



Teaching Organizational Skills through Self-regulated Learning Strategies

Susan M. Cahill

A Case Story Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Volume 5, Issue 1, September 2008

Teaching Organizational Skills through Self-regulated Learning Strategies

Susan M. Cahill

Abstract

This article presents a case story of how an occupational therapist worked with Joe, a junior high student with Asperger's Syndrome, to develop better organizational skills. Self-regulated learning strategies were used to teach Joe how to keep track of his assignments as well as his grades. In addition, the case story provides a clear example of how these strategies could be used to teach organizational skills to other students with similar needs.

Keywords

organizational skills, self-regulated learning, Asperger's Syndrome

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Cahill, S. M. (2008). Teaching organizational skills through self-regulated learning strategies. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 5(1) Article 3. Retrieved [date] from <http://scholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol5/iss1/art3>

Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a developmental disability that is characterized by impairments in social interactions and restricted patterns of behavior and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Children with AS have typical language and cognitive abilities, however they often underachieve at school (Safran, 2002). Many students with AS are fully included in general education; however, they often struggle to complete daily assignments and participate during classroom activities. The purpose of this article is to describe self-regulated learning and how metacognitive strategies associated with self-regulated learning were used to support one student with AS.

Learning about Joe

Each August the seventh grade junior high school special education team met during orientation week to review the files of new students entering our program from elementary school. The case manager, who typically attended all of the transition meetings, provided the team with copies of the students' individualized education plans (IEPs) and a brief introduction to each of the students on their caseloads and class lists. As an itinerant occupational therapist, I came to learn about three new students, one of whom was Joe.

Joe was a thirteen year old boy with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) who was eligible for special education under Specific Learning Disability. On a weekly basis he received 250 minutes of resource for Reading and Language Arts. He received Bs in Science and Social Studies, and usually received As in Math. In addition to special education resource services, Joe received 30 minutes of social work services to help him better nego-

tiate social relationships and cope with frustration and 30 minutes of occupational therapy to help him manage transitions and develop better organization habits.

The team learned from the case manager that Joe was an architecture buff. At home Joe spent a great deal of time reading about different styles of architecture and designing plans for buildings. Joe was particularly interested in buildings inspired by ancient Greek architecture and could complete intricate drawings of buildings without looking at models. Over school breaks Joe built elaborate creations out of blocks and other supplies and sometimes brought pictures of his creations to school to share with his teachers.

Joe preferred to work independently on assignments and avoided working with other students. In sixth grade he received two detentions in one month for refusing to work with his classmates during Science and for saying that his lab partners were "numskulls." Joe disliked Physical Education be-

cause he was preoccupied with the other students bumping in to him and having to maintain close contact during certain sports activities. In elementary school Joe was allowed to have his locker at the end of a row so that he only had to worry about getting jostled from one side.

At his transition meeting, Joe's mother described him as "a creature of habit." Joe got up at the same time everyday and ate the same cereal for breakfast. Even though his elementary school did not have a dress code, he preferred to wear long sleeve, button down shirts and navy slacks to school. Joe changed into a t-shirt and pair of blue jeans as soon as he got home from school. He always played a

Monitoring both his successful and unsuccessful attempts helped Joe develop the habits he needed to reach his goal on a consistent basis.

building game on the computer for thirty minutes before eating a snack and starting his homework. On Saturdays Joe went to the community center with his grandfather to play chess and then out to lunch. Despite his age, Joe had a great deal of difficulty handling disruptions to his routine. It was not unlike Joe to cry and yell if something didn't go according to his plan. On more than one occasion Joe had gotten into trouble for arguing with his teachers because they "sprang something" on him.

The team learned from the case manager that Joe had never really gotten used to using an assignment notebook and preferred to keep track of his assignments mentally

rather than write them down. This strategy wasn't very successful and over the years Joe had become very reliant on his previous special education teacher to remind him of due dates. Rather than help Joe develop better organizational skills, his former occupational therapist recommended accommodations and asked that his teachers fax forgotten assignments to his mom at work so that he could complete the tasks and submit them on time. The seventh grade team anticipated that Joe would continue to have difficulty with keeping track of assignments and multiple deadlines in junior high school. However, they agreed that it was important for Joe to learn new habits and organizational skills as well.

Table 1: Guiding Self-observation Questions

Questions to Ask Yourself
What is the assignment or project I am working on?
What score or grade do I want to receive on the assignment or project?
What are the teacher's expectations for this assignment or project?
What steps do I need to take to receive that score or grade?
Do I need help to complete any of the steps? If so, who can help me and what do I need?
When and how will I measure progress towards my goal?
What steps will I take if it is difficult for me to reach my goal?
How will I know when I have achieved my goal?
What will I do if it is difficult for me to reach my goal?
How will I celebrate my achievement?

Joe's Occupational Therapy

Based on what the case manager had relayed to the team about Joe, I knew that I would have to help him put develop efficient organizational habits immediately. However, I

hesitated to come up with a plan without Joe's input because I had worked with other students who had been diagnosed with AS before. I knew that students with AS tended to gravitate to activities that provided them with

a sense of control and offered them consistency (Carrington & Graham, 2001). In my experience children like Joe usually rejected being told what to do and would often get into power struggles with adults if they didn't find value in their suggestions. Because of this, I knew that I needed to find a way to help Joe develop an organizational system that he could take ownership of.

I had used several different organizational strategies with other junior high students, but wasn't sure if they would work for Joe. I opted instead to teach Joe some self-regulated learning strategies. Strategies based on self-regulated learning allow students to choose their own learning goals, as well as

develop and execute action plans related to these goals (Boekaerts & Niemivirta, 2000). Self-regulated learning is a result of a student's motivation, preferred method for learning, use of time, as well as the influence of other individuals in the environment (Dembo & Eaton, 2000). Self-regulated learners employ a series of metacognitive processes, which include *self-observation*, *self-evaluation*, and *self-reaction* (Zimmerman, 1989). Each of these processes is based on a set of skills including: goal setting, positive self-talk, and self-reinforcement (Dembo & Eaton, 2000) and described in more detail below.

Figure 1: Joe's Social Studies Recording Sheet

Week of:

Subject:

Date					
Assignment					
Completed and turned in on time					
Grade					

Self-observation

Students who monitor progress towards individual goals engage in a process called *self-observation*. Self-observation involves the process by which a student monitors his progress towards goal pursuits and includes reporting or recording his progress, both of which have been found to impact personal factors such as self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 1989). In order to develop self-

observation skills, students need to be clear about performance expectations. For example, rubrics and sample projects provide concrete examples to students with AS. Once students are clear about the teacher's expectations, they can identify their own learning goals. For example, a student with AS might identify receiving a high grade on an assignment as a learning goal. Next, the student would explicitly define the necessary steps

that lead to goal attainment. Some students will not be able to identify the appropriate steps leading to goal attainment and will therefore require support from their teachers to do so. Table 1 provides a list of questions that students can ask themselves to identify steps leading to goal attainment.

Self-evaluation

The next metacognitive process involved in self-regulated learning is *self-evaluation*. Self-evaluation requires students to assess their growth and determine whether they are progressing, staying the same, or moving further away from their goals. Self-evaluation requires insight on the part of the student. Teachers can help students develop insight by providing honest and constructive feedback. For example, rather than simply offering praise, a teacher should discuss both the strengths and weaknesses of a project or assignment with students with AS. In addition, teachers can create opportunities for students to practice self-evaluation on a daily basis. For instance, after giving a pre-test on spelling words, a teacher could provide students with an opportunity to check their own work. The teacher could also support students in evaluating their performance by providing them with a predetermined key or legend. By using such a tool, students could assess their own progress and begin to think about how they can alter their behavior to meet their goals.

Self-evaluation requires students to assess their growth and determine whether they are progressing, staying the same, or moving further away from their goals.

Self-reaction

After students evaluate their progress towards goal completion, they engage in a process called *self-reaction*. Self-reaction allows students to problem solve and brainstorm potential strategies to meet their goals or further enhance goal achievement. Individuals who use self-reaction strategies aim to “optimize their specific learning responses...enhance their personal processes during learning...or seek to improve the learning environment” (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 334). Teachers can support the development of self-reaction skills by guiding students to generate steps to improve learning or alter habits for increased success.

Joe Leans Self-regulated Learning Strategies

I met Joe the first week of school. After discussing his summer vacation, I began to ask him about what he liked and didn't like about school in sixth grade and what he expected school to be like in seventh grade. Joe was able to identify some major differences between sixth and seventh grade including having to change classes every period, using a desk instead of a locker to organize books, and having a study hall period. Joe also talked about how his role of student might be different; he explained that as a seventh grader he would probably have to do more homework and study more. When I asked Joe about how he planned to organize his assignments and belongings, he shrugged and told me that his new resource teacher would probably just take care of it for him.

I explained to Joe that part of my job was to help him develop new habits or performance patterns that would allow him to

better manage his responsibilities at school, like remembering to complete and turn in assignments on his own. Not having to rely on

adults, or in Joe’s words “not being told what to do”, was very appealing to him and Joe was eager to get started.

Figure 2: A Completed Example of Joe’s Revised Recording Sheet

Week of: **September 18**

Subject: **Social Studies**

Date	9 - 18	9 - 19	9 - 20	9 - 21	9 - 22
Assignment	Questions 1-10 in Ch 1	Worksheet	Questions 11-20 in Ch 1	Worksheet	No home-work
Completed and turned in on time	X	X		X	_____
Grade	95%	100%	Incomplete	90%	_____

1. Did I meet my goal? **No**
2. Why or why not? **I didn’t turn in homework that was assigned on 9-20 because I watched the game on television instead.**
3. How did I do this week? **Not bad**
4. What will I do to meet my goal next week? **Continue to use my chart. Get my homework done before watching the game or ask Dad to tape it for me.**

“How Did I Do?” Key

- I didn’t miss any days=**Awesome**
- I missed only 1 day=**Not bad**. Make the assignment up over the weekend and turn in for partial credit
- I missed 2 days=**Danger**. Talk to Ms. Jensen and make up both assignments over the weekend.
- I missed 3 days or more=**Get help quick!** Schedule time with OT as soon as possible. Something isn’t working.

The first strategy Joe and I worked on was *self-observation*. Joe explained that he wanted to turn in all of his assignments on time and get at least a B on each assignment. We discussed several different ways that Joe could monitor his progress and I showed Joe samples of several different recording sheets. After seeing several different models, Joe decided that he would like to tally the number of

times he turned his homework in and also record the grades he received on assignments. Joe indicated that he wanted to use a word processing program to develop the recording sheet and asked me for suggestions on how to organize the information he wanted to collect. Joe indicated that he wanted to use a separate recording sheet for each one of his classes. Rather than suggest he use one sheet to or-

ganize all of his assignments, I presented him with several scenarios so that he could think through the pros and cons of using different sheets. Ultimately Joe continued to use separate recording sheets, even though I thought that using one sheet would be more efficient and easier to manage. Figure 1 illustrates Joe's Social Studies Recording Sheet

After Joe became proficient at keeping track of his assignments, whether or not he turned them in on time and the grades he received, we explored another self-regulated learning strategy called *self-evaluation*. Initially Joe told me that his goal was to turn in all of his homework assignments for every class and to achieve a 100% on each assignment. Even though Joe was a good student, I thought that this goal might be too difficult for him to achieve consistently and I worried that if he didn't meet his goal he might become discouraged. Rather than selecting a more appropriate goal for Joe, I encouraged him to think about times that it might be difficult for him to achieve his goal and also offered additional scenarios for him to think through (e.g. he might get a lower grade when he tried his best, but was still having difficulty understanding a lesson). After discussing these scenarios Joe revised his goal to turning in his homework every day and receiving a grade of 80% or better.

Next I asked Joe to think about how often he wanted to review his progress. At first Joe said that he wanted to review his progress every day; however, he quickly changed his mind because he decided this method would take up too much time. After brainstorming several options together, Joe eventually settled on reviewing the previous week's progress on Monday mornings.

Joe and I then discussed another self-regulated learning strategy called

self-reaction. Joe developed definitions for different words or phrases that were meaningful for him that also described how successful he was at achieving his goal. Joe concluded that it would be best to add some guiding questions and a key to the recording sheets he was already using (see Figure 2 for a completed example of Joe's revised recording sheet). Joe's use of self-administered praise served to optimize or maintain his learning responses or proactive behavior. Monitoring both his successful and unsuccessful attempts helped Joe develop the habits he needed to reach his goal on a consistent basis without making him overly reliant on the adults in his environment.

Each of the self-regulated strategies helped Joe in different ways. In occupational therapy Joe learned how to monitor his own progress, evaluate the efforts he was making towards his goals, and reinforce himself. While each of these strategies was successful, the combination of all of the strategies proved to be the most effective for Joe. After he learned how to use self-regulated learning strategies, Joe continued to use his recording sheets for the rest of the year and told me that he started making up recording sheets for some activities that he was involved in outside of school. For example, Joe shared that his allowance was based on the number of chores he completed in a week. Joe initiated the development of a recording sheet to track how many times he made his bed, took out the garbage, and put away the dishes. Joe also began tracking the number of chess matches he won each month at the community recreation center.

Conclusion

Self-regulated learning strategies helped Joe to become more organized by giving him the tools he needed to make choices

and discover which options worked best for him. In addition, Joe learned to take responsibility for his own actions and didn't have to rely on his teachers and other adults to remind him to complete his assignments. Joe incorporated the strategies he learned in occupational therapy into other areas of his life.

Teachers can easily incorporate *self-observation*, *self-evaluation*, and *self-reaction* strategies into routine instruction. The consistency provided by self-regulated learning strategies compliments the learning styles of many students with AS and may help them to participate more actively at school.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). Pervasive developmental disorders. In Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (4th edition-text revision) (DSM-IV-TR). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 69-70.
- Boekaerts, M. & Niemivirta, M. (2000). Self-regulated learning: Finding balance between learning goals and ego-protective goals. In M. Boekaerts, P. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of Self-regulation* (417-446). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Carrington, S., & Graham, L. (2001). Perceptions of school by two teenage boys with Asperger syndrome and their mothers: A qualitative study. *Autism*, 5 (1), 37-48.
- Dembo, M. & Eaton, M. (2000). Self-regulation in academic learning in middle-level schools. *Elementary School Journal*, 100 (5), 473-490.
- Safran, J. (2002). Supporting students with Asperger's syndrome in general education. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34 (5), 60-66.
- Zimmerman, B. (1989). A social cognitive view of self-regulated academic learning. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81 (3), 329-339.

About the author:

Susan M. Cahill, MAEA, OTR/L is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy and a PhD student in the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago.