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FEATURE

**A Case Study Examination of Emotional
Competence in a Tween Male**

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Abstract. *A case study design was used to investigate the emotional competence of a Caucasian tween boy from an upper middle class family. Three themes emerged from the data, which were collected via observations, interviews, and two self-surveys; built in friendship, yes man, invisible leader. The findings from the data parallel the literature that reveals that children who consider themselves shy or socially withdrawn tend to find comfort in friendships that come with team sports, do not speak up despite the situation for which they find themselves, and whose leadership skills differ significantly from children that are outgoing or outspoken. These findings help inform how teachers approach and work with shy children in schools. Additionally, parents of shy children should be concerned with the emotional competence of their children and work with them to develop strategies to be successful in their tween years and beyond including nurturing leadership qualities.*

Keywords: Emotional competence, shyness, adolescence, tween, United States, education, psychology, case study design, teachers

Introduction

Shy children are often described as unengaged, socially awkward, and not tuned in. Shyness can be defined as one's feelings of apprehension in new situations (Coplan & Armer, 2005). More importantly, adults often describe the same children as socially withdrawn and reluctant. Children who display shy characteristics and traits may be more likely to experience depression and anxiety (Rubin, Burgess, & Coplan, 2002). Shy children are "fearful, anxious, wary, and reluctant to take part in interactions with others in situations that involve

uncertainty, novelty, and actual or perceived judgment by others” (O’Conner, Cappella, McCormick & McClowry, 2014, p. 239). In general, children’s view of themselves is reinforced by a myriad of environmental factors such as school, family, media, and social circles (Bosack, 2012). The self-stories that shy children tell themselves can have social, emotional, and cognitive implications. So debilitating is shyness that many children struggle academically and are viewed by teachers as less intelligent as their non-shy peers. Furthermore, shyness is consistently related to early academic problems, a metacognitive implication, with negative trajectories worsening in upper elementary and middle grades (Evans, 2010; Heckman, 2006).

Emotional understanding and emotional competence is of particular concern as shy children become preteens and eventually enter adolescence. Emotional competence is one’s ability to recognize and express emotions appropriately (Denham & Brown, 2010). Furthermore, individuals with positive emotional competence have the ability to monitor and adjust their emotions appropriately. This case study examines the journey and self-story of one 10-year-old boy. The emotional competence of the case was examined through interviews, self-report, and, non-participatory observations.

Review of the Literature

Shy Children and Academic Obstacles

Bruner’s emotional and social aspects of learning describe how shy children interact with the world in which they live. Children described as shy are often reluctant to engage in interpersonal interactions both in and out of the classroom, which can be detrimental to their academic success (Bosacki, 2012). Moreover, shy children tend to speak less in a group dynamic, such as the classroom, and may seem less tuned in, engaged, or intelligent. Evans (2010) found that shy temperament in children is consistently linked to early academic problems. Shy children are often reluctant to neither participate in class discussions nor offer answers to teachers’ questions, which may very well portray these children as less intelligent. Additionally, these children are nonassertive with their peers and authoritative figures, such as teachers (Rudasill & Konold, 2008), making school difficult to withstand both academically and socially. Temperamentally shy children, in particular, have less behavioral engagement, which refers to effort, determination, and attentiveness to classroom assignments or instructions (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). This lack of behavioral engagement can impact both social and academic success negatively. The less a child engages with classmates and classroom teachers, the less likely they will be able to find success in those areas. Children who were considered quiet in the class or have a longer latency period to speak may lead teachers to believe they are less engaged, when in fact, it may take these children longer to process and plan the interaction or

attempt to volunteer. Learning is a social act, and shy or withdrawn children may find this dynamic a difficult one to deal with in a school setting.

The inability to interact in the most frequent setting for children, such as school, can be debilitating and have long term effects. Academically, elementary school children who display shy characteristics may perform equivalent to their peers in the early elementary years, yet as children age, academic performance of shy children may decrease (Asendorpf & van Aken, 1999). That is, as shy children age their academic performance decreases showing signs of learning difficulties. Spere and Evans (2009) found that shy children between the ages of 5 to 7 scored lower on pre-reading skills assessments, a necessary component of successful future reading. This handicap in emergent literacy skills could have long-term consequences. Pre-reading skills such as rhyming, phonemic awareness, and letter-sound correspondence are prerequisite skills necessary for later reading success. Without the foundational reading skills, children will have difficulties when transitioning from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. Consequently, a correlation between shyness and lower-level reading scores in late elementary years solidifies the urgency of this issue (Rapport, Denney, Chung, & Hustance, 2001).

Literacy skills are not the only academic obstacles shy children face. Many shy children have also displayed poor math ability and achievement. Dobbs, Doctoroff, Fisher, and Arnold (2006) posit that shy children scored significantly below their more outgoing peers in mathematics. When paired with a reading deficiency, the inability to perform on grade level in mathematics can have devastating academic consequences.

Teachers may be a piece of the shyness puzzle. Teachers may actually perpetuate the shyness issue for children. O' Conner et al., (2014) report that teachers' perceptions of shy students may add fuel to the fire. Less engaged or less active learners tend to be viewed as less intelligent by teachers. This may lead to an unfair judgment on children. By increasing behavioral engagement in classrooms, teachers can increase and improve academic outcomes. By design, classrooms are comprised of communities of learners, where children are expected to interact and engage on multiple levels. Shy children are less likely to be engaged, a behavioral and academic implication of low emotional competence.

Social and Emotional Obstacles: Implications

Research indicates that shyness in children may be a risk for later emotional problems, specifically in children's social and emotional adaptations (Coplan & Armer, 2005). Harter (1990) believes that the view we have of ourselves is a social construct based on the relationships we have with those around us. Parents, teachers, siblings, and peers help children define who they are, how they situate themselves in the world, and how they interpret themselves in relation to others.

More importantly, emotional understanding, the ability to discern emotional states and articulate those feelings, can lead to low emotional competence for shy children. Shy children, in particular, may have greater difficulty with emotional expressiveness, regulation, and understanding (Denham, 1998). In theory, shy children may navigate their social arena as their peers, yet they may lack the competence to deal with those social situations. It is within those social arenas that interactions can make a socially withdrawn child feel inferior and ill-equipped. The problem may lie in shy children's inability to reflect on their own thinking about their self-image. This lack of introspective behavior may actually be detrimental to children and young adults.

Coplan and Armer (2005) found that shy boys may be more at risk for socioemotional problems than their female counterparts. Moreover, shy boys may be more likely to be apprehensive in social situations, anxious about those social situations and feel inadequate in comparison to their peers (Rubin et al., 2002). Therefore, children identified with temperamental shyness in early childhood are at later risk for exhibiting social anxiety in adolescence. More specifically, males may have more psychological issues due to the stigmas attached to the role of males and expected behaviors in society.

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this case study was to examine the level of shyness of a 10-year-old male and his interpretation of his shyness through his self-stories. In this study, the following research questions were answered:

1. How does the participant perceive his own shyness and the effect it has on social and academic achievement?
2. What themes are apparent in the behavior of a shy preteen/tween boy?

Research Design

A case study methodology was chosen as the design for this study because it involves the investigation of an individual case within a real life context or setting (Yin, 2009). Creswell (2009) defines case study as a methodology bounded by time where the researcher explores multiple sources of information. In this case, the participant is a 10-year-old Caucasian male in 4th grade from an upper-middle class family. The participant is actively engaged in multiple sports teams associated with his school district and has a "circle" of friends in and out of school all of whom are either classmates or teammates.

Participant

The participant for this case study was a 10-year-old Caucasian male from a midsize suburban school district in Western Pennsylvania in the United States. His teacher describes him as a quiet, smart, well-adjusted boy in 4th grade. He earns above average grades in all academic areas, and excels in physical fitness. He is involved in a number of sports teams and responsible at home and school. He has a younger sibling that attends the school as well, and he considers himself well-liked at school. Many adults would describe him as shy but not withdrawn. He engages more with his peers than adults.

Data Collection

To measure self-report of shyness, the participant completed, with assistance, McCroskey's *Shyness Scale* (1970) and the Liebowitz *Social Anxiety Scale for Children and Adolescents* (LSAS-CA). Additionally, the child was observed in academic and social settings with peer group(s), adults, and strangers. Finally, the child was interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researcher. Member checking was utilized for the purpose of trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

The participant scored a 34 on the McCroskey *Shyness Scale* which indicates a moderate level of shyness and a 33 on the Liebowitz *Social Anxiety Scale for Children and Adolescents* on a scale of 60. Additional data were collected via a semi-structured interview and multiple observations. A 1-hour interview was conducted and 10 hours of observation took place in both school and social settings. Table 1 shows a sample correlation among the highest rated areas of anxiety with the observation and interview data.

Based on the data collected that was triangulated from three different sources (two self-report scales, observations, and a semi-structured interview), three themes emerge from the data. The themes included; *built in friendship*, *yes man*, *invisible leader*.

The first theme, *built in friendship*, emerged primarily from observations and the interview. It is apparent that this case is most comfortable with friends that come as a package. That is, friends that are part of a team sport are his closest friends and seem to share the same interests. If a new child joins the team, which is a built in relationship, the participant has an automatic friend. All of the participant's friends seem to fit into that category. The social aspects of shyness seem to be highlighted in this arena. Shyness can be difficult to understand due to the nature of the complexity of the concept. Shyness is a mixture of emotions that is every changing and quite complicated (Brophy, 1997).

Table 1
Correlations among Anxiety Scale, Interview, and Observations

Task	Anxiety Scale	Interview	Observations
Talking to a grownup/ Asking a grownup for something	3	“I hate asking for something from a grownup if I don’t know them, especially if it is a favor. Unless it is my teacher, she isn’t a stranger grownup. I know her.”	-asked mom or friend to accompany -refused to talk to the adult -become physically uncomfortable, -verbally upset
Standing in front of class (i.e. going to the blackboard)	3	“Everyone is watching me and that makes me nervous.”	-walked to front of room but physically withdrawn looking at the ground
Using a public restroom	3	“I can pee in a public restroom but I would never go number two at school.”	n/a
Answering questions in class	3	“It’s okay sometimes if I know the answers, but if I don’t know what to say, I hate it. It can really be embarrassing and I feel shy.”	-only answers when called on by teacher -does not volunteer to answer questions

(Table continues)

Table 1 (Cont.)

Correlations among Anxiety Scale, Interview, and Observations

Task	Anxiety Scale	Interview	Observations
Meeting new people or strangers	2	“I don’t mind meeting new kids if they are on my baseball or basketball team. It took me a long time to join a new travel baseball team because I was afraid I wouldn’t know anyone. It only took a little time and we all became friends.”	-awkward with an introduction to a new student -quiet and reserved -stands next to the new teammate but will not engage in conversation -caught baseball with the boy with little verbal interaction except laughing when they missed the throw
Saying no to people when they ask me to do something	2	“I always want to say yes, but sometimes I’m tired or I have other things to do and don’t want to go with them, but I say yes usually.”	-said yes when asked to go to the playground -said yes when asked to catch baseball -did not observe any “no” statements by participant
Asking questions in class	2	“If I am really confused, I think I better ask now or I won’t know when I get home. It is embarrassing though if everyone else knows and I don’t.”	-did not ask for help or clarification in either an academic or non-academic setting

(Table continues)

Table 1 (Cont.)

Correlations among Anxiety Scale, Interview, and Observations

Task	Anxiety Scale	Interview	Observations
Talking to kids I don't know well	2	"Depends on the kids or how I think I know them. Usually I meet new kids in sports or in class and we become friends fast."	-one teammate that was new to the team engaged in catching -no verbal engagement
Presenting or answering questions in class	2	"Sometimes you just have to because your teacher tells you to do it. You can't say no so you just hope for the best."	-answered when called upon
Eating in front of other people	2	"It's sometimes embarrassing to eat in front of people. I have no idea why, it just is. Maybe people are starring at you or laughing at you...I don't know. I don't like it."	n/a
Talking to people on the telephone	2	"I will talk to my parents but that's about it."	n/a

Notes. This table is a sample of data extracted from data points.

When a child feels fear, tension, or apprehension they may have difficulty making new friends. Having the ability to make friends in a non-threatening manner is helpful for children who are shy or struggle with emotional competence. Moreover, "strengthening young children's capacity to manage their emotions and behavior, and to make meaningful friendships, particularly if they are exposed to multiple life-stressors, may serve an important protective function for school success" (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004, p. 97). Research has indicated that the adjustment of children emotionally, socially, and behaviorally is

an important component of school readiness and success (Raver & Zigler, 1997). In order for shy children to be successful in school, they must feel a sense of accomplishment in social adaptability and belongingness. While some parents and teachers may be concerned with children only having built in friendships, it is these vital relationships that define who they are as they enter adolescence. Without these opportunities to belong to a social network, tweens would feel lost and may be at higher risk for anxiety-based disorders.

The second theme that emerged from the data was *yes man*. The participant primarily felt most comfortable doing as the mainstream. He liked to follow rules and enjoyed structure, specifically in the school setting, and he was displeased with those who did not follow the rules. The participant actually explained that he once took the blame for an incident on the school bus, but the administration had the wrong student. He would not correct the adults, as it would go against what he believed to be proper etiquette. Lack of social skills, confidence or even self-worth may interfere with the participant's ability to "speak up" when he was accused of an act for which he was not guilty. The consequences of being a *yes man* could have detrimental effects. As children age, they must have the confidence and self-worth to stand up for what they believe or what is right making peer pressure unbearable. Moreover, strengthening children's abilities to manage and regulate both behavior and feelings would help children transition from childhood to adolescence seamlessly (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). With that said, deliberate and explicit teaching of social skills is necessary for young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Moreover, helping children deal with emotions may also be important. Providing children with an arsenal of strategies to deal with peer pressure could alleviate the burden of pressure.

The third theme that emerged, *invisible leader*, stemmed from the observations and semi-structured interview. The participant conveyed numerous times that he does not like to be the center of attention and would much rather sit back and blend into the crowd as if invisible. The only exception to this is sports. The participant stated, "I love to be the best on the baseball field or making a three pointer on the basketball court, but anywhere else I don't want people staring at me." This was evident during the observations as well. While engaged in a small group classroom activity, the participant was more likely to sit quietly and participate when asked a question directly. Likewise, the participant sat quietly at lunch and talked when someone talked to him first. On the contrary, he was a leader on the baseball field rallying the team to "talk it up" on the field and even gave a pep talk to a fellow teammate. His coach stated, "I can't do it without him. The kids look up to him because he is the best on the field and never has to tell anyone he is the best. His performance always speaks for itself and the other kids know it." Introversions may help or hurt, the truth lies in the interpretation.

Introverted behavior is actually what some would consider a positive quality in leaders. Introverted leaders are more likely to listen to subordinates, process input and output, think before acting, and implement the ideas of others. It is this idea of quiet leadership that many organizations find an asset as children age. Zimbardo (1977) found that over 40% of respondents described themselves as shy. The concept of shyness in our children may not hold a negative connotation in the years to come. Furthermore, not all cultures consider shyness as a negative character trait. For example, Berry, Carbaugh, and Nurmikari-Berry (2004) found that Finnish scholars consider shyness a positive trait as compared their American counterparts. This means that the concept of shyness may be a cultural norm and children who consider themselves shy may show the tenacity and interdisciplinary to overcome such personality traits.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the data, it could be interpreted that children entering their tween years view themselves inwardly in a hypercritical manner. The participant has spent much time analyzing his shyness and how others perceive him in that regard. From that inward analysis, he is very articulate about what he would consider negative personality traits. He is most comfortable talking with peers that are either classmates and/or teammates, and those built in friendships are simply easier because of common interests. On one hand, these behaviors evidenced through this case study could be “predicative of social anxiety disorder and may benefit from intervention; on the other hand, there are claims that normal behaviors are being pathologised” (Crozier, 2014, p. 156). Crozier (2014) found that these behaviors suggest a risk for social anxiety, but “the large majority of shy children do not go on to meet diagnostic criteria for social anxiety disorder, nor have adults who meet these criteria necessarily been shy as children” (p. 156). It is this information that is important for both shy children and parents of those children to understand. Opening the lines of communications about the areas of social interaction for which tweens are struggling should be of utmost importance. Talking to preteens about the issues and finding ways to role-play and work through the anxiety is of importance for teachers and parents of these tweens. Helping tweens work through situations that allow them to practice strategies and role-play to overcome their shyness will help to alleviate some of the anxiety associated with, for example, speaking with a stranger, approaching an adult, or talking in front of a group of peers. Providing tweens with structured peer groups in the school setting will allow the shy preteen to have the comfort of “school” with the support of an adult to help scaffold the conversations with other children.

Furthermore, addressing shyness as a positive trait can help tweens see themselves as “normal.” Shyness is not always a negative concept. “We have to remind ourselves that it can be a positive quality, that it is related to what are widely regarded as desirable traits: modesty, reserve, diffidence, gentleness and consideration for the feelings of others. Shyness can serve useful social functions, for example as a self-protective strategy when we are faced with a challenging social situation” (Crozier, 2014, p.157). Self-worth did not seem to be an issue with this particular case, but it is a concern for adults that work with tweens. School based programs are available for schools that may want to help support children in their schools with social confidence and interaction. At the heart of these findings is the ability of tweens to be self-reflective and able to inwardly analyze their strengths and weaknesses. All stakeholders in the lives of tweens should work toward the common goal of supporting adolescents as they learn to grow and mature in their own way and at their own pace—navigating the world around them.

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