

Learning and Teaching:
Through The Mind of an Autistic Child:
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Background of My Experience

For the last two summers I worked as a teacher's aid in a special education summer school classroom. This classroom was both community-based and based on authentic instruction tasks that allowed students to simulate actual jobs, which created meaningful learning. My main responsibility was to teach Jane*, a fourteen-year old autistic girl one-on-one. From my experience as a teacher's aid, I learned to teach her by discovering how she learned through her autism, motivations, and strategies.

The Autistic Student

Personal Myth

Before this experience I had heard of autism, but I did not know what it was. In Learning Conversations I read that myths can be detrimental to learning. I think that I was better off not knowing about autism because otherwise I would have made assumptions about Jane and not focused on her as an individual (Harri-Augstein 1991). I could have falsely held the myth that she was mute because of her autism. I acquired knowledge about autism from this student and this knowledge gave me a foundation that allowed me to understand her strategies and needs for learning. She was diagnosed autistic and physically and mentally handicapped before age two, so she was relatively low functioning. I believe that effective teachers know when their students do not understand. I also think that most students communicate that they are learning through their behaviors, but this student lacked the skills to communicate. She had delayed,

*A fictitious name was used.

limited, and unusual verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

Using My Explorer

Jane's verbal communication was poor because she had an extremely limited vocabulary. The words that she did say expressed basic needs such as bathroom, food, and drink. She exhibited echolalia, which is the repetition of previously heard words or phrases. Jane often repeated me hours after I taught her, saying "good girl!" She also reversed pronouns, in which she would say, "you drink" instead of "I drink." Thoughts and feelings bottle up inside autistic people and they cannot express them the way others do, so clinicians recommend treating unusual communication as purposeful and functional as possible, because they are probably trying to communicate a request, protest, affirmation, or self-regulation (Mash, 1996). While I taught Jane I used my Explorer, an important role in learning, to keep an open mind by first trying to understand the function of her behaviors (von Oech 1986). When she said, "you drink," I knew that she wanted a drink.

Learning a Difficult Task

Jane had poor nonverbal communication because she lacked gestures, and her eye contact was short in duration and varied in frequency. Because her communication was so limited, it was difficult for her to communicate that she was learning, and hard for me to evaluate it. I also found it difficult to know whether or not Jane understood me. I taught her to categorize pictured blocks into two containers of clothing and signs. First, I described each category and then categorized a few blocks as examples to show her how. Next, I gave her all of the blocks to categorize, but she was easily distracted from them;

so I gave her one block at a time and she focused, but acted confused. Then I put my hand around hers and physically helped her to put the blocks in the containers. Jane repeated this action on her own, but put the blocks in the wrong categories. She understood the process of putting the blocks in the container, but she did not understand why.

Different Personality Types

I noticed that Jane used a rule-based approach to learning rather than a holistic approach, which led her to focus in on the details of an object or a task, rather than understanding the whole task. She did not generalize what she learned to other tasks or situations as we would naturally, which was necessary for her to categorize the blocks. After learning about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, I realized that I am more “Intuitive,” but Jane was a strong “Sensor” because she focused on the details and learned through her senses, so I adjusted my thinking in order to understand how she saw the world. I exposed her to similar tasks so that she could generalize the concept of the similarity and difference. I also detected that Jane learned most effectively by repetition, so I gave her this task every day, allowing her to increase independence, and soon she improved and finally learned to categorize in this task and in other tasks (Mash, 1996).

Conditions For Learning

Each day my first task was to get Jane to focus her attention and keep it focused so that she could learn. At first, I spoke to her and she did not respond, so I wondered, “how can I get her to focus?” I noticed that she always smelled anything she

encountered. Once, I touched her hand and she looked at me and held eye contact for a little while. I quickly recognized that Jane used her senses of touch and smell as much, if not more than, her sense of sight. She was extremely sensitive to touch so I used touch to get her eyes and behavior focused so that she could learn. I also discovered that I could get her attention to focus by placing my body close in front of her and touching her hand or chin, which is a technique that many parents and teachers use for autistic children. Applying the list of necessary conditions for my learning that I made early this semester, Jane's attention needed to be focused in order to learn. I created a highly structured environment with predictability and routine, which she benefited from greatly (Mash, 1996). These conditions for learning were prerequisites that could not be overlooked.

Using My Artist

Before my experience I had the myth that I was not a creative person, which is one of the locks, or myths explained in A Whack On the Side of the Head (von Oech, 1996). After reading A Kick In the Seat of the Pants, I realized that I used my "Artist," or creative role, to apply my knowledge about Jane, by using tactile and scented materials that stimulated her and helped her learn (von Oech, 1996). The first three times that I gave her play-dough, she smelled it then pushed it away, but the next time I offered the play-dough she accepted it encouragingly. This experience showed me that I could choose to be creative.

One day Jane brought two Little Golden books in to school and I let her “read” them. I noticed that she was more verbal when she used them, so I brought other books in for her to read and I used my Artist to help her learn from the books. I agree with von Oech that the Artist can be used in many situations and I believe that teachers should use it more often (von Oech, 1996).

Motivation: Her Basic Needs

Needs For Survival and Power

During the summers I understood that Jane was motivated by her basic needs, but I did not have words or terms to express this until I read Glasser’s book, Control Theory In the Classroom (1983). She was especially motivated by her needs of power and fun. Jane was manipulative, and I discovered how to teach her by trying to understand the function of her manipulation. I figured out that she manipulated objects and people in order to fulfill her basic needs. She had a very limited diet because of her specific preferences, and I only knew of ten foods that she would eat. Jane attended school in the mornings and camp in the afternoons, so her mom packed her lunch to eat at camp, which always included peanuts because they were her staple.

One morning, Jane repeatedly asked for peanuts as if she had not eaten breakfast. She was so insistent that she interrupted any progress in her schoolwork. I questioned whether to give her some of the peanuts or not, so I called her mom and found out that she had not eaten breakfast that morning. I gave her the peanuts and watched as she ate all of them without taking a breath! I thought, “she must have been really hungry!” The

next day as I led the students inside to the classroom, Jane requested peanuts. I asked the teacher about her request, and she suggested that she might be trying to establish a ritual. I thought, “uh, oh!” We called her mother and found out that she had eaten breakfast and she told us that she was probably trying to manipulate us.

I decided to tell Jane that she had to wait until lunch to eat, but as I taught her that day, she asked for peanuts at least once a minute. She persistently demanded peanuts for the rest of the week, but the frequency of her demands decreased. I tried to teach her amidst this and I withstood the test of wills. From the next week on Jane no longer asked for peanuts in the morning during school. From this experience, I learned that this student had incorporated her needs for survival and power in order to stop her hunger the first day, and in order to have control the following days (Glasser, 1983). I used these needs to encourage her to learn, by rewarding her with peanuts for lunch.

Need For Fun

I discovered that this student met her need for fun by creating it, or “acting out” in the form of squealing, which interfered with the class and her learning many times. I discouraged her inappropriate behavior with verbal reprimands and a touch on the hand. This behavior contrasted from the natural fun that I saw her experience only twice in both summers. Once, the main teacher joked with her and she began to laugh. I could not believe it! I consistently focused on being “serious-minded” in order to help her stay on task, but I did allow her to meet her need for fun in this latter way.

Need For Belonging

Because Jane lacked much emotion, she did not express her need for belonging the way we do (Glasser, 1983). She was especially attached to her mother, which was evident when she hung on her like a young child; but she expressed dislike and discomfort when most other people stood close to her by moving away or pushing them away. Jane appeared to experience familiarity rather than belonging to most people and objects. Anything unfamiliar agitated her. She recognized family members, students, and teachers in the pictures that we looked at first each morning, to allow her to adjust and to get her thinking.

Personal Meaning

In Learning Conversations, we read that students need to find personal meaning in what they are doing in order to learn, and I certainly found that to be true in my experiences (Harri-Augstein, 1991). Personal meaning is necessary for learning and teaching, and I emphasized many practical, authentic tasks, which would help Jane take care of herself and prepare for the future. Some of the tasks that she learned were to do laundry, identify and use money, tie her shoes, and brush her hair.

In order to teach her how to do laundry, I had to remember how I did laundry and how I learned to do laundry. I wrote down the steps and skills that are involved in this process and divided laundry into four separate tasks: sorting, washing, drying, and folding. In the beginning I prompted Jane frequently, but as she improved I decreased the prompting. I allowed this student to touch and smell the clothes, which helped her

become comfortable with her work and learn more effectively. I also used repetition and different sets of clothes so that she could generalize this task. Jane never achieved full independence doing laundry, but she improved greatly.

Most Important: Strategies to Learning

The first day of school I came home and told my mom that I found a fountain of patience somewhere inside me, which I needed in order to work with Jane. I have described some of the elements that I combined to create an optimal learning environment for her, and strategies that I used to successfully teach this student. I focused on her attention and basic needs. Recently I read in Child Psychopathology, for one of my psychology classes, that researchers Dawson and Osterling found that autistic children learn best in these conditions using these strategies (Mash, 1996). It was a wonderful teaching experience because I gained knowledge and skill in classroom management, discipline, and authentic instruction. Most importantly, I learned to teach Jane based on her motivations and strategies of learning.

References

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