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Educating Students With Disabilities*

editor's introduction:

Special Education Programs. U.S. school systems also are diverse in that they consist of a large number of special education programs. These programs serve students with disabilities and who cannot be served well by the “regular” curriculum. Sometimes, the programs are offered as an adjunct to the regular curriculum and in the same school building. Other times, they are administered by a totally different school, with its own administration and staff. The present case study is an example of the latter situation. The case study, again represented by an entire book, analyzes the teaching strategies of a single teacher (“Anne,” a pseudonym) in a school for students with disabilities (“Brighton,” also a pseudonym). The particular selection draws from two parts of the book.

The first part summarizes five specific features in the teacher’s strategies. She focuses on students’ strengths (not just their disabilities); the whole child (not just their academic performance); ways of making learning fun, to increase students’ self-esteem; setting high expectations for her own performance; and maintaining a capacity to love her work in the face of constant challenges. The summary gives you an idea of what it might be like to teach special education students.

The second part gives the author’s rationale for selecting this specific teacher and her class. The portion also goes into some detail regarding the author’s data collection methods, which included the use of videotapes, direct observations, taped conversations with the teacher while watching the videotapes, interviews, and documentary evidence.

*Cambone, Joseph. (1994). *Teaching Troubled Children: A Case Study in Effective Classroom Practice* (pp. 37–43 and 191–196). New York: Teachers College Press.

Relevance of Case Studies: Building Case Studies From Career Experiences. Case studies can be written by people who have been involved in the case being studied, not just people who might be “external” to it (see also Selection 19 in this anthology, on “School Board Leadership”). Your own professional career may offer some life experience that appears worthy of being a subject of your own case study.

Under such circumstances, you should want to show how your case study nevertheless represents a fair and accurate rendition of the actual experience. The present selection, with its extensive use of various types of externally collected video as well as oral data, along with an explicit concern for minimizing any biases, gives you an example of how you might provide such a rendition.



An Explicit Mind Set

Anne engages with her work using a particular mind set. . . . Five recurring thoughts, or clusters of thought, orient and equilibrate her in the sometimes overwhelming flux of information that rushes toward her during any given classroom episode and amasses as the day progresses.

To begin, Anne focuses her energy and effort on the students’ strengths. One cannot underestimate this ability, particularly when one considers how strongly the children present their aberrant behaviors. More important, though, one cannot overlook how this ability runs counter to common behaviorist practices in special education, where practitioners are exhorted to locate and remediate student behavioral and learning deficits, but where little encouragement is given to locate and exploit student strengths. . . . For instance, at one point in this study, when she was at the nadir of hope about finding a way to keep her class safe, and particularly Jason’s ability to reduce his violent and sexualized behavior, she noticed him actively participating in a lesson. She immediately commented on his strengths. “I was just thinking,” she said, “about how cute and polite and intelligent Jason is being in contrast to what I just said about feeling hopeless about him . . . he’s starting to show some of his strengths again.” And then, with a laugh and a sly glance toward me as if to reveal a secret, she said, “Maybe we can fix him after all!” Because she sees her students’ strengths, she is always willing to re-engage, to push them to use those strengths, even at the risk of creating more short-term problems. She sees the boys as more than their problematic behaviors, and that vision propels her back into the work.

There are times when other workers at Brighton, usually therapists and child-care workers, think she pushes the boys in her class too hard to engage

in school work. For instance, she related that during the first year of the study Paul's residence workers and therapists were concerned that her expectations were too high for him. No, she insisted, Paul has strengths that he needs to exercise if he is to begin to believe in himself: "I think that Paul is capable of a higher level of functioning than what they're expecting from him in the residence. And I'm pushing him harder, and he's having more behavioral problems, but in the long run, it's gonna be better for him 'cause he's going to learn that he can meet those expectations." There is a reason, a driving force to this decision to push them harder.

In terms of high standards and pushing the kids . . . maybe [I'm] causing more behavioral problems cause I'm gonna push them to do things. It wouldn't be worth doing that if they were always going to be at a place like Brighton for their whole lives. Like *who cares*, you know, how much socially appropriate behavior they learn, and if they learn how to read and do math and those kinds of things. I think that there is always in the back of my head the thought and the hope that at some point down the road they're gonna go to some more normal setting. Whether they're gonna be adopted and stop living at Brighton, or they go back to a public school at some point. Or that they stay at a place like Brighton and are more successful there. You know or whatever. That there is a goal that each one of these kids is capable of more, [of] higher functioning.

Anne is of the mind that her students are more than their past, or their circumstances, predict. There is hope for students because they have strengths, and that's a good enough reason for her to do the necessary work.

The second component of Anne's mind set is her focus on teaching the whole child. She chose her career because within that discipline she could address more than just academics in her teaching.

In choosing to work with these kinds of kids, clearly I'm not just interested in academic teaching. I'm interested in the social [and] emotional growth of kids. So I expect that some proportion of my time is gonna be spent dealing with social, emotional, [and] behavioral issues with kids and not just with teaching [academics].

Even though she believes that intellectual stimulation is crucial for troubled children, Anne makes choices in her classroom that reach beyond academic considerations. She puts substantial effort into planning "neat curriculum" ideas, but "the neat curriculum isn't as important to me as how the kids are doing altogether." Thus, for instance, when Brian had just heard that his social worker was coming for a visit to tell him some news about his mother, whom he had not seen in some time, he became increasingly

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impulsive and bizarre in his behavior. Anne went out of her way to keep him in class. She didn't want to "boot him off" to someone else so she could return to the academic task at hand. Seeing that the remainder of the group was in relatively good control, she kept him with her in an effort to both support and prepare him for the difficult meeting ahead, and she saw that emotional support and preparation as part of the job she loves to do.

While Anne is interested in the whole child, at the same time she is interested in academic production. She wants the children to have the experience of finishing their work, writing stories, doing science projects, and the like. She knows that the experience will enhance their sense of intelligence and power. She is oriented toward students producing products—she worries that she is too much so. Yet, it is her product orientation that provides the necessary balance to her process-oriented view of the whole child.

You know, all my preschool education training says don't be product oriented, the experience is what is important . . . [and] the last thing I want to be is the traditional old-fashioned first-grade teacher. . . . That's not what I want. But at the same time, I . . . want them to have products. I know they would like the products and feel proud.

Without her product orientation, she knows she runs the risk of making excuses for the children to not finish their work, to not do normalizing activities. She has seen other teachers at other schools and institutions who, in their compassion for troubled children, mistakenly expect less from them. It is Anne's opinion that such lowered expectations foster the helplessness troubled children feel. On the other hand, she knows that being too product oriented might result in her being brittle, unable to understand why her "neat curriculum" needs to be pre-empted by the emotional baggage the children bring to school. She has seen teachers whose tolerance for anything but academic schoolwork is exceedingly low. Anne knows that it is in those classrooms that her students would inevitably fail.

One important benefit derived from her willingness to deal with the whole child, troubles and all, is that it predisposes her to accept and work with a wider field of explanations for their behavior. Hence, nothing really ever comes "out of the blue" for Anne. She is never thrown off her stride for long with the children if, for example, they present antisocial behaviors when they ought to be doing mathematics. Each is her concern, math as well as pro-social learning, and she is able to move fluidly from one to the other and back again. One would never hear Anne claim that it is not her job to deal with the troubles children bring from home, for instance. As far as she is concerned, that is her job exactly.

It is not uncommon today to hear many elementary teachers say that they are trying to teach the whole child. Anne is an elementary teacher who has made that phrase operational; it means very specific things that she can delineate in her mind and point to in her practice. Teaching the whole child requires a detailed understanding and tolerance for the behavioral, social-emotional, and academic aspects of student learning—and considerable skill at balancing the three.

The third component is closely related to the previous two: The best therapy for any of the children is to learn skills and competencies. A student's self-esteem can be founded only on an accurate self-assessment of his abilities. To help students reach that point, Anne insists that she must focus the largest share of her attention on her student's health and not on their pathology—and that she must find ways to make learning fun. This requires that she discover at what developmental level each boy functions in social, academic, and emotional domains. That knowledge helps her plan for each, as well as for the group as a whole; it gives her the ability to check when she has gone astray or expected too much or too little from an individual boy. . . .

A companion to her expectations of students, and the fourth component of her mind set, is her very high expectations for herself. She strives to be "perfect" as a teacher, is unflappable in the face of chaos and violence. She possesses knowledge of herself that allows her to be highly self-critical without being self-deprecating, and to laugh at herself and her faults without caving in under the weight of her controlling tendencies. Anne is emphatic that, although this group of boys is the hardest she has taught to date, she can and will make a difference, but only through considerable effort on her part.

I guess I have incredibly high expectations for myself as well as for what is going to happen with the group. And so it's . . . not good enough for me to say that this is a hard group and that everyone says it's a hard group and it's just going to take some time. That helps because I know it's true. But at the same time I feel like there have got to be things I can be actively doing better to make it better. It's still gonna be a hard group; they're still gonna be crazy kids; it's still going to take a long time. But there have gotta be things I can be actively doing better to make it better.

To actively make things better means that she is continually critical of her lessons, of her approach, of her language. She picks lessons apart both when they are successful and when they fail, paying particular attention to the impact of her own actions and her own expectations on the lesson. If a lesson fails, or a period is disrupted, Anne rarely places responsibility anywhere but on herself: "I was some of the problem . . . my expectations were

wrong,” she told me after an early, disastrous lesson intended to teach about things being the same and different, using four different types of apples and the five senses as tools. She had done the lesson with students in former years and previous classes and it had always been a resounding success. But with this class, she concluded, she had misread their abilities, planned a lesson that was too advanced, “was a little stupid in saying, ‘Well, this is a great lesson that I’d done before and I don’t really need to think about it very much.’” She laughed at herself, as she often does when she is struck by the irony of being perfectionistic yet imperfect.

Anne believes that her work and her effort are important catalysts for growth. She smiles when she says, “I don’t think I can ‘fix’ them.” But her expression becomes earnest when she says, “I think I can be part of making them healthier people . . . I’d like to think that all the time and effort and energy that’s going into everything that I’m doing and that others are doing with [them] is going to mean that 10 years from now [they] can lead some sort of productive, normal life.” She believes that success or failure in helping the children is directly connected to her efforts. This aspect of her thinking is important if we are to understand what and how she teaches. Her propensity for taking responsibility for what happens in her classroom is remarkable; she is not the kind of teacher who blames television for her students’ lack of attention, for instance, or parents for students’ lack of school readiness. Her nature is not self-deprecating; rather, she is like a strategist who replays every move she’s made, searching for the false ones. Her attributions of success or failure are, in large measure, what propel her to use her considerable natural intelligence in increasingly flexible ways as she tries to cope with the whole child as he presents himself. . . .

Finally, Anne loves her work and she is satisfied with it, even though it is difficult, even discouraging. In the times when her energy is low and she feels defeated, she consciously reminds herself of that fact.

I remind myself of the times when I feel hopeful or of the good things that can happen, and of my real belief that things will get better . . . I say to people “Well, it’s a good thing that I love this kind of work, because it would be easier to forget this week!!”

This capacity to love her work in the face of intense and persistent challenges binds her core values together and helps to shape her sense of vocation as a teacher. Throughout her working life with children, it is this set of attitudes and values to which she returns when she needs to re-calibrate her plans, her decisions, and her emotional responses. These values run deep, back through her life to her youth, her family, and the beliefs they first

instilled in her. Anne knows herself well; her history, her present work, and her direction in life seem to her to be unified. To watch Anne teach is to witness a teacher who is confident, insightful, decisive, and, more often than not, effective. . . .

Methodology

Anne's is the youngest of six classes with the smallest number of students at Brighton. I selected Brighton and Anne's class for a number of reasons. First, for 14 years I had taught youngsters of junior high and high school age who were in some sort of separate setting as a result of behavioral or emotional difficulties, and I had, and continue to have, a strong interest in learning how troubled students can be successfully schooled. For the last 6 of those years, I worked at Brighton School. During the first 3, I was the teacher in the oldest classroom, teaching 12- and 13-year-old boys. For the next 3 years, I was a program director with primary responsibility for the older 3 of the 6 classes. Additionally, I was the coordinator of special education services and acted as liaison with the public schools. I have not worked at the school since 1988, except to consult with my successor during the first 2 years of transition. Thus, I had the benefit of knowing the institution—what it is like to teach at the school, to design and implement curricula, to be part of a treatment team, and to handle children's crises. I also had the benefit of knowing the institution from a management perspective, and have an understanding of the school's internal workings and its position in the larger community. As a researcher, I was able to be a fully acclimated participant-observer at Brighton.

My second reason for choosing Anne's class was that, for all my experience within the institution, I had had limited contact with her personally, except around certain administrative business, namely, the IEP conferences that I chaired. I approached her for this study, in part, because I observed the respect given her at IEP conferences by her students' parents as well as her professional colleagues. Additionally, the children in her class made academic progress, a fact that was my job to verify as coordinator of special education. Finally, her supervisor, who was my colleague, had high regard for her skill as a practitioner. Such universal regard, combined with her documented success in academics, suggested that she was a good candidate for my study.

My third reason was that I was a teacher of adolescents and preadolescents and had little expertise in the teaching of young children. Therefore, I believed I would not be encumbered by my own biases about pedagogy.

Although I knew little of what Anne did or how, I knew that both she and the children recognized me from the larger school community and that probably I would not be distracting as a participant-observer. Originally, I negotiated entry to Brighton and to Anne's class for a 1-year pilot study. When that fieldwork proved fruitful in shaping research questions, and because Anne was scheduled to teach the same group of boys, except for one, for a second academic year, I successfully negotiated the continuation of my fieldwork for a second year. I reasoned that this classroom provided a rare opportunity to conduct longitudinal research where the same teacher and students worked together for 2 academic years.

Fourth, the children who attend Brighton come from a wide geographical area and are considered by the professionals who have placed them there to be among the most challenging youngsters to teach. Fifty-four boys ages 5 through 12 attended the school in 1988, some staying for as short as 1 year and others as long as 5. At the time, the children came from 32 different towns in Massachusetts. There was a wide variability of family background, social status, and income. Boys come to Brighton through one of three routes: recommendation of a Special Education evaluation at the local school level because of pervasive emotional and learning problems; the Department of Social Services because they are in need of care and protection; or the recommendation of both agencies. At the beginning of the study, the five boys in Anne's class were diverse racially, socioeconomically, and in the troubling behaviors they presented. The class had one African-American and four white students. One boy was homeless, two were wards of the state, one was adopted at birth and, like the fifth boy, was living with his parents in an upper middle class, suburban home. In some important ways, the boys' characteristics represented a microcosm of those that many teachers of emotionally disturbed and so-called normal children have in their classes.

Fifth, and finally, because I was known to the school administration as well as students' parents, I was able to negotiate permission to access all data on the children in this class. These data included written reports from school, social work, and child-care personnel, as well as crisis reports. I was also given permission to attend meetings with parents, social service agency personnel, and school personnel.

I used four strategies to collect data for this inquiry: videotaped, ethnographic observations; taped conversations with Anne elicited from watching the videotape together; semistructured interviews conducted with Anne and other key informants; and document review.

I used a hand-held video camera as my primary means of collecting observational data in Anne's class, but I also used conventional fieldnote recording. I chose to emphasize videotaping over collecting fieldnotes

because it enabled me to capture far more accurately the rapid talk of the boys and teacher, the quickly shifting goals of the teacher, and the frequent behavioral outbursts of the boys. After each session, I viewed the videotape and transcribed it into fieldnotes. This transcription enabled me to analyze and code the observational data very finely.

During the first year of study, I videotaped Anne's class once and sometimes twice every month throughout the school year in 30-minute sessions, usually, but not always, during writing class. Twice during that year, I conducted two 2-hour conventional field visits as well. During the second year, 1989-90, I videotaped Anne teaching in 2-hour segments once every month. These segments covered all reading and mathematics instruction, as well as oral language time. During the final months of the study (May and June 1990), I videotaped 2 full days in Anne's class. The object of full-day observations was to experience the classroom activity as an integrated day. During those observations, I gathered data particularly on the movement of students from activity to activity and Anne's transitions in curricular and pedagogical style as she moved between subjects. It gave me the opportunity to observe the boys doing such things as going to the library and at play, which I had not been able to do until then. Additional observations were conducted of Anne in supervision meetings with the school principal, while in a supervision meeting with her teaching intern, and while she was conducting individual year-end, academic testing with one boy.

After each videotaped class, Anne and I viewed the taped lessons together. During these sessions, I stopped the tape often to ask questions about what she was saying or doing in the lesson, if she recalled what she was thinking, and what she was thinking or feeling as we watched. Anne also would stop the tape when thoughts occurred to her. My goal was to locate the recurring themes in her thinking, the salient emotional and cognitive aspects of her as a practitioner. Those discussions of immediate, concrete feelings and thoughts invariably led to discussions of larger, more abstract philosophical and practical thoughts in teaching and learning with disturbed children. When an idea was spent, we returned to watching the tape. All of those conversations were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

During the first year, watching videotapes together elicited 10 hours of audiotaped conversation with Anne about the boys, the curriculum, and her pedagogy. In the 1989-90 year, the videotaped lessons elicited 5 more hours of taped conversation. These elicited conversations, combined with the videotaped lessons, constitute the largest portion of data to be collected for this study.

In addition to elicited conversations, I conducted three additional semi-structured, open-ended interviews to investigate Anne's personal history, her

perceptions of her place in the Brighton institution as a whole, her professional relationships, and her philosophy of teaching.

Brighton is rich in written report data. I received permission to investigate three classes of documents written about the students over the 2 years of the study. The first class of documents included (1) the narrative reports, or what Brighton teachers call "Student Profiles," written by Anne and other educational personnel as the result of periodic academic testing; (2) narrative quarterly and yearly summation reports on academic and behavioral progress; (3) Anne's accumulated unit plans; and (4) the permanent products of students' work that Anne had saved. These longitudinal data assisted me in tracking Anne's thinking on paper about her students and then cross-checking it with her thinking gleaned from elicited conversations and my observations of her teaching.

The second class of documents included reports on behavioral crises that transpired during the academic day. These data were helpful insofar as they tracked the daily reasons and length of time students were out of class for behavioral problems. The third class of documents included the "Conference Reports" on Anne's students written by noneducational team members. These documents are not academic in nature; they are written by therapists, social workers, and child-care workers. But they assisted me in checking the validity of Anne's social and emotional assessments of particular boys.

I analyzed these data in four stages. In the first stage, I tested two hypotheses that I had drawn from sustained observation: first, that Anne was involved in three general types of instruction—behavioral, academic, and social/emotional; second, that over time her academic utterances increased, and her behavioral talk decreased. To conduct this analysis, I used the transcribed videotaped observations from the first 6 months of fieldwork. I coded every utterance of Anne's where she initiated some instructional move with the boys as *Behavior*, *Academic*, or *Social*. Analysis revealed that there were three areas of instructional talk, although behavioral and academic talk far exceeded social/emotional talk. Additionally, although the number of academic and behavioral utterances numbered approximately the same at the start, the number of behavioral utterances decreased while academic utterances remained relatively constant.

At the second stage of analysis, I reasoned that teacher utterances in a particular category of instruction might denote thought in that category. To test this hypothesis, I analyzed the conversations that were elicited from watching the videotapes. As I've mentioned, as Anne watched a tape she would comment on what she was thinking as she watched, and what she recalled thinking at the time of the episode on the tape. I, on the other hand, asked her to explain why she had said something to a boy, or what she was

trying to accomplish with a given action. I coded all interviews for the first 6 months of the study using the three existing coding categories, and I matched the videotaped lessons of the first analysis with their corresponding conversations. This coding and matching strategy yielded evidence that corroborated my earlier findings, that is, that three areas of instruction/thinking were salient for Anne. However, it also revealed that, although academic and behavioral teaching was evident in *what* she talked about with the children, social teaching was evident in *how* she talked with them and in how she structured the environment. In other words, in elicited conversation, Anne described how she was approaching social and emotional issues implicitly, something that was less obvious in her explicit talk with the students.

At the third stage of analysis, I conducted a cross-sectional analysis of the interview data, coding all of the interviews for the 2 years by category of instruction. Analysis of Anne's conversations revealed that, over time, there was a shift in her focus among the categories. That shift corresponded roughly to the shift in teacher utterances found in stage one of the analysis: Behavioral utterances during teaching episodes, and her preoccupation with talking about student behavior as we watched the tapes, both decreased in frequency, while academic teaching utterances and talk remained constant. Furthermore, coding and sorting of the interviews revealed that an increase in her comments about the social goals of the class coincided with the decrease in her behavioral comments. This longitudinal analysis led me to divide the data into three overlapping intervals corresponding with her periods of manifest preoccupation with behavioral concerns, social/emotional concerns, or academic concerns.

In a second pass through the interview data, I analyzed each of these three categories of instruction more specifically, coding each for curriculum as well as pedagogy. I then divided the academic category of instruction into its constituent subject areas (reading, math, and writing) and coded for curriculum and pedagogy in each subject area. This cross-sectional strategy enabled me to analyze the data in each instructional category more finely. Furthermore, I coded across interviews in other categories, including Anne's overall thinking, her background, and her stories about individual boys.

Finally, having determined (1) that there were three distinct, albeit overlapping, stages of teacher thinking and action in class; (2) that each stage had an instructional preoccupation (although all three areas of instruction were clearly evident at every stage); and (3) that each instructional category revealed substantial and salient content, I divided the data temporally into each of the three intervals and conducted the final analysis. In what was largely an inductive analysis, I used the videotaped data to create as

objective a narrative of the class events as I could. I paid careful attention to verbatim transcription of the boys' and the adults' talk, as well as the movement in the class and the activities that were carried out. In parallel, I worked to capture Anne's subjective experience of those same class events. I did this by listening to her talk about the events, observing her physical responses to them, and using clinical interviewing techniques in our extended discussions to understand her understanding of the class phenomenon. I then placed one description next to the other—my attempt at objective description of observable phenomena and my transliteration of Anne's subjective experience of those same phenomena—and proceeded to analyze the relationship between the two, looking for recurring patterns, as well as obvious discontinuities, in Anne's thought and action. It is this final analytic stage that yielded the bulk of the information used in writing this book.

Because I am a special education teacher and a former staff member at Brighton, I was particularly careful to safeguard against bias throughout the study. I have been trained in the jargon and ways of thinking used in my field, as well as in the particular jargon and ideology of Brighton. As a result, I was concerned that I would overlook data that I simply took for granted, that I would under- or overinterpret particular events or discussions of significance, or that I would fail to notice and critique aspects of the school culture that I, as a former staff member, had once made my own. To address those validity threats, I engaged an independent researcher to conduct the data analysis described in stage one of my data analysis. Using the videotapes, she conducted tests of my coding system, and then together we refined the coding and analysis strategy. I also engaged a graduate student trained in videotape analysis, who was involved in research into the language development of autistic children, to view videotaped sessions that I transcribed and analyzed. She critiqued my analyses of Anne's use of language, looking particularly for unexamined data and assumptions.

A second threat to validity concerned my remaining objective about Anne and her teaching. After working together for 2 years collecting data on her practice, we had developed a friendly acquaintance. Although this acquaintance facilitated our deepening discourse, I took pains to remain objective and critical about her work with the children, using memos to explore my potential biases.

Finally, because I was the major instrument of data analysis and interpretation, I guarded against erroneously interpreting Anne. On two occasions after data collection had been completed, I shared written analyses with Anne in order that she might discuss them and correct or verify my interpretations. After the first completed draft of the book was prepared, she read the entire document and offered thoughtful critiques of my analyses of

her thinking, made some minor corrections on such things as dates of events, authors of curriculum materials, and facts about the students.

It is important to underline the fact that in doing this project I had wide access to the private information of five children and families, as well as to Anne's classroom practice. I assured the boys, their parents or guardians, and the school's executive director that I would use only pseudonyms for the participants and the school. Thus, the name of the school as well as all the names of children and adults have been changed in this document.

