

## **August 20, 2004: Exercise B, Schein's ORJI, pp. 39-40 Coghlan**

A few years ago, I had a student, "B", who just did not complete his assignments. He was capable of completing the work, but just wasn't interested in doing so. "B" was in my homeroom so that meant that I was responsible for monitoring his school experience. By the second month of school, it became obvious that "B" was in jeopardy of failing all his courses due to lack of assignment completion. Individual teachers had tried their usual consequences: zeros for incomplete work, after-school work detention, study hall tutoring, lunch detention, and other strategies. I decided to telephone the parent to get a better handle on what was happening at home and to try to gain support from his family. It was hoped that mom or dad would be able to provide assistance in monitoring work completion and such. During the phone call, mom asked if she could meet with all of his teachers because she just wasn't able to "do anything" with him at home. I questioned her about strategies that she could try and she stated that she had tried them all, including taking everything away from him so that he had nothing to do. I agreed to set up a meeting. I asked the principal and the guidance counselor to attend the conference since it was quite possible that "B" would continue this behavior pattern and possibly fail for the quarter. I felt that "B" was quite capable of doing the work, he knew how and what to do, but I thought he just wasn't interested or motivated by the things required of him. It was my hope that we could work with the family to develop some strategies to get "B" back on track, get ideas for some work assignments that would interest "B", or provide guidance type intervention for him. This was my hope.

### **The outcome of the intervention**

We were never successful in changing "B's" behavior. The intervention that was decided upon, by the parent and the principal, was that "B" could not get his work accomplished because he could never find his papers and assignments. His locker was a nightmare! "B" agreed that this was the problem. However, I did not feel that this was the root of the cause. "B's" locker was a mess because he didn't care about completing the assignments, they weren't important to him. The principal offered the suggestion of taking "B's" locker privileges away from him so that he'd have to keep things organized and he couldn't "collect" garbage in it. It was decided by the principal and the parent that "B" would have a box in his homeroom (my room) where he'd have to keep his materials, and that I would go through the box each morning and afternoon with him to be sure that it was organized. I need to mention that I was totally against this plan as I did not believe this strategy would work and that I strongly stated my opposition to both the principal and the parent. As mentioned earlier, the intervention was unsuccessful.

## The unexpected outcome

Each afternoon, “B” and I would go through his “box” organizing his assignments and placing them in a folder to go home for completion. Each morning, “B” and I would review the folder to see if work was completed. “B” rarely had all his assignments completed—occasionally he might have 1 out of 3 assignments completed. I hated doing this and so did “B.” Another student in my homeroom, “M”, is a student who attends special education courses and is only mainstreamed for homeroom, study hall, and social studies. This student would witness this exchange and watch “B” “live” out of the box each day. After about 4 weeks of this, I received a call from “M’s” mom stating that I am giving entirely too much work to “M” and that he is so stressed out that he can’t sleep and ends up in tears doing his homework. She requested that I please reduce my workload. I was confused by this because I don’t give a lot of homework for social studies. I stated this and said that this can’t possibly be the reason why he’s upset. However, I reduced the workload for “M” based on the mother’s extreme concern. After about 3 more weeks, I received a visit from “M’s” mother and our guidance counselor regarding “M’s” concern about my work. We discussed what was happening and again I stated that I wasn’t giving a lot of work, that I wasn’t “doing” anything to make “M” fearful. “M” would only tell his mom that he had to get his social studies work done and that he had to do well in the class. I talked to him and got the same response. Eventually I determined the cause of “M’s” fear of social studies work—he didn’t understand why “B” had his locker taken away. He feared it was because as “B” social studies teacher I wasn’t happy with the quality of his work and I was angry over his missing assignments. “M” believed that if he missed completing an assignment or that if his work wasn’t as good as it should be that I would take away his locker too. “M” became obsessive about his social studies work and grade and began ignoring his other subjects causing him to fall behind in those classes.

I don’t believe that my reaction contributed to the outcome of “B’s” intervention. I do however believe that the reaction of the parent and the principal did. Both parent and principal reacted to “B’s” show of non-commitment and non-engagement as a power struggle that they wanted to win. My reaction was resistance to the proposed solution as I did not feel it would bring the problem closer to resolution. It seemed to me to be a senseless solution that required most of the work to come from me and very little responsibility or commitment from “B.” Essentially, I ended up in the power struggle with “B.” even though it was not of my choosing. “M” watched this and saw me as this “mean teacher” who would embarrass a student by making them keep their things in a box in the room. “M” decided he would never let that happen to him and was so committed that he spent all his time on social studies work and ignored other subjects to avoid losing his locker privileges. I was so confused by what “M’s” mother was telling me and I couldn’t figure out what I could possibly have done to cause “M” to act this way. When I finally

figured out what was happening I felt so terrible that "M" thought that these same things could happen to him just because he missed an assignment or did poorly on a test. It was a horrible experience and one that I will not repeat even if it means being reprimanded for not following a directive.