

Transforming Michael
Evan Hanson & Danielle Warwick
Bridgewater State University

Autism Case Study; Transforming Michael

Statements such as “Your child is struggling.”, “We need to set up an evaluation.”, “Your child has been diagnosed with a disorder.”, “The IEP meeting is coming up, think of things you may want to bring up.”, and more are all things that parents of a special needs student might hear. Clearly, the world of special education can be overwhelming. We, as school counselors, are responsible for helping the parents gain understanding and insight into their child’s specific disorder. In addition, we are given the task of working with the student, specifically through advocacy, in order to ensure that they are provided with the tools that they need to succeed. This case study will examine the process that a school counselor may experience while working with a student with special needs and their family. This process includes having a deep understanding of the student’s specific disability, the analyzation of the student’s assessment scores, points of advocacy for their upcoming IEP meeting, and the development of a school counseling plan.

Description of the Disabilities

Michael was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at the age of four. Affecting 1 in 42 boys (Autism Speaks, n.d.), Autism Spectrum Disorder is described as a “developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and non-verbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance” (Quigney & Studer, p. 39, 2016). In addition, ASD is often associated with repetitive activities, stereotyped movements, resistance to change in environment or daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences (Quigney & Studer, 2016).

Other characteristics of ASD include a restricted repertoire of activities and interests, self-injurious behavior and aggression, perseveration, joint attention issues, deficits in the

understanding of figurative language, repetitive language, and over-selectivity (Quigney & Studer, 2016). Clearly, there is a plethora of characteristics that can come with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, it is important to understand that these characteristics vary by child, and each student with ASD should be treated depending on their individual presentation (Quigney & Studer, 2016). In addition to Autism Spectrum Disorder, Michael has been diagnosed with a Language Impairment for his difficulty with pragmatics, which is the practice of using language for communication (Quigney & Studer, 2016). Next, we will examine the specific characteristics and information of our student, Michael, and the interventions that are currently used.

Currently, Michael is a fifth grader at ABC Intermediate school, where his primary special education eligibility is Autism Spectrum Disorder and his secondary special education eligibility is Language Impairment. Michael attends school regularly and comes well-groomed and in uniform. At this time, Michael receives direct special education services in the general education setting for Math. In addition, he receives a consultation service for Language Arts. To address his Language Impairment, Michael meets with a Speech Language Pathologist for twenty minutes once per month. Michael's parents are concerned about his interactions with peers. Recently, Michael has gotten into trouble for fighting due to his inability to read the emotional cues of his peers, especially when they are annoyed with him. His teachers also report that he does not always respect the space of others. Due to these particular issues, Michael's parents would like to add social skills counseling to his IEP renewal.

Michael has a visual cue card on his desk to remind him to raise his hand when he needs help. However, Michael's Math teacher reports that he does not always indicate when he needs it. This indicates that Michael is having communication issues that are adversely affecting his

education (Quigney & Studer, 2016). His general education teachers report that he uses his class time to complete all assignments. As a result, Michael has completed 90% of his assignments in all subjects. Currently, Michael is working on grade level state standards. Michaels current grades are as follows:

- Mr. B. Social Studies – 85%
- Mrs. W. Science – 80%
- Mrs. J. Language Arts – 90% Michael receives consultation services for R/LA.
- Mrs. P. Math – 75%

Mrs. P. reports that Michael has not mastered deciding when and how to break a problem into simpler parts. He also needs assistance to support his solutions with evidence. In addition, Michael gets anxious when he has projects that require more than one session to complete, such as book reports or group projects. Accommodations that work for him include breaking up large assignments into smaller pieces and providing him with a visual timeline of when each portion is due.

Michael has a passion for video games and Transformers. He also likes to act out scenes from his favorite video games or movies during unstructured time, such as lunch. These two interests demonstrate that Michael has restricted interests and that he perseverates over specific scenes, which are two of the aforementioned characteristics of ASD (Quigney & Studer, 2016). Social narratives have been used to explain appropriate behavior for the cafeteria. Michael thinks literally and does not always understand figurative or slang language, which is common for children with ASD (Quigney & Studer, 2016). Language such as this should be explained to Michael when he needs it. Additional problems for Michael include hypersensitivity to bright lights and loud noise, which depicts that Michael has unusual reactions to sensory events (Quigney & Studer, 2016).

In the area of verbal comprehension, Michael scored a 106 (66th percentile), which is looked at as average. What this means for Michael is that he is able to apply acquired word knowledge effectively. In the area of visual spatial, Michael scored a 111 (77th percentile). This was looked at as high average. Michael is able to effectively understand visual details and construct geometrical designs from a model. In the area of fluid reasoning, Michael scored a 94 (34th percentile), which was looked at as average. Michael is able to solve novel problems without prior knowledge. Also, with his ability in fluid reasoning, Michael is able to identify patterns and relationships under these novel problems. In the area of working memory, Michael scored an 82 (12th percentile), which put him in a below average category. Michael struggles with storing and retrieving auditory information. Also, this score means that Michael struggles with gaining new information, storing it into memory, then using that same information. In the area of processing speed, Michael scored a 95 (37th percentile), putting him in the average level in the category. Michael is able to scan visual information and make quick and accurate decisions using this information. When combining these subtests into an average score, Michael's IQ is a 97 (42nd percentile). In reference to the population, Michael scores average on the IQ test, only struggling with skills dealing with his working memory.

In terms of Michael as a student, these scores tell us that Michael is a pretty smart student. He does not have trouble with any part of the exam besides working memory. What I found interesting is that although Michael is diagnosed with a language disorder, he performed at an average level on the verbal comprehension index. This means that when going through this part, he was able to find similarities between words, define multiple words, and comprehend and explain social situations that should be familiar to him. It seems that from this test, Michael's receptive language is where he is experiencing trouble. Also, it makes sense that Michael is

struggling with mathematics because of his score on working memory. Mathematics deals with a lot of working memory, remembering equations and remembering when and what to do with certain formulas. This is hard for Michael, especially when he is trying to follow the teacher on the board.

Points of Advocacy

Perhaps the most crucial duty of professional school counselors advocating for their students. In fact, the American School Counselor Association cites advocacy as a professional responsibility (Quigney & Studer, 2016). This is especially important when working with students with special needs, as they may be unable to advocate for themselves. In addition, the family of the student may be overwhelmed with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning process and may be unsure of how to fight for what their child needs. In the case of Michael, there are a few points of advocacy that the school counselor should suggest for the IEP renewal meeting.

The first point of advocacy involves Michael's social skills. Currently, he is having issues with peers. As mentioned previously, Michael is unable to read his peers' emotional cues, especially when they are annoyed with him. Additionally, his teachers have reported he is having trouble honoring the personal space of others. Clearly, Michael needs a little more help in this area. His parents also would like to see some social skills counseling. Michael's school counselor should advocate that social skills be implemented into his IEP through specific, measurable goals (Quigney & Studer, 2016). This way, Michael's team can work with him on these goals, and thus improve his social skills. If Michael is better able to notice his peers' emotional cues, he will be able to both make and maintain friendships. These skills will follow Michael throughout his life and could help him in areas like job interviews or romantic relationships. Therefore, advocating

that social skills counseling be added to his IEP is much more important than it may seem on the surface and is something that his school counselor needs to fight for in order for Michael to see social success in his life.

A second point of advocacy involves Michael's communication skills. He currently sees a Speech Language Pathologist for 20 minutes, once per month. However, he is still having difficulty with pragmatic language. This is adversely affecting his education, specifically in his Math class where he regularly does not ask for help. This is despite the fact that he has a visual cue card on his desk to remind him to raise his hand. The school counselor should advocate that Michael spend more time with his Speech Language Pathologist. With the SLP, Michael can work on his pragmatic language skills. Together, they can come up with a way to ask for help in Math class that is more efficient than the cue card on his desk. Ultimately, the hope is to improve Michael's ability to communicate his needs, but it could also help him improve his score in Math. The SLP could also spend some time working with Michael on figurative language. This could help Michael better connect with his peers. Certainly, there are several benefits that could come from Michael spending more time with the Speech Language Pathologist, thus it needs to be advocated for by his school counselor.

A third accommodation for Michael involves an accommodation for his Math assignments. Mrs. P., Michael's Math teacher, reports that he has not mastered deciding when and how to break a problem into simpler parts and needs assistance with finding evidence to support his solutions. In his other classes, Michael's large assignments are broken down into smaller sections and he is provided with a timeline for when the individual parts are due. This accommodation seems to be working for Michael. In his Math class, Michael could be provided with his own worksheets that break down the problems a little bit more than what his peers are

provided with. Seeing the individual parts of the problem laid out for him might help make Michael feel less overwhelmed. Additionally, the smaller pieces could make finding the supporting evidence clearer to him. Therefore, the school counselor should advocate that Michael's Math assignments be broken down into smaller pieces, just as they are in his other classes.

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School Counseling Plan

During the school day, it seems that Michael's problems arise in mainly two areas. The first area being in Math where he is struggling academically. The second area being with his peers and the social aspect of school. However, I think that because Michael is exhibiting aggression towards other students, this should be a priority over his academics.

From the report, it seems that Michael is having a tough time understanding emotional cues from other peers and respecting the space for others. When these happen, Michael tends to show aggressions towards other students. My first step in the plan would be to meet Michael. If I am going to help a child, I feel that I should bring him down to my office to create a rapport with him. Once this rapport is created, Michael and I can work as a team to correct his social problems. In creating this rapport, motivational interviewing will be used. With Motivational interviewing, I am able to create an atmosphere that can facilitate change for this student ().

Questions like: "What is going to happen if you continue to fight" and "On a scale of one to ten, how much do you want to change your behaviors?" These questions simple enough that Michael

can think and answer them effectively at his developmental level. I would bring Michael in for sessions, after the initial session, once a week to see how he is doing on a weekly basis. During these weekly meetings, I will be able to check in on his aggressions and also his accommodations in math are going. If these accommodations that were suggested are not working, then I will be able to change that accommodation immediately.

Also, I believe that using Michael's likes can be extremely helpful to lowering his aggressions down. We know that Michael enjoys transformers and video games//movies. In order to foster Michaels social skills, a group can be created either during lunch time or at recess where Michael and other students come in and talk about movies and/or video games that they play. This can be done once a week. This way, Michael is interacting with people with similar likes to his own. This could be seen as being a reinforcer for Michael as well. When Michael does have a good week with no aggressions, Michael is allowed to join the group and talk about his favorite likes. Another great part about this group is that a real bond can be created between Michael and his group members. Therefore, they can teach Michael the correct social skills and ways to conversate effectively. Since it would be around a table, personal space would be worked on as well. Teaching Michael to stay in his own seat when talking to others and not to get to close to them.

I think another idea that could help Michael is a type of behavioral contract. According to Quigney and Studer, a behavioral contract provides the student with a check in time program. On the contract, it would have the students name, behavior to watch out for, the reward they are trying to reach, signatures for the student and the supervisor, and a spot for each day of the week where the supervisor could sign. In Michaels case, the behavior he is trying to decrease is his fighting. Then, at the end of the day, Michael would check in with me to have me look over this

contract and sign upon a successful day of no fighting. If Michael got through each day of no fighting, he would be rewarded with the ability to attend his movie/video game group on Fridays. If Michael even fought for one day, he would not be able to go down and attend this group. I think this could be super helpful to Michael because not only would he be earning something that could be enjoyable to him, but he would be checking in each day. This would be a reminder to him to not engage in aggressions because he would need to check in. A sticker would be put on his desk to be a constant reminder to go at the end of the day.

Conclusion

When looking at Michael, we, as counselors, see someone who's potential to succeed in academics is great. After taking the WISC-V, Michael scored well in all but one subtest, working memory. When combining the subtests into one average score, Michael scored an IQ of 97, which was at an average level compared to the population which took the test. When Michael's IEP meeting takes place, points of advocacy were created for Michael and his family. One being about his social skills, a second being about his language skills, and the third being about his math assignment. All being brought up in the meeting in order to figure out better ways to accommodate Michael. Finally, a possible plan was created to help Michael through his days in order to work on his aggressions and social skills. Michael will meet with the counselor once a week. With this, Michael is given the opportunity to attend a group every Friday that is dedicated to discussing video games/movies with other peers. However, in order to attend these groups, Michael must abide by his behavioral contract that will be created for him. With these put in place, Michael is sure to exceed every aspect of school.

References

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