.

Research Question

How can teachers help Mary through the intervention of a structured learning strategy?

Conceptual Framework

Mary is considered as socially incompetent. She has no friends in school, her performance is merely average, she is passive in the educational process, and when called to respond, she suffers from anxiety.

Mary is in her adolescence, a transition from childhood to adulthood; she is at school, a bridge between home and society. It is in this period that a person learns and acquires skills, attitudes, beliefs and knowledge necessary for effective participation in society (Rogers, 1981). Mary does not appear to be desperately in need of help. However, if she is not helped, she may become withdrawn, an antisocial and a miserable individual who might have difficulty adjusting to the next stage of life when work, a love relationship, friendship, and community involvement are part of being.

Mary does not seem to understand the need to view herself as a contributive unit. She does not know what she wants. She may have a goal but it is too remote or impossible to attain. She is passive at most times. Looking back, her academic performance has not been too encouraging; looking forward, she does not think she can do very much. She is simply helpless. She is not doing anything to help herself to excel what she can. She leaves everything to take its natural course. Her self-esteem and ability are low. Hence, the teacher must plan an intervention to help Mary in her development.

In Mary's case, the family need not be involved; the problem is not so severe that her family should be given alarm. Besides, her self-esteem and confidence is expected to increase if her English language is improved. It is also not necessary to change the school policy that everyone speak English, because such a policy is helpful to other students in the acquisition of the language. A structured learning strategy should be planned for the whole class with Mary in mind.

Diagnosis (Informal)

The main cause of Mary's social incompetence seems to be lack of skill in the language, which she does not speak at home. In addition to her low self-esteem and shyness, she may have developed communication apprehension – she does not venture to speak to classmates and make friends.

Objectives of the Intervention

There are three objectives:

- a. Help Mary to improve her English by creating practice opportunities.
- b. Help Mary to enhance her self-esteem and confidence, enabling her to see her worth.
- c. Help Mary to interact with classmates, initially in learning activities, and later in informal extra-curricular activities.

Intervention Design

To obtain a base line for evaluation, we will give Mary an English achievement test appropriate to her age. Other students also can take this test so as not to single out Mary. In other words, Mary need not know that the intervention is planned for her. As she is such a self-conscious person, it would be best to help her without making a fuss.

She and her classmates can be asked to complete a personal report of communication apprehension (Hurt, Michael, & McCroskey, 1978) and the Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967). Simultaneously, the teacher should seek the help of other teachers, especially the English teacher or the Social Studies teacher, in insuring positive reinforcement whenever Mary communicates.

One of the approaches for helping students could be adapted from Goldstein, Aprafkin, and Gershaw (1976). Their structured learning is a therapeutic approach that has been used successfully in teaching skills and is helpful in showing people how to lead satisfying and effective lives. The approach focuses on the teaching of personal and interpersonal coping and mastery skills, including such skills as initiating, carrying out, and ending a conversation; listening; initiating and responding to a complaint; negotiation; role taking; asking for help; self-control; stress rehearsal; problem solving; affective perception; aggression deduction, and a host of other skills relevant to the work, social, and personal aspects of daily living.

McCroskey (1980) also suggests the following approach to encourage communication in the classroom:

- a. Develop a communication-permissive classroom.
- b. Encourage, not require, oral performance.
- c. Provide alternatives to oral performance.
- d. Avoid restrictive seating assignments.
- e. Avoid grading on participation.

Teachers can facilitate the satisfaction of student needs by engaging in supportive communication behaviours and by encouraging their students to do likewise. According to Hurt et al. (1978), a teacher's communication behaviour, as well as the communication experiences that he or she designs for the classroom, have a tremendous impact on a student's self-esteem.

Positive personal and interpersonal growth demands that a student have some positive perception of his characteristics and abilities, his relationship to others, and his relationship to the larger environment. It is crucial, therefore, that teachers communicate with their students as supportively as possible – even if students are performing below ideal levels. By the same token, it is crucial that teachers attempt to create an environment where students also engage in these behaviours, supporting their classmates or communicating their criticisms in a supportive manner.

Meanwhile, Mary is encouraged to read books suitable for her age and interest. Her teacher can recommend a few to start her off. She can also be encouraged to consider joining the Art and Craft Club in school so that she can display her skill at knitting. Doing something which she is good at will help her see herself as useful and worthy.

A Structured Learning Strategy

Adapting from Neer and Hudson (1981), steps are built into the teaching process to help Mary and others in her category to enhance their communication skills and build confidence in talking and expressing their views effectively.

- a. Read to the mirror: The teacher assigns two or three passages, and students read one of their own choice. They are asked to look at the mirror as they read to see how they shape their mouths and lips, so that they can evaluate themselves: their facial expression, their looks, the shape of their lips and the position of their tongue. This gives a rough idea as how they will appear when they read or talk.
- b. To tape their reading: The teacher can provide a tape recorder if required. Again two or three passages are provided and students read and tape one of their choice. They are to listen to their own voice, their pronunciation, their diction and expression. This also helps them correct themselves instead of being corrected by others and makes them feel self-conscious. The tape recorder plays the part of a listener.

- c. Read to someone: The teacher provides the reading materials and students choose their own passage and partner to whom they will read. After reading, they reverse roles. Mary can play the role of the listener before the reader. This gradual introduction to an outsider being present while one reads should cause less anxiety. While listening to the partner, one can evaluate or imitate; this will facilitate the acquisition of the language.
- d. Small group discussion (two-member group with a friend of own choice): The teacher selects a topic of common interest, for example, "Should girls go to school?" Being with a friend of one's own choice will reduce the tension of being criticized. The teacher can provide some simple leading questions to stimulate thought and discussion.
- e. Small group discussion (two-member group, teacher assigns a classmate): The teacher assigns a student who is better in communication skills to serve as a model (for Mary and those who lack the skill). Again, the topic of discussion should be of interest to girls of Mary's age.

Steps d and e can be repeated until there is a sign of ease among those who are less confident.

- f. Small group discussion (three- or four-member group, students choose the members): The teacher should tell the class how a small-group discussion is conducted – that every member should contribute and no one should monopolize the talking. The teacher also assigns a leader so as to report what is being discussed. On the first occasion, Mary should be a member, not a leader, to see how others set the pace. The passage and the questions should be provided by the teacher for discussion.
- g. Small-group discussion (three- or four-member group): When the teacher thinks that it is time to see if Mary can take over the lead, she will assign Mary as leader, providing the materials and questions as before.

All the above are taken at a gradual pace so as to allow confidence and self-esteem to build up. The slow processes of exposure to others will desensitize the fear of speaking to others. The models provided and the frequent practice will also help Mary improve in her spoken English.

At the same time, remedial work or tuition can enrich Mary's vocabulary and the understanding of the language; thus her mathematics should also improve, strengthening her self-esteem. Her activities in the extra-curricular activities should enable her to show her ability in knitting, and give her opportunities to meet friends in an unthreatening atmosphere (a non-academic situation), and at the same time, relaxes the brain, and reduces tension.

Post-Test

Most probably, it would take three to four months for the whole plan to be completed. By that time, Mary should have shown some improvement. To measure change, the same English achievement test, the personal report of communication apprehension, and the Self-Esteem Inventory are to be completed by Mary and others. Scores and responses are to be compared with the pre-test results to confirm significant changes.

Expected Outcomes

Mary is expected to have improved her English through reading library books recommended by the teacher. Remediation or tuition in English and Reading should increase her vocabulary and fluency in reading. The classroom atmosphere will be less threatening, less punitive, and hence more encouraging to communication. With the constant exposure to reading and talking, Mary should have been desensitized, having got used to the idea of being listened to, and of listening to others. With the positive reinforcement she gets from mathematics and her extra-curricular activities, her self-esteem should also have improved. She too should have more friends to talk to and talk with, at least those who study or participate in discussions with her.

Hurt et al. (1978) point out that one of the best methods is to provide the child with positive reinforcement for communication. Communication-apprehensive children need to be rewarded for communicating, whether they are giving the right answers or disrupting the class – whatever the outcome of their communication is. Another partial solution is to provide positive models for the communication-apprehensive child, so that he or she can learn by imitation.

Implications and Results for Theory, Future Research, and Educational Practice

Research on classroom climate, teacher attitude and warmth, teacher-pupil interaction and informal communication has been conducted again and again. Interventions for problem kids are not new. However, combining classroom climate, teacher attitude and warmth, teacher-pupil interaction and informal communication to plan for intervention is rare. The suggested structured learning strategy could be tried out to check its effect. The strength of such a method is that if teachers cooperate, and if teachers do care, intervention need not be a big deal. Mary does not know that such a strategy is planned with her in mind. There is no threat, no force. She, like all others, is simply to participate in the learning process. If she does not gain from the strategy, neither will she have lost anything. There will be no stigma on her, or on her family, to bring about shame and guilt.

Social competence is an important aspect of life and a teacher can help much to develop this in her pupils. However, not all teachers are competent to do the job. It is therefore necessary for teachers to be knowledgeable about how social competence is taught, how it is developed and enhanced, what are the consequences of being socially incompetent, and what are the signs and signals of social incompetence.

In conclusion, teachers should not wait for serious problems to occur before intervening. Intervention planned before problem becomes too severe is in fact a prevention. However, teachers must not be too alarmed should a problematic case take place. It is best to interrupt the daily routine as little as possible. And finally, teachers must bear in mind that teaching social skills involves many of the same procedures by which academic concepts are presented, i.e., exposing the student to a model for imitation, eliciting an imitative response, providing feedback about the correctness of the response, and structuring opportunities for practice. So in addition to providing support and encouragement for a communication-anxious child, the teacher can be accomplishing traditional academic goals.

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