

Emma: A Child Development Case Study

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### **Behavior Analysis**

Emma is in First Grade and reads below her grade level. Emma successfully spends time with an interventionist and does well in the classroom in small groups, however, Emma does not do well in whole-group or individual classroom instruction. Emma's behavior is best toward the middle of the spectrum (one-to-one and small group instruction) and is poor at each end of the learning spectrum (whole-group and individual instruction).

Considering that Emma does well in one-on-one and small group instruction—Emma may be experiencing stress when it comes to larger groups because she may be intimidated and overwhelmed because large groups lack intimacy and comfort; Emma becomes overwhelmed with individual instruction because she has no one to confirm that she is doing the work well, thus causing a lack of interest, anxiety, and stress during this time—she may be relying on constant approval and/or gratification from others as a permission to continue her “good” work.

The first issue with Emma's whole-group and individual work sessions is her motivation to complete her work within these two sectors of classroom divisions. Wendy L. Ostroff (2012) states, ensuring students' comfort and security within the classroom, “. . . will allow them to feel safe to go out on a limb, to try new things and to play with ideas. Clear expectations and boundaries are a crucial foundation from which to springboard into the unknown and exciting” (pp.12). In order to motivate Emma, she must feel as if she is in a safe environment. It may be apparent that Emma does not feel safe in whole-group classroom sessions because she is intimidated by a less intimate group and she may feel that she cannot be herself. These feelings of anxiety may cause her to detach herself from reality during whole-group classroom duties. Individually, Emma may become frustrated because she does not feel safe or secure in her ability to complete work without adult-teacher supervision or the help from her peers.

Emma's ability to pay attention and focus during whole-class and individual classroom work is another factor. Emma's unwillingness to complete work on her own and losing focus in large group instruction is an attention factor. Ostroff (2012) states, "[i]n order to focus attention, children must maintain a calm, alert physical state... [and] [p]racticizing meditation can teach children to harness attention and emotions" (pp. 63). This technique must be recognized by educators to sooth unfocused students into a comfort zone, and this may be another reason why Emma is having difficulty focusing on her work into completion.

Both Ostroff and Jean Piaget theorize about children's cognitive development; both theorists insist that children need free time to use energy, regain focus, and enhance motivation and attention. Ostroff (2012) states:

Emotions determine whether or not children focus on and remember new information.

The ability to recognize emotional expressions is related to social competence and learning. Small amounts of adrenaline can spark performance and enhance motivation, attention, and memory. To learn well, children's emotional needs must first be met.

Lasting learning experiences have emotional significance to the learner. (pp. 139)

Emma's emotional well-being may be at stake because her issue is a lack of attention to detail and very little motivation in whole-group and individual classroom work. Emma does well in small and one-on-one support groups because she may look to authority for acceptance to continue learning and completing tasks.

According to Mooney (2013), Piaget developed the Preoperational Stage of cognitive development which applies to children between the ages of two and seven years old (pp. 81). Using Piaget's research and theory, Mooney states three cognitive development approaches that teachers may use: "[1] provide large blocks of time for uninterrupted free-playtime, [2] provide

many real-world experiences for children throughout the year, and [3] plan open-ended activities and ask open-ended questions” (pp. 90). Piaget’s and Ostroff’s cognition theories intertwine in such a way that frees a child from outside a boxed-in, trapped learning regime. Emma may feel trapped in her teacher’s strategies in whole-group and individual classroom work; Emma may need to feel comfortable by expressing her natural emotions through productive and uninterrupted free-thinking-time where she is free to brainstorm thoughtful answers to real-world experiences which will validate her confidence in individual and whole-group classroom performances. Validation of feeling important and correct may help any child open up and defeat their anxious fears.

Emma’s lack of individual and whole-group focus leads into Lev Vygotsky’s theoretical approaches that attaches a child’s socio-cultural experience to their learning abilities. Emma’s socio-cultural environment is unknown, however, this may be a key factor in Emma’s need for one-on-one and small group attention and her lack of motivation and attention for large group and individual competencies. Vygotsky developed a way to measure learning successes and named it the zone of proximal development (ZPD): “[T]he distance between the most difficult task a child can do alone and the most difficult task a child can do with help” (Mooney, 2013, pp. 101). This measure needs to be applied to Emma’s inconsistent spectrum from one-on-one to whole-group learning situations. In order to analyze Emma’s behavior, Emma’s teacher must measure the most difficult task she completes with her one-on-one interventionist and the most difficult task she has completed on her own—along with the most difficult task Emma is able to complete in a small group situation in comparison to what she can complete in a large group situation.

### Instructional Strategies

Paul Tough (2012), the author of *How children succeed: Grit, curiosity, and the hidden power of character*, gives an example of how Tom Brunzell, dean of students at KIPP Infinity Middle School in New York City, has handled frustrated students using a metacognition approach:

When his [Tom Brunzell] students were flailing, lost in moments of stress and emotional turmoil, he would encourage them to do the kind of big-picture thinking—the metacognition, as many psychologists call it—that takes a place in the prefrontal cortex: slowing down, examining their impulses, and considering more productive solutions to their problems than, say, yelling at a teacher or shoving another kid on the playground. (pp. 121)

This approach aligns with Piaget's Preoperational Stage of cognitive development and Ostroff's cognitive theories on motivation and attention. Each theory allows a student time for stepping back, reflecting and/or meditating, and looking into their own behavior whether the student knows they are performing this task or not.

In Emma's case, offering free playtime and open-ended thinking skills may lead to improvements in her abilities to trust herself and larger groups because this free-time and free-thinking strategy may calm her anxieties and fears, which may help her focus on completing individual work and focusing in larger groups and establishing trust with her teachers and peers. Ostroff (2012) states "[m]uch of children's learning happens without awareness or conscious effort. Children learn and follow complex rules without realizing they are doing so. Experience itself is powerful for thinking and learning" (pp. 123). In all, by giving Emma her own time to

figure things out—she may improve in her weaker areas of classroom instruction and become more independent and secure in their own way of completing tasks.

Emma's teacher must use Vygotsky's ZPD to measure Emma's engagement and changes in learning. Emma's teacher must communicate more with Emma's interventionist, this will allow Emma's teacher to pinpoint Emma's strongest and weakest independent abilities and her strongest and weakest classroom group abilities. This requires much observation and record-keeping by Emma's teacher. Once Emma's teacher performs the appropriate research, her teacher will be able to revise her curriculum to include concepts for below average readers in the classroom.

As Emma improves, she will benefit more in group situations with her teachers and peers—Vygotsky refers to this upward built learning as “scaffolding” (Mooney, 2013, pp. 101). Vygotsky felt that it is important to build trusting relationships with both peers and teachers: “[h]e believed that a child on the edge of learning a new concept can benefit from the interaction with a teacher or a classmate” (Mooney, 2013, pp. 102). Emma will develop more trust with her teacher and not only rely on her interventionist (who Emma sees less than her teacher); Emma will also begin to feel more comfortable in large, whole-group interactions as she builds more trust with peers outside of her normal small groups. With this stated, Emma's teacher must begin rotating and changing small groups within the classroom to ensure that all students become comfortable with one another in a small group setting—this, in turn, will help all students in a large, whole-group setting.

To further help Emma improve in reading and in social/classroom groups, Emma's teacher must find out more about Emma's socio-cultural home life because this is a key to

pinpoint where Emma's stress and anxieties are forming while working independently and in large, whole-class groups.

### References

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