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Communication Project Reflection

SPED800

Dr. McKeithan

1. **Give an overview of the featured student (project names/geographic area) and their communication needs.**

Bobby is an 11-year-old student in the 6th grade, attending Pioneer Middle School located in Dupont, Washington (a part of the Steilacoom Historical School District). Bobby started out the year spending time in the class and doing activities with his peers, however, he often leaves the classroom when he feels overwhelmed or uncomfortable. He prefers to be in a separate, familiar space with students he knows. Bobby met WAC special education eligibility under the category of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Bobby’s conditions adversely impact his social skills, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior. He demonstrated a need for specially designed instruction in social skills, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior. While Bobby is verbal, he struggles with social interaction and communicates in a very limited capacity with peers. With adults, Bobby communicates easily, but typically any communication with adults is limited to wants or needs or vocalizations relevant to work avoidance or verbal precursors to elopement. Bobby does have a 1:1 instructional paraeducator assigned to him, but Bobby rarely completes academic work and rarely attends general education classes. While Bobby is verbal, Bobby struggles with both peer and adult communication and social interactions.

Communication is fundamental to daily life in numerous ways, serving as the cornerstone of how individuals interact, express themselves, build relationships, and navigate the world around them. Developing functional communicative language requires an individual to engage with others and adapt language skills to the situations around them which are always changing. When one possesses the ability to verbally communicate, as opposed to individuals who rely on PECs or AAC devices to communicate, working on developing verbal communication is fundamental to future independence and success. For Bobby, honing his ability to verbally express himself to both adults and peers will be a definitive function to his ability to independently convey thoughts, emotions, feelings, needs, wants and ideas. Such communication is not limited to only an educational environment but is conducive to successful communicative abilities outside of the classroom. Bobby’s family currently struggles with his inability to effectively communicate, despite him being verbal, and the inevitable behavioral manifestations and outbursts and aggression which he engages in when frustrated, or when demands are placed on him.

When Bobby is engaged in a preferred activity, or interacting with preferred adults or peers, Bobby becomes much more verbal and interactive. When Bobby is provided a new task to which he shows an interest, Bobby will engage with said task for extended periods of time which is atypical of Bobby’s engagement with other activities, particularly social or academic. Bobby’s limited verbal interaction with peers creates a communicative deficit for Bobby in academic and/or classroom environments and social situations. If Bobby is able to learn how to communicate more effectively and in a more consistent manner, Bobby will find himself better able to interact with peers which may alleviate some of Bobby’s frustration and elopement behavior. Bobby would benefit greatly from increasing his social skills communication and interaction which will transition him to better communication at home as well as an academic environment.

1. **Talk about the identified communication needs (review ASCS-2 Results) which are connected to student needs addressed in this project.**

Bobby, an 11-year-old student in the sixth grade, presents with above-average intellectual abilities, as indicated by his IQ scores which fall well within the superior range (Full-Scale IQ: 120). While Bobby does not demonstrate severe impairments in communication, he does present with significant deficits in social skills and peer interaction which directly impede his communicative abilities, as Bobby prefers specific adult interactions over peer interactions. Bobby demonstrates impairments in social skills, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior, reflected by his Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) scores placing him at a Level 1 severity (requiring support).

Bobby’s communication is primarily verbal, and Bobby is able to communicate wants and needs, but tends to be affected and impacted by his environment and the presence of others (especially peers and adults he does not know) and work or task demands. Bobby’s previous IEP goal in the area of social emotional learning focused on self-efficacy and the ability to engage with his learning environment. Bobby is most engaged in his learning when he feels that it is benefiting him and is useful content. For example, when learning math, if he feels I will help him learn to code better, he may have a desire to learn it. However, if he feels a topic is boring or not useful, he tends to refuse work. Currently, Bobby has a schedule that incorporates some choice, but has structured parts of his day. Bobby does really well with having a private space to regulate when he becomes frustrated or upset. There are some days when he is able to follow his schedule and engage in learning activities with 90% accuracy, and there are some days he does so with about 30% accuracy. Bobby also benefits from consistency and predictability, so change in routine or unexpected things can upset him.

1. **Identify the selected EBP and briefly describe how it was implemented.**

The EBP that will be used for this project is reinforcement. Reinforcement is used to teach target skills and increase desired behaviors. Other evidence based practices (for example, prompting, pivotal responses training) draw upon components of reinforcement. Reinforcement (R+) is a foundational practice that is used with other evidence-based practices. Reinforcement describes the relationship between learner behavior and a consequence that follows the behavior (in the case of Reinforcement (R+) the consequence is a positive one which the learner enjoys or looks forward to, a reward). This relationship is reinforcing only if the consequence increases the likelihood the learner will perform the skill or behavior in the future (Sam & AFIRM Team, 2015), which is typically motivated by the reinforcement. The relationship between the learner’s use of a skill/behavior and the consequence is only reinforcing if the consequence increases the likelihood the learner performs the skill or behavior.

The supports that are most effective with Bobby are reinforcement in the form of Avian-Assisted Intervention, which Bobby absolutely loves. Through the use of this reinforcement, Bobby is able to self-regulate, manage his anxiety, maintain a less-stressed demeanor, remain in the classroom, engage in social activities with unfamiliar peers, attend general education classes, and engage in academic demands.

 To support implementation, Bobby only needs to be allowed exposure to the Conures (small parrots) which have been integrated into the classroom environment as Avian-Assisted Intervention tools. Bobby is capable of self-efficacy with limited support when interacting with the Conures specific to this program. Teachers, paraprofessionals, and intervention specialists are able to assist throughout the intervention process. Most of the time, Bobby is simply seated at his table with the Conure present on the table in front of him. Bobby is able to interact through touch and verbal communication throughout the intervention. Bobby is also able to facilitate interactions with other peers, both those familiar to him and unfamiliar to him, around instructional time, in order to develop adaptive behaviors and greater social interactions.

Implementing Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) reinforcement strategies, specifically utilizing positive reinforcement (R+), involves several key steps, but the basis of its foundation relies heavily on identifying the behavior, collecting baseline data through direct observation, and establishing a goal or outcome that clearly states when the behavior will occur, what the target skill is, and how the team will know when the skill is mastered.

 The three primary steps to Reinforcement (R+) rest on R+ Planning, R+ Implementation (or using), and R+ Monitoring. The following guidelines identify what steps should be followed in the implementation of Reinforcement (R+). Identify Target Behaviors and determine which behaviors you want to reinforce. These behaviors should be specific, observable, and measurable. Determine which reinforcers that are meaningful to the individuals whose behavior you want to reinforce. Reinforcers can vary widely from person to person and can include tangible rewards (such as stickers, tokens, or privileges), social rewards (such as praise or attention), or activities (such as extra free time or preferred tasks). Before implementing R+, collect baseline data on the target behaviors to establish a starting point. This data will help you measure the effectiveness of the reinforcement strategy over time. Determine a feasible and practical schedule of reinforcement you will use. This could be continuous reinforcement (providing a reinforcer every time the desired behavior occurs) or intermittent reinforcement (providing a reinforcer only some of the time). Intermittent reinforcement can be more effective for maintaining behaviors over the long term. Consistently apply the reinforcement plan, providing reinforcers when the target behaviors occur. Make sure to deliver the reinforcer immediately following the behavior to strengthen the association between the behavior and the reinforcer. Continuously monitor the target behaviors and the effectiveness of the reinforcement strategy. Use data collection methods to track progress and make adjustments to the reinforcement plan as needed. Offer feedback to individuals about their performance and the reinforcement they have received. Positive and constructive feedback can help individuals understand what behaviors are being reinforced and motivate them to continue those behaviors.

Once the desired behaviors have been consistently reinforced, work on maintaining those behaviors over time and generalizing them to different settings or situations. This may involve gradually reducing the frequency of reinforcement or expanding the range of situations in which reinforcement is provided. Periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the reinforcement strategy by comparing current data to baseline data. Adjust the reinforcement plan as necessary to ensure continued progress toward goals. Educate and support those implementing the reinforcement strategy to ensure consistency and effectiveness. Training may include instruction on how to deliver reinforcement effectively, how to collect data accurately, and how to troubleshoot any challenges that arise.

By following these steps, you can effectively implement Evidence-Based Practice reinforcement strategies, utilizing positive reinforcement to encourage and strengthen desired behaviors.

1. **Briefly review the results - Was the intervention effective? Why or why not? What would you do differently if you had to do this assignment again?**

The results of the data collected indicate a drastic decline in the student’s elopement behavior and his desire to remove himself to a preferred or isolated space when R+ EBP interventions using AAI were in place. The high-magnitude behaviors manifested by the student on a continuous basis without the EBP (R+) implementation show that the student will routinely and consistently remove himself from his expected environment, refuse to participate in academics and social skills activities and choose to relocate himself to a more isolated and preferred space. When the EBP is implemented, the reinforcement provides the student with motivation to remain in his classroom and participate in academics (in a limited capacity) and in social skills development. The high-magnitude elopement behaviors nearly reach complete cessation when the EBP is implemented. Data was tracked simply based upon whether the student engaged in his typical elopement behavior or chose to remain in class due to the EBP being implemented as a successful reinforcement.

The data for this specific intervention shows high effectiveness in motivating the student to remain in class and refrain from leaving to a more isolated and preferred space. The data also shows a higher level of engagement in social skills development (charted by the gray line). Baseline behavior for the student was an inability to maintain a presence in his academic environment with a preference for elopement to a more isolated space where he did not have to interact with peers or adults. When the intervention was implemented, the student chose to remain in his classroom and never asked to elope to a (preferred) isolated space. The reinforcement (R+) provided the student with an intervention that facilitated his development of social skills and self-efficacy and emotional regulation, allowing him to quickly adapt to his environment and engagement with peers and adults that were non-preferred and/or unfamiliar. The intervention provided a palpable reduction in the student’s level of anxiety and changed the manner in which he was able to engage with peers on a consistent basis throughout the days and times when the intervention was implemented. According to SAM and AFIRM team, Reinforcement (R+) is a foundational practice that is used with other evidence-based practices. Reinforcement describes the relationship between learner behavior and a consequence that follows the behavior. This relationship is reinforcing only if the consequence increases the likelihood the learner will perform the skill or behavior in the future (Sam & AFIRM Team, 2015).

Prior to the intervention being implemented, there was no assurance that the student would accept the intervention or participate. There was a foundational context to the student having a “love” for animals that prompted the discussion on the intervention being implemented as a test to see if it would be accepted and be applicable as a tool for successful implementation over time. The student accepted the intervention immediately and adapted to it, with only a brief hesitation at first as he learned how to handle and interact with the Conures. Within the matter of 60 minutes the student was comfortable and confident handling the Conures and by the end of the day was helping other peers interact and handle the Conures (facilitating IEP goals, social skills development and the cessation of elopement behaviors).

Additional factors to be considered were the level of engagement which the student adhered to during the implementation of the intervention versus the lack of engagement with peers and academics without the intervention. Just being present in a classroom does not always correlate to engagement.

If I had to do this assignment again, with this particular student, I would not do anything differently and I would select the same EBP and provide the same supports and interventions. Were I to select a different student, with different needs for such an assignment, I would more than likely modify or select a different EBP based upon that students needs. When I had the opportunity to select a student to work with, I was going to select a non-verbal/limited verbal student I worked with last year who utilizes a PECs to communicate, but access to that student this year was more limited and the distance to that school was greater than the one I selected, which allowed more time for interaction, observation, and the implementation of the intervention selected. I have also recently began researching and applying Avian-Assisted Intervention and I am building upon the use of Conures to work with students with ASD in an effort to create a defined EBP that shows practical application within certain situations with students who can benefit from the intervention. Access to this student, who showed an interest in the intervention, and with whom I had support from his teacher, parent, and administrators made this the choice for this project.

1. **What are the recommended next steps for this student to promote generalization?**

The application of generalization is fundamental to the process of developing skills in a variety of settings that remain viable regardless of who an individual may be interacting with, or the situational conditions which may invariably change. The May Institute defines generalization as “the ability to complete a task, perform an activity, or display a behavior across settings, with different people, and at different times.” Generalization establishes a flexibility that is typically difficult for individuals with ASD who adhere to more rigidity in routines and interactions.

Given that the student’s goals identify self-efficacy, self-regulation, and social skills development, generalization for the student would incorporate the student being able to engage with his peers in the same fashion as he does when the intervention is place, but do so when the intervention is not in place. The intervention provides the student with a tool that helps to facilitate a breaking from his normal behavioral routines and anxiety-manifested responses, allowing him to engage, communicate and interact with peers and build upon social skills development gradually, until the reinforcement can be faded and the student can maintain engagement and interaction with peers without the intervention. The intervention helps the student build confidence in his social interactions and over time this will allow the student to generalize those skills and behaviors and maintain peer interactions with less elopement and anxiety. In order for generalization to occur, the skill must be demonstrated across novel, noninstructional settings with multiple partners (Quill & Stansberry-Brusnahan, 2017). The student has already demonstrated the ability to do this with the intervention in place, generalization would correlate with the student slowly being able to maintain the same abilities and interactions when the intervention is no longer being implemented.

1. **What were the challenges of implementing/assessing this project/intervention?**

The greatest challenge in the implementation and assessment of this project and the application of the intervention was student presence. The student did not always come to school and there was no method of communicating that the student would not be in school on a specific day. Absences were based upon student mood, medications, desire to participate, etc. There were days when the student was not in school. There were days when the student was not in school, but when I arrived, the student decided to come to school. The variable of attendance was the greatest challenge and complication.

 Additionally, the intervention piqued the interest of other students in both resource and general education, so there was an added complication of other students wishing to interact with the birds, but this challenge provided an additional opportunity for the student to engage in social skills development and further meet IEP goals and develop the skills he needed in interacting with peers throughout the day, something which is permanently absent when the intervention is not being implemented.

1. **How might you apply what you learned from these experiences in your current or future practice?**

A goal moving forward in my future practice is to hone research on Avian-Assisted Intervention (which is rooted in Animal-Assisted Intervention) and use both research and application to facilitate the development of an evidence-based practice that works and that is supported by success implementation, data, and research. I would enjoy furthering my research and potentially publishing such research in the future in an effort to aid other practitioners who are looking for new and unique interventions that work with students who need a creative but applicable support.

1. **What changes might be made to this assignment to improve the planning/implementation in an eight-week mini-semester?**

This was a mini-semester? It did not feel like a mini-semester. I do not feel any changes should be made to this assignment, whether it is perceived that it is a lot of work, or whether it took some students longer to completed does not establish a basis for it being less applicable to the practice. The process was methodical and incorporated a great deal of data and evidence and application and reducing this project in any way will only result in a teaching opportunity that is reduced for students who should really experience this process without any modifications. It was a great opportunity to work with a student and apply an intervention and see success. This is a functional process with future application. It is essential to the degree seeking special educator, especially one at the graduate-level.