

Emily Davidson

CEP 832

Case Study

This is my second year teaching at Troy High School. My very first year of teaching I taught both Geometry and Informal Geometry courses. I wish that I had taken this course last year when I was teaching Informal Geometry as it was comprised of many of the “low-level” students. These were students who had seen nothing but failure throughout their schooling, and were constantly having run-ins with authority. All of my colleagues warned me that I was going to have to beef up my classroom management in order to keep the class in line because I was not prepared for what I was getting into. Needless to say nothing that I learned at MSU undergrad could prepare me for the classroom I was about to walk into. More than half of the kids were labeled as special education and another $\frac{1}{4}$ of the class was labeled as ESL. On any given day there were at least 5 people missing, and others coming back from absences, so getting students caught up were always an issue. Also on any given day students could fly off of the handle creating a disturbance. This was my trial by fire on classroom management, and I feel as though I ended up strong I started out weak. One thing that I learned in my first year was the power of relationships and how much they changed the dynamics of even the worst class.

This year I teach Geometry, Algebra 2, and Active Chemistry. Two new courses means that I feel as if it is my first year of teaching all over again. One of my courses that I teach this year is a low level chemistry course. This is an elective course but was truly designed for students who could not handle regular chemistry in order to get to see the basic chemistry concepts before heading off to college. As soon as I walked into the course on the first day I recognized a large portion of the class from my previous informal geometry course. The other

half of the class were faces that were new to me, but their names on the roster were names heard often around the office for various infractions.

My classroom is made up of 18 students, 12 on a good day, where half of the students are special education and the other half are ESL. This is my only class of the day that has African American students in it, and in my roster I have four of them. Between my African American students and my Chaldean students my classroom is made up of almost all minority students. Those cultures are generally louder cultures, and it requires patience in terms of being able to handle the noise. I have learned that I need to become accustomed to a little more chaos than I would otherwise be used to as long as it is controlled chaos.

In this classroom there is a student, Emily, who I been having issues with. She is a 17 year old African American female from a wealthy family. She should be a senior but she is considered a junior by credits status. In her first semester of this year she was enrolled in three math courses, an english course, a social studies course, and my science course. She was in my class for one day and then she proceeded to spend two days in an in-school suspension (ISS) for an offense committed during the end of summer school. So before I truly got to meet her she was in ISS.

After returning from ISS I got to meet the true Emily. She was late to class almost every day, and it seemed like the whole class was always waiting for her. When she showed up late she wouldn't go right to her seat but she would slowly find her way to her seat and distract as many students as possible along the way. Her classmates found this incredibly funny while I found it incredibly rude. I would ask her to find her way to her seat so that the class would proceed. Once she found her way to her seat she would take about two minutes to search through her bag to find a writing utensil and her lab report. She always found a way to come to

class just when instructions for the lab were taking place, and therefore was never prepared for what she was going to be doing.

It seemed like every day she was running late, always losing her materials, always searching for writing utensils, never listening to directions, and always was the first person to ask “what are we doing?.” Whatever lab group she was in always seemed unhappy. While they were busy with the lab she was dancing around complaining that she didn’t know what she was doing. After multiple warnings about breaking lab safety protocol I would have to sometimes ask her to sit out of the lab. If it was truly her not knowing her lab protocol I would ask her to sit down and read over the directions one more time in order to return back to the lab. If she could prove to me that she knew what she was doing I would let her return to the lab.

Emily was never a violent student but there were definite issues occurring that was taking over her attention. Her attitude was like a roller coaster and you never knew what student you were going to see. The days after she was absent she was usually very dramatic, but if she had been in school for a couple of days straight she seemed a bit calmer. No matter what day she was in class she was still losing everything, coming in late, and always causing some sort of a disturbance. Her disturbances were never enough to throw off the whole class, but they were always enough to bother me. This was only compounded by the fact that she was only barely holding onto a D in my class as she was not good about turning materials in.

Right before Christmas break I was began to receive multiple emails from her counselors, and assistant principles, in regards to her grades. Apparently she was failing four out of six of her classes, and the other two she was barely hanging onto a D. They wanted to know if there was going to be any chance of her passing any of her classes this semester, and what we could do to help her pass. This just let me know that it wasn’t only in my class that she was struggling

with, but there was an overarching issue. I let the counselor know what was occurring in my class, and how I was never able to get a hold of her parents no matter how often I tried to call. I was running my classroom with an authoritarian personality where I was trying to be in complete control instead of allowing for some freedoms. My goal through this case study is to take a step back and review my teaching practices to allow for some freedoms while still having control over the situation.

When this master's course began I was introduced to what Emily truly was, a passive-aggressive student. Passive aggressive students are defined as having the following characteristics as defined on p. 201 of Brophy:

1. *Are subtly oppositional and stubborn*
2. *Try to control*
3. *Show borderline compliance with rules*
4. *Mar property rather than damage*
5. *Disrupt surreptitiously*
6. *Drag their feet*

Emily was displaying in the classroom a majority of these characteristics and they were playing a part in her lack of success. She was always showing up late and when she final did arrive she was always dragging her feet to get anywhere. With her slow movement from one point to another she was also disrupting the classroom in little ways along her way. Her favorite thing to do was make little noises along the way to make herself the center of attention. The students responded in such a way that fed her desire for attention, and this meant that this action was going to keep going. Her other passive aggressive behavior was in her lack of preparedness during the classtime. She always avoiding reading directions, or following along with the class,

and this showed up as her using unsafe lab practices. This often resulted in issues resulting with her data, and her lab group finding themselves frustrated with the grade they received. As a new science teacher I gave my students too much freedom in regards to being able to read directions and follow them. This created a situation where students like Emily could avoid reading directions, and just keep asking “What are we supposed to do now?” during every step of the lab. Instead of just simply asking questions at the beginning for their understanding I think of them as seniors who should be able to read and follow directions. One of the things I learned through this experience is that there is no substitution for ensuring that your classroom is well prepared for a science lab.

So the issue within the classroom has persisted to the point where now Emily has moved into not turning in her work when it is due. On a daily basis she is showing up late, resulting in tardies and in-school suspensions, and finding herself unprepared for what is going on that particular day in class. Her students love for her is beginning to wane as they see their grades being affected by her actions. Some form of action needs to take place in order to improve her performance in the classroom, and to allow for a better classroom environment.

As I stepped back and looked at my teaching I realized that I missed one of the steps that a higher rated teacher would do which is build a relationship with them. I found that while I was just disciplining them I was not finding out what was causing them to pursue this passive aggressive behavior. Since my disciplining was obviously not working “you might try talking to the child and ask him just why he does these things” (Brophy, p. 203) and maybe the problem could have been solved sooner. Also I believe that my methods of enforcing consequences were not followed through with on a consistent basis and that also needed to be rectified. I decided to

put into place a homenotes system from Best Practices, but I knew I needed the parents to play a part in the process.

The next day in class I pulled Emily out of the classroom to have a heart-to-heart chat with her about her actions in the classroom. I brought her grade report out with me to discuss with her where she stood in the classroom. I then asked her why her grade was the way it was, and I proceeded to let her come up with a way that it could be improved. After that discussion I brought into play her work ethic in the classroom, and how I felt that it was playing a part into her grade. I let her know “that when we’re in the classroom situation, you’re basically functioning as a large group and you owe it to the group not to be lagging behind because you’re unfair and you’re thinking only of yourself when you do those things” (Brophy, p. 203). I wanted her to see that her actions were not only hurting herself but they were also hurting her other group members as well who depended on her. I let her know how I would like her to make sure that she makes it a priority to be prepared for labs from now on or else she would not be able to participate in the labs. I explained to her that unsafe lab procedures could wind her, or her classmates, with serious injuries and that would not be tolerated. I reminded her that as a Junior in high school she was mature enough to be able to handle herself in a manner that held up lab safety protocol.

I made sure that when I was having this talk with her that I was not threatening in anyway, but was merely trying to convey a sincere message to her. I wanted her to see that I wanted her to be a part of the classroom experience, but it could not happen unless she took it upon herself to be a safe part of that classroom. I let her know that if I did not see a change in behavior that I was going to be contacting her parents in order to set up a plan of action. She seemed responsive to this but only time would tell. The next day she was gone for another ISS,

due to skipping Saturday school, so I had to wait a day to see if my chat was successful. Much to my dismay her return brought her back with all of the same problems. She showed up late, dragged her feet, and once again found many ways to distract herself when we were going over lab directions. I even made sure to go through and “quiz” the students over the directions but it did not make a difference. When she could not answer any of my questions I released the rest of the class to complete the lab, but I held her back. Until she was able to tell me what she was doing in the lab, and the safety precautions that needed to be met she would have to stay out of the lab room taking a zero. I let her know that I would be calling her parents to set up an action plan in order to fix what was happening in the classroom, and that her sitting out while her classmates had fun would be a daily occurrence if necessary. She was not very keen about the idea of me calling her parents saying that she would improve her behavior. I let her know that it was for the best that I let them know what was occurring, and that until she showed me in the classroom that changes were being made that I was going to have search for outside support.

At the end of the day I called home to her parents and luckily I was able to get a hold of her mother. I discussed with her the situation that was occurring in the classroom, and let her know how I felt about it in regards to her success. I wanted to make sure that I gave her mother the ability to ask any questions she wanted to, but she was not very welcoming in terms of dealing with the situation at hand. She claimed that it must be the fault of someone other than her daughter, and what happens at school really isn't her problem. I let her know that I was disappointed to hear this but I truly needed her help from home as well to create a system by which to improve her behavior towards school. She did agree that was concerned about her not passing another set of classes and finally agreed that we needed to set something up for her. I discussed with her the use of home notes.

We discussed how I would be tracking Emily's actions every day noting:

- 1. When she entered class*
- 2. Whether she was prepared with classroom materials*
- 3. If she was actively following along to directions*
- 4. How well she participated in the lab (i.e. following directions, keeping up with safety precautions, and working with classmates)*
- 5. Whether she used her time wisely.*

I then let the mother know that I would be sending them an email three times a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) in order to let them know her progress so far. I then made sure to ask for the mothers input on what they were willing to do at home for rewards/consequences in regards to the emailed note (Best Practices, p. 31). She let me know that they would come up with fair rewards/consequences, but she didn't know what they would be off the top of her head. I also made sure to let her know how thankful I was to have her support, and that together we could work together to ensure Emily's success in the classroom. So after sharing our email addresses we parted ways with a plan set in front of us.

I discussed with Emily the plan and let her know that I would be keeping a close eye on her progress on a daily basis. So every day I kept track of our list of agreed upon items with a simple check list, and three times a week I emailed her parents the result. The parents however never responded to any of my emails. In the classroom however it seemed like the simple action of me hovering and documenting her actions really did create a change. I started to take a closer look at my practices as well in connection with working with students like Emily. I made it my mission to work on building relationships along with making sure that I am setting reasonable goals for the students. I started implementing pre-lab quizzes where students had to prove ready

in order to be able to complete the lab. One surprising factor is how the class has begun to turn on her over time. They are not willing to tolerate her actions any longer, and this has played into my advantage over time. She has found that in order to be accepted she is going to have to adapt to the community that we have created. Also after being kept out of a couple of labs she didn't like the feeling of not being a part of everything, especially when she had to watch her friends having fun.

Life with Emily in the classroom is still a roller coaster ride because depending on what has occurred throughout the day depends on what baggage she will enter the class with. I also find that everything seems to go really well until she finds herself gone for a day then we seem to start over again. I would rate my intervention as successful in the rate of change that I have seen in her, but I just wish that I could have received more parent support throughout. She has shown emotional growth throughout, and I wish that I had started the intervention sooner in the year. In the future I will always make sure that it is my first mission to form relationships, and also to set firm boundaries in my science courses. I have really enjoyed my pre-lab quizzes because it forces my students to become prepared. I am not happy with the homenote system, but instead I believe that I will still do the check list as participation points for all students down the road. I have perfected the system to where it takes almost no work to track Emily's performance in a given day. I think that more than sending emails home it is the attention and close watch that I keep on her that has truly made the difference. I find that everyday I am just a little bit happier to enter the classroom because I know that there are strides being made to create a better classroom community. I also see that other students in the classroom are happier as well with how she is acting.

I have created a system that will work for the remainder of the school year with Emily. I believe that between us we have come to an understanding that in order for her to be able to gain credit, and also a good classroom experience, that certain classroom rules must be followed. I also think that it is important to her that I am not willing to give up on her where some of her other teachers already have. All in all I believe that my professional stance has transformed from being authoritarian to being authoritative (Brophy, p. 21). I am able to put my leadership skills into action while using relationship building in order to make the students feel at home in the classroom. My first year of teaching I used relationships to my benefit in order to run the class as smoothly as possible, but I didn't employ that off the bat my second year of teaching. I wish that I had started with relationship building instead of starting with simply trying to bend students to my will. Through my work with Emily, and other students, I have found that in the end the relationship that we build must be the most important thing. A student who trusts, and respects you, will be willing to follow the directions you set forth for them. Also these students will be more likely to work hard in the classroom setting.

Students like Emily are students that I will now be able to look out for early on in my classroom because of the skills that I gained from Brophy's book. His insight into the world of hard to manage children was the key to my success. In almost every chapter I would have fallen into the lower rated teacher category, but with the tips for success I found myself able to move towards working in the higher rated teacher arena. One of his running themes in the book is looking at the problem as bad instead of looking at the student as bad. There is a story behind every problem, and the student often just needs an outlet to get help for it. We are not magic workers that will be able to solve every problem, but he gave us a basic tool kit to be able to approach all problems reasonably to keep the power with the teacher in the end.

Works Cited

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