

PART 3 - SOLVING A DIFFICULT SITUATION

Background Information & Teaching Context

Ms. Williams, a newly-graduated French teacher, has been asked to fill in for a Grade 9 Core French class for the next six weeks, as the regular teacher is off on a medical leave of absence. In a previous meeting with school administration prior to the start of classes, Ms. Williams was informed that there have been some notable “behavioural issues” from a few of the students in this class. The Principal, Ms. Stevenson, has pointed out three students who have had a history of challenging behaviour this past school year: Dani, Sam, and Taylor. Furthermore, Taylor has been formally diagnosed with ADHD. Ms. Stevens explains that in order to keep Taylor engaged and focused, they need to remain busy or you will lose their attention and that is when the behavioural issues have been known to occur. On her first day of teaching, Ms. Williams walks to the classroom, reads over the notes for the day, and tries to keep an open mind.

The “Situation”

Ms. Williams: “Good morning, everyone! My name is Ms. Williams, and I am going to be your French teacher for the next 6 weeks.”

Taylor: “Where’s our old teacher, Mr. Cheung?”

Ms. Williams: “I’m sorry, but I don’t know any names yet. Can you please tell me who you are?”

Taylor: “I’m Taylor,” They state with a sassy tone.

Ms. Williams: *(She recalls Ms. Stevenson mentioning Taylor as presenting challenging behaviour)* “Well, Taylor, I would appreciate it if you raised your hand to ask a question.

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That's one of my expectations of students. To answer your question, Mr. Cheung is taking a medical leave of absence."

Taylor raises their hand, with an unimpressed look on their face.

Ms. Williams: "Thanks for raising your hand this time, Taylor! What's your question?"

Taylor: "Is Mr. Cheung dying?!"

Ms. Williams: "No, he is not dying, but I am not at liberty to discuss anything further as that is private information. Okay?"

Taylor nods their head in agreement but rolls their eyes, unimpressed.

Ms. Williams turns her back to write out the agenda for the day and begins giving out instructions. While she has her back turned, some of the grade 9 students become bored and uninterested and begin throwing paper airplanes around the class. When Ms.

Williams' asks them to stop, Taylor hits her with an airplane and swears at her.

First Possible Solution - Preventative

As Skiba et al., (2016) states, "A teacher's ability or failure to develop a positive classroom climate, and find ways to deescalate rather than escalate student behavior, also has important consequences for students" (p. 121). In order to deescalate this situation, prevent any further harm from occurring, and repair the damage that has already been done, I would first remove Taylor from the situation by asking them to step outside with me for a moment. Looking at this situation first through a behaviourist lens, we know that behaviour is maintained by its consequences (Open University, 2016). Seeing as I believe in having consequences, I would inform Taylor that I would be contacting the Vice-Principal to let

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her know about this unacceptable behaviour.

Additionally, I believe in autonomy-supportive teaching. What this means is that we are engaging students “by facilitating an on-going congruence between students' autonomous sources of motivation and their moment-to-moment classroom activity” (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010, p. 3). That is to say that students ought to be given opportunities for self-direction and self-empowerment. In this situation, I would first want to promote Taylor to use and apply various resiliency strategies. First, I would start by attentively listening to Taylor, as “attentive listening incorporates all three protective factors—caring for, believing in, and inviting the participation and contribution of the one listened to.” (Benard & Slade, 2009, p. 366). Listening to Taylor would also increase their social competence, problem solving, autonomy/identity, and sense of purpose and future (Benard & Slade, 2009). Secondly, I would want to promote Taylor to use and apply various self-management strategies. In order to further use this as a preventative strategy, I would ask Taylor to issue a verbal apology to the class and myself for their actions so that they understand its impact. I truly believe that we need to make space in our classrooms for students to make mistakes and then own up to them afterwards. It is about engaging our students in learning activities, of all kinds, that will lead to enhanced classroom engagement (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010), thus limiting and minimizing behavioural outbursts in the future.

Even if these classrooms are not our “own”, we can still have the kind of flexibility where students can talk about a potential unacceptable behaviour they exhibited and then “make it right”, so to speak. Even a simple act of making an apology can be powerful, and enables students to use various social skills that they will carry with them for the rest of

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their life beyond the classroom; or at least that is always my goal for students.

Finally, in order to be proactive and prevent further situations as such from occurring, I would monitor at-risk students such as Taylor more closely, so they are not presenting frequent disruptions causing continual referral to the office. As Skiba et al., (2016) claims, “The secondary level Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports procedure Check-In, Check Out (Crone, Horner, & Hawken, 2003) provides a student-level monitoring procedure throughout the school day that has proven effective in decreasing problem behaviors (McIntosh, Campbell, Carter, & Dickey, 2009), decreasing office discipline referrals and discipline contacts (Filter et al., 2007), and increasing achievement (Hawken & Horner, 2003)” (p. 123). This is an approach I would hope to implement moving forward, in order to ensure Taylor’s success and growth in the class.

Second Possible Solution

An alternative approach I might take in addressing the situation would be to facilitate a discussion around the classroom rules and expectations. With this solution, I would formally address the situation in a group setting, in the moment. Seeing as I believe that the classroom ought to be a place to build respect for one another, I would illustrate to the class the damage and disrespect that these sorts of behaviours cause and how they fall short of the classroom expectations that were created collaboratively by everyone in the class at the beginning of the school year. By referring back to these classroom “rules”, even if they are not “my own”, I am reinforcing the expectations of the classroom community (Cervone & Cushman, 2014).

Next, I would explore Restorative Justice practices with the students. Restorative

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Justice emphasizes repairing the harm caused by certain behaviours and is best accomplished through cooperative processes (Centre for Justice and Reconciliation, 2020). It has shown to be an effective way for students to discover self-empowerment by resolving conflicts on their own and in small groups, and I believe that students need to achieve their own measure of success through autonomy, self-direction, and self-empowerment. We would spend some time in small groups talking about the impact of our actions and discussing ways to strengthen our classroom community and reduce future conflicts. Some of the benefits I would hope to reap would include: reductions in disruptive behaviours leading to suspensions and expulsions, and a happier, safer classroom environment for all.

In addition to the restorative justice practice, I would want to illustrate the benefits of creating a culture of respect, participation, and reflection to the students, as this is also a vital part of my teaching philosophy. To achieve this, we may need to spend time as a class reviewing and creating our own classroom expectations. Although their regular classroom teacher, Mr. Cheung was likely to have already created expectations, rules and procedures for the year, these were created with him and the students in mind, and not myself. In order for the students to build respect with their new teacher, I will need to spend a good deal of time clarifying my expectations and giving verbal explanations and reminders, as these are all important sources of information for the students (Skiba et al., 2016). By explaining my expectations and recreating the classroom expectations as a class, I would hope to “set a tone of community among a fresh group of students” (Cervone & Cushman, 2014, p. 3).

Moving forward, I would also modify a few of the classroom dynamics to suit the needs of our newly-defined classroom expectations. For example, I would want to rearrange the teacher’s desk to suit my own needs as the new classroom teacher. I would

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also want to decrease various stimulating visuals, eliminate background noises, and rearrange student seating to face away from various other distractions. Lastly, I would alter my stance and positioning in the classroom to ensure I always have a clear line of sight. (Skiba et al., 2016). By ensuring that the classroom is arranged to engage students in their own learning and that classroom expectations are clearly stated and understood by everyone, my goal would be to shift the traditional view of the “classroom” towards a culture of community that prides itself on respect, participation, and continual reflection.

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