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Working With a Challenging Student and His Family



In this case, a teacher reflects on her or his attempts to meet the educational needs of a challenging student. Responding to the unique and changing needs of this learner conjures images of attempts to address a moving target. The divergent learning style of this student also leads to his being a social target for his peers. Case commentators Deborah J. Trumbull, David Booth, Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo, David E. Wilson and Joy S. Ritchie along with Janna Dresden examine the multifold approaches of concern, empathy, negotiation, and reflection that are prompted by children who do not seem to fit into traditional schooling venues.

❖ THINKING AHEAD

As you read this chapter, reflect on the following questions and issues:

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- Consider the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences of the teacher.
- What past events and present behavior suggest that Marc is a “divergent learner”?
- List the dilemmas in this case.
- Consider the diverse perspectives of those involved in this case and what each believes are Marc’s needs.
- Consider whether or not specific strategies had been put in place to deal with Marc’s prior knowledge and observed behavior.

Father: “It’s the school’s fault!”

It was not the first time that I had heard Mr. Russell blame the school for his son Marc’s difficulties. I was sure it was not the school’s fault. After all, if it was, that would mean that it was my fault—at least in part, since I was the child’s teacher!

Here I was again, facing a parent I dreaded dealing with even in casual conversation because of his hostility. It was the evening of the first term report card interviews by prearranged appointment. I was not sure I could handle this man alone and had accepted the principal’s offer to sit in on the session.

How could it be the school’s fault? I had worked so diligently to explain to this particular parent that his child had problems that must be faced. I had done my best for his son. I hoped he would want to work with the school to do something to help.

My class that year was shaping up to be as close to heaven as mortal teachers could expect. It was my fifth year of teaching. The class was made up of students I had previously taught, with a few imports who were going to fit in just wonderfully. And Marc, the odd one out. Marc, who, when I asked the class to participate in a paper-tearing activity, immediately took out his scissors. Marc, who, when I told him we were not “doing dinosaurs,” brought every dinosaur he could cram into his backpack to school. Marc, who, when reminded that, yes, volcanoes were exciting, but we had already seen the one he made earlier in the year, nevertheless brought in his latest volcano only to be greeted by the less than subtle jeers of his peers. In spite of all these previous incidents, I was confident that I could respond to this “divergent learner.”

I felt I had arrived at a very satisfying point in my teaching life. I had a combined class of 25 fourth- and fifth-grade students happy to work in small groups, confident with rubrics, comfortable with peer-self-teacher three-way assessment, who showed promise with

project-based learning in the areas of science and social studies. They gathered materials they needed on their own from various storage areas in the room and generally worked independently and interdependently without much fuss. I recognized their individual learning styles, devised activities with awareness of multiple intelligence theory, and provided a variety of teaching and assessment strategies to meet their needs. We were all set for success.

Even Marc was finding some degree of acceptance when he had an opportunity to shine. He could often see and explain unusual solutions to Find the Intruder and word games, and the other students even listened to him with interest from time to time. Over the last year, there had been no major conflicts in the classroom. It had helped that I had been team-teaching with a colleague, regrouping our students according to individual needs. We knew these students, and they were beginning to know themselves too.

The schoolyard was a different matter. Unfortunately, Marc was currently experiencing problems there due to his poor social skills. He would not leave others alone. He trailed behind older students, who ignored him. Then, he would try to join younger, more tolerant students, but they, too, would eventually drift away.

Father: "I don't care that he can read better. What are you going to do about the way the other kids pick on him? He gets kept in at recess and then we have to put up with him running all over the place at home."

Present thought: I had fantasized that we would be talking about the signs of progress Marc had shown lately in reading, an area that had always been difficult for him. I thought we had already had quite enough conversations about his social problems. The principal and I exchanged a look. I initiated the conversation, reviewing the old ground about Marc's habit of accusing other kids of conspiring against him. Marc would reiterate that one group would not allow him to spin the roulette wheel in a math game, when often, the other kids were simply following instructions, and it was not Marc's turn yet.

Flashback: The in-class scene replays itself in my mind's eye: "He won't listen. Can't you move him?" Marc's screams pierce the classroom as he sulks purple-faced, fists clenched, body rigid. "Tell the little creep to get out of our way!" "Yeah, I pushed him, but he kept coming up and telling us about his stupid army men!"

Present thought: So many social situations cause Marc difficulty. The principal explains that she or he feels she or he has no choice but

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to keep him in at recess because he provokes aggressive reactions from the older students. He goes out of his way to intrude on their agreed-upon section of the playground and stands smack in the middle of their games. It saddens me to see us resort to removing Marc from the very social setting he needs practice in handling, but strategies presented through the anger management program and group sessions with the behavior counselor have not yielded much impact on Marc.

Father: "You should be punishing the other kids. I've told Marc he has my permission to fight the other kids. He's pretty good at karate now, you know."

Present thought: It was true. I thought it was essentially not a bad thing for Marc to take karate lessons, as it seemed to help his self-esteem. As if through a thick blanket, I hear the voice of the principal giving the stock answer to Marc's father about violent behavior and the school code.

Father: "Well, you people are gonna hear from me. I'm not putting up with it anymore."

Present thought: Suddenly, I observe Marc's father's hands firmly planted on his thighs, elbows out. His face is quickly turning red.

Father: "You keep telling me Marc has all these problems. He has problems all right. It's the school."

Present thought: I am aware that his hands are now pressing down on the table. He is leaning in toward me. I see him start to rise. I go into panic mode, followed by survival instinct, in a heartbeat.

Flashback: My first principal is telling me never to forget it's their child. Affirm any feelings they have. That's their right, but put the onus back on them. Quick. Say something.

Response to Father: I let him know I understand he must feel very frustrated, that he obviously cares, and that he wants the best for his son. He moves back, sinks into his chair, and looks defeated, almost sheepish. My heart resumes a more normal pace. The conversation gradually takes on a more natural tone. The principal relaxes. Earlier he thought that one of us was about to be hit.

Present thought: I have averted a crisis. But later, I feel unsatisfied. I feel trapped in a kind of professional diplomacy. I really want to tell this man to stop ignoring the signs that are saying, "This child's conflict is going to blow up in our faces one day." I am troubled by Mr. Russell's reluctance to admit there is a problem, troubled by the intensity of Marc's outbursts, troubled by my own deference to parental rights. But then I am also a parent. How would I have reacted in Mr. Russell's place?

Response to Father: Since kindergarten he has played almost exclusively with military toys like tanks and soldiers. What bothers me is not just the nature of the toys, but also the inflexibility of his choice.

I continue on with a few concerns about his physical coordination. He runs in a very stiff-legged way, seemingly on purpose and to please himself somehow. He has trouble putting the beat in his feet to mark time in music, whereas the rest of the class is having no difficulty. I feel obliged to touch on the area of social interactions again, because it is here that his behavior is most volatile. Marc's outlandish statements like "I've flown to Mars in a space ship" are guaranteed to provoke ridicule from his peers—a reaction which, in turn, infuriates Marc. He seeks attention from adults constantly, to the point where he tells the same stories and asks the same questions repeatedly, "May I go to the washroom?" "Yes." "Madame, may I go to the washroom?"

We also examine Marc's academic difficulties. In math, he readily finds relationships between angles in pattern blocks, but confuses addition and subtraction symbols. He varies between fast, accurate responses and erratic ones. He does not often follow procedures either orally or in writing. The quirky way he now insists on writing "ge" instead of "je" puzzles me because I know he used to write the word for "I" in French correctly.

Present thought: Sometimes I wonder if Marc is doing things differently on purpose, just to be different, or if he really doesn't get it. I feel he is increasingly disconnected from me. Ways that were once appealingly eccentric now appear rigidly alien. I have consulted with the principal and the board's behavior counselor. I have kept daily notes on his behavior this year. I have explored the Internet looking for clues as to the nature of the possible dysfunction, discovering references to Asperger's Syndrome, high-functioning autism, and obsessive-compulsive disorder that might provide clues.

I have mentioned my concerns over the course of the last school year to both of his parents. His mother has never shown much interest. She smiles a lot, says very little, and looks as if she is in another world, herself. She seems only to dote on her youngest daughter. Marc's stepfather, Mr. Russell, is usually hostile. Marc is stuck in his behavior patterns. This is not a simple case of immaturity. To make the situation more difficult, there is now a student in the same class whom I refer to in the privacy of my own mind as a predator. I found out at the beginning of the year that Marc has been the target, his "prey" in

kindergarten, and the two of them have been separated ever since. Now, there is no option but to place them in the same classroom. The old relationship barely camouflaged by a veneer of civility is returning. If the old rivalry resumes, it would surely fuel the accusations that we are not safeguarding Marc.

It seems I have not been able to change anything. Despite all of my concerns, Marc's father refuses to acknowledge the possibility that his son might need a diagnosis or support for his situation. He states that he sees no reason to discuss the subject further with the family doctor, or any kind of specialist. He threatens that he will just move Marc to a different school. And, in fact, he does just that.

Reflection: Other students have moved on, and they have faded from memory. This student still haunts me. After events such as the Columbine school shooting tragedy, it is not hard for me to picture Marc striking back one day. He knows he is different from others. He is forever stuck in behaviors that create conflict. He made little or no progress in social skills. He believed others were out to get him, and he always seemed fascinated by weapons. He dwelled in a fantasy-land. All his "symptoms" were significant to me. I always felt caught between deference to parental rights and concern for the child. It is tempting to try to find out how he is doing, but I am not sure I want to know.

❖ EXPLORING THE CASE

A curriculum coordinator, recalling an experience in the fifth year of teaching, wrote this case.

Identification

Identify the key facts of this case. What factual events are central to understanding this situation? Identify the dilemmas and tensions in this case. Explore the main aspects of each dilemma and tension.

Analysis

Analyze the issue(s) from the viewpoints of the different people in the case. Based on the teacher's interactions with Marc, his parents, and her or his colleagues, what educational issues are suggested?

Evaluation

Examine critically the teacher's strategies for handling the challenge(s) with the student, his parents, and school administration. Does the teacher depicted fulfill, fall short, or surpass your notion of the role of a teacher?

Alternative Solutions

Were there alternate solutions or strategies available to deal with the dilemma? Generate alternative solutions to the ones presented in the narrative. Take into consideration risks, benefits, and long- and short-term consequences of each proposed action.

Reflection

Even years after the incident, the teacher is still troubled by Marc's story. Why is the teacher's concluding reflection poignant? Has anything been resolved?

Changing Opinions

Consider your thoughts and assumptions at the beginning of the chapter. Who or what has caused you to consider a new way of thinking? How strongly do you still feel about your previous assumptions?

Synthesis

Synthesize your understanding of this case into a statement. What is this a case of?

Case Commentary by Deborah J. Trumbull

I found this case haunting. The story of Marc and his difficulties was indeed moving. Too many accounts of teaching gloss over the powerful emotions associated with practice—fear, anger, frustration, and deep impatience. This case brings these emotions to life. If our emotions are not engaged by this case, we are not paying attention. This case shows us the extent to which pupils become part of a teacher's life and the impressions they leave on it. Not all memories of

former pupils are endearing. The case also illustrates the way former and present experiences and images weave themselves into interactions. The teacher was not just interacting with the stepfather in one conference—she or he interacted with earlier images and experiences, and future concerns.

The idea of target permeates this case. Haven't we all, as teachers, wanted to target the causes for a pupil's difficulties, looked for the diagnoses or classifications or home factors that would explain why this particular boy behaves in these peculiar ways. This wish for a target seems based on an assumption that once we know the cause(s) we can design a successful treatment. Others wish to target, too. The stepfather targets the school as the source of Marc's difficulties, and acts accordingly.

There are other images of target. Marc's behaviors make him a target for other students' exasperation. More ominously, Marc is in danger of becoming a target for another boy the author sees as a predator. There are many targets that move around in this case as we are moved by it.

The author describes Marc with carefully observed details, details to which good teachers learn to attend but details easy to overlook in the rush of daily life. This case is valuable for the exemplar it provides for close study of a pupil. The author uses general (and usually impoverished) terms such as "poor social skills," or "self-esteem" to orient us, but these terms are richly supplemented with details about Marc's actions and interactions. These details provide us a glimpse of the hard-to-understand actions of this boy. The author gives us a look into Marc's home conditions. Some descriptions of the stepfather mirror descriptions of Marc. As I read this case the first time, I found it easy to target Marc's family as the cause of his difficulties; easy to say Marc's problems were the fault of his mother and stepfather. The author worries about capitulating to the stepfather's concerns in her or his conference. Did she or he?

There are other factors at play in Marc's difficulties. The case captures the complex network of social interactions that operate in schools and the ways in which selves are embodied and enacted in the ordinary interchanges of the day. The author, for example, is honest about her or his unwillingness to believe the school is to blame for Marc's problems because she or he knows that she or he embodies the school to her or his pupils, so the school's failure would be her or his failure. And this teacher has tried hard. She or he describes other elements in the contexts

of the school—the “agreed-upon sections of the playground” claimed by older students, the students who refer to him as “the little creep,” the time for sharing in the classroom that Marc abuses. Marc seems not to be able to read the rules operating in any of these contexts.

Just as it is easy to wish to target the causes of Marc’s odd behaviors, it is easy to wish for a hero story, a story in which this exceptional teacher had been able to provide what Marc needed to improve. Indeed, Marc had been improving in his reading, not an insignificant gain, but one ignored by his stepfather. But this is not a hero story. It is a story of heroic efforts. We learn about the steps a concerned teacher can take and the realities with which this teacher dealt. I found myself wondering how I would feel about a student as difficult as Marc, and then wondered how I handled those students with whom I do not seem able to make a difference, those who consistently fail to see and negotiate the interrelations around them or who target me as the source of their difficulties? How do these situations make me feel, how do I deal with my emotions? How do I accept my failures with some students?

❖ EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Student Behavior

What past events and present behavior suggest that Marc is a “divergent learner” or an “at-risk” learner? How does Trumbull suggest that teachers think about and attend to the needs of difficult students in class? How should teachers think about their own progress or difficulties with troublesome students?

Student Behavior

Trumbull suggests that past experience and assumptions might target a teacher’s attitude toward a student for better or worse? Was this true for Marc and his teacher’s steps for helping him?

Programming

Trumbull examines what “good “ teachers should do in difficult cases. Do you agree with her approach and what might you add?

Schools in Society

Trumbull says that the teacher thinks “she or he embodies the school to her or his pupils.” Why would a teacher want to separate her or his persona from that of the school’s? Who is responsible when a child fails at school?

Case Commentary by David Booth

All of the teachers that I have met in my years in education have encountered children like Marc in their classrooms. And his father. We carry those memories of those children-at-risk forever, and often they act as change agents for our teaching. As we meet new children with similar problems, we scan those past recollections to redesign our responses from the always-looming shadows in our teaching psyches. We need to learn from our unsuccessful episodes with children and families as we try to invent new teaching selves, just as when we view a videotape record of who we used to be, and shudder, even tremble, at our past teaching personas and behaviors.

Rather than forgetting these children or being afraid of meeting them in the future, we need to reuse these memory icons, as the author of the case study has done, to help locate us in the present, to support our new professional knowledge of helping these children and parents inside the school community. It was especially comforting to hear the author connect her or his parenting self to the issues she or he was confronting in the classroom as a teacher, to recognize the pain and frustration of a parent over a child’s unhappiness in school. That ability to distance her or his own “teacher response” deepened her or his understanding of those involved in the meeting, and let her or him regain her or his balance and clarify her or his focus. However, her or his first principal’s words still echo in my ears: Never forget it’s their child.

Often the parents are presenting their own needs and fears during the parent-teacher interview, and they may value this particular forum for venting their frustration and unhappiness. Children move to and fro every weekday—from home to classroom to home and homework. How we integrate these dual worlds is one of the central complexities of raising children, and the teeter-totter of childhood quickly becomes unbalanced if one party feels the other is somehow neglecting the requisite assistance that children need, especially children-at-risk.

In spite of our best efforts, we are sometimes unable to offer enough supportive strategies to a child in difficulty to ensure a successful school life. And it may be that some children will need other environments, other structures, in order to progress. But to paraphrase the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, we have to be “the good enough teacher;” and for me, therein lies the struggle. I need to know that I did all that I could at that time in those circumstances with that particular child. By remembering that experience, I look at every new child differently. I have the opportunity to grow wiser because of that special child.

As a teacher, I read and take courses and talk to other professionals, with Marc as a benchmark. Knowing what I couldn't do, didn't do, and might now do, is how I grow professionally. Next time, perhaps, I will prepare differently for the meeting with the parent: I will review the child's portfolio of work, highlighting examples of her or his progress; I will create an action plan for school and home that works toward the child's social growth; I will find a booklet or an article (or an outside agency) that offers help for the parent; I will interview the child in order to have her or his own words to point toward change; I will have a practice interview with the principal to smooth out the wrinkles in my own approach; and after the interview, I will debrief with a school leader to move toward a professional response to the situation. And if the child leaves, I will follow up with a supportive note to the family, wishing them success in finding a more effective placement for the child they love.

These case studies that every teacher carries forever are not records of failure to disturb our sleep. Instead, they are signposts, computer icons to click on, that signal future possibilities in interacting with children and parents. Schools are integral aspects of a family's community. And those families come in all kinds of configurations, with all types of needs and wants. I am still pleased that most children have satisfying and nurturing school lives, and that most parents recognize the inherent values of the schools where their children spend most of childhood.

The “felt imperative” to help every child in our care is a good one for every teacher to experience; perhaps it has to be tempered with our professional sense of having done everything we could at that time for that child, strengthened by the knowledge that the experience of knowing Marc and his father will nudge us towards new understandings in our relationships with the children and their parents, in the place called school.

❖ EXPLORING THE ISSUES**Parental Relationships**

Booth examines the fact that Mr. Russell and the rest of Marc's family have different perceptions about Marc and his learning behavior. What differing sets of values have provoked the unpleasant confrontations for the participants? Booth says that Marc and his father may have nudged us to a new place of understanding. How can that place be created?

Parental Relationships

Booth ponders the worlds of schooling and home. Consider how parents respond to their children's unhappiness when those worlds collide. How might the teacher have improved communication with the family?

Reflection

Booth suggests that cycles of reflection are helpful in thinking about events that plague teachers. How do "signposts" such as Marc aid in teachers' professional growth? What positive outcome does Booth foresee from narratives such as Marc's?

Case Commentary by Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo

Novice and senior teachers alike routinely enter the classroom with preconceived notions of how their students should act, of how learning should take place, of what are deemed as "successful" teaching strategies. Preconceptions are constituted by, among other things, personal history, the ideology of the dominant class, social relations and class location, cultural and societal values, and lived experiences. In "Working With a Challenging Student and His Family," we are presented with a scenario of a seasoned teacher who has "arrived at a very satisfying point" in her or his life. A thorough look into the author's description of professional satisfaction accentuates the importance placed on student's docile and formative reactions to rules, procedures, and routines. Marc, the moving target, represents the "odd man out"—the student most teachers dread for his perceived unruly and truculent behavior.

The case author analyzed the “Marc” problem from the perspective that she or he has done everything possible to accommodate for the child’s behavior both in and out of the classroom. According to the author, conferences with the principal and behavior counselor resulted in no observable outcomes and have therefore satisfied the teachers’ responsibilities—it is ultimately “Marc’s” problem. The unit of analysis encompasses the family and the author’s interactions with a seemingly hostile parent that she or he dreads confronting during conferences. The family is notably resistant and blinded by “Marc’s problem,” which, in turn, obstructs the level of collaboration between the school and family. In conclusion, the author resorts to the fatal Columbine massacre metaphor; Marc will travel through the educational pipeline shadowed by social maladjustment and accompanied by a lack of family intervention. As the author states at the closing, “He is forever stuck in behaviors that create conflict.”

When teachers serving diverse populations of learners fantasize about the academic strides their students make in reading, writing, and math while at the same time clinging to the notion that some students are beyond behavioral redemption, they are exhibiting the same fatalistic attitude as the students that they fear. Although the author highlighted several points of insight—such as Marc’s constant desire for attention and acceptance—little was done to maximize on those points of departure. Marc’s overindulgence in military artifacts pointed to an opportunity to engage the class in a critical discourse around symbolic violence and aggression. Perhaps the author may have utilized the information provided by Marc and built upon his interests to create an environment where he could challenge his own behavior. The teacher could accomplish this while engaging the entire class in a critical dialogue on the topic of conflict and social acceptance. It is the responsibility of critical educators to contextualize learning and connect it to all students’ lived experience and to do this not in an ideological vacuum of presumed neutrality, but by approaching the concept of student behavior dialectically, as an ensemble of social relations linked to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and subjectivity and agency.

Although Marc may not have interacted well with peers on the playground throughout the entire year, it does not cast him into a pit of emotional entropy for the remainder of his life. A critical perspective is hopeful and transformative—which may have allowed the author to establish meaningful objectives for not only Marc, but also for her- or himself and for the other students in the class. This is not to suggest that change would have been immediate or would have occurred at all,

but it is intended to stress the importance of constructing teaching and learning dialectically.

“Working With a Challenging Student and His Family” depicts a caring—yet frustrated—teacher jarred by a “nonnormative” student and family. There are multiple ways of critically examining and responding to this scenario. The key point we wish to emphasize is that educators need to be empowered critically to develop a working understanding of how student behavior has been constructed by the interaction of multiple forces and social relations and how those forces and relations can be challenged and transformed through focusing on the determinants of behavior, not the symptoms. The challenge of the critical educator is to accomplish this without silencing student voice. To be voiceless is to be powerless. The voices of students can—and often should—be critically challenged, but they can never be silenced or denied, or rendered irredeemable.

❖ EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Programming

Consider why the school and the teacher have arrived at the attitude that: “It is ultimately Marc’s problem?” McLaren and Jaramillo extend a scenario that would draw on Marc’s interests as opportunities for fostering responsibility in improved learning and social acceptance. Are there possible intersections between school and Marc himself for transforming the situation? What role might students play so that they are not silenced and rendered powerless?

Teacher Self-Image

If a teacher assumes that all the “right things” are done, and yet there is no development, particularly social development as in Marc’s case, how might teachers deal with their frustration and then resume work with unbiased views toward the student? According to the commentators, how should a teacher stand away from personal feelings and think critically?

Student Behavior

The commentators exhort the readers to look deeper and more critically for reasons, not just the symptoms of student behavior that is

“nonnormative.” How can dialectics and discourses on teaching and learning foster that critical evaluation?

Case Commentary by David E. Wilson and Joy S. Ritchie

This case enacts the very usefulness of case narratives themselves for readers and for writers. It immediately invoked in us memories of students we’ve each had over the years who presented themselves in our classrooms and our lives in ways that troubled us then and still trouble us now. This text invites us to author our own texts and engage in a kind of reflection that would allow us to probe more deeply our experiences with and responses to those troublesome students.

Fortunately, “Working With a Challenging Student and His Family” enacts a reflective stance that is instructive; the author shows us one way of being more analytical about our teaching. Through writing, she or he dramatizes the encounter, and then she or he draws back from that moment and from her or his present perspective, she or he reexamines it. She or he attempts to carefully reconstruct various perspectives: the action and thought at that time, flashbacks to prior moments, an analysis from the present, and possibilities for the future. Her or his use of narrative and drama allows him to recapture or construct the complexity of the situation—its context, language, and emotions. Rather than a one-dimensional, impersonal, or pseudo-objective description, this case is more infused with the kinds of complexities and tensions teachers face in any given encounter with a parent, child, or administrator.

In reading this, we were reminded of Ann Berthoff’s double-entry journal, a reflective method that allows a writer to document an experience or observation and then return to reexamine and re-narrate that experience (Berthoff, 1982). This process permits the writer to be both participant and spectator, to be in the world and to step back from the world, gaining distance, perspective, and understanding. This resembles a strategy we have used with pre-service and in-service teachers in which we’ve asked them to consider a moment that—like the author’s experience with Marc and his father—continues to haunt them. Reconstructing that experience is itself a reflective move; then the written text provides another opportunity for reflection, either by the author alone or in concert with peers.

In “Working With a Challenging Student and His Family,” further construction of the narrative might allow the author an opportunity to

begin to see and understand the rich, complex, human ecosystems in which Marc, his father, the teacher, and the principal lived. Such a process may allow educators to better understand the rich complexities we face while not necessarily leading us to a “solution” or fix. Although this may seem somehow incomplete or even frustrating, we believe we are in far better positions when we can name the complexities we face, as the author of this narrative does. With this speculative stance, Marc’s teacher may be better prepared in her or his present role to negotiate the challenges posed by the troublesome students and parents she or he will no doubt continue to encounter.

❖ EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Teacher Self-Confidence

Explain how the commentators’ reference to Berthoff’s “double-entry” journal approach of both participant and spectator might provide insight for teachers working with challenging students? How does reflection and sharing dilemmas enable us to reach and receive new perspectives on a situation?

Parental Relationships

Wilson and Ritchie discuss the purpose of reconstructing narratives. How might rewriting the narrative open up understanding of new perspectives and suggest a new story for Marc?

Case Commentary by Janna Dresden

As I read the first page or two of the case, my initial reaction was to be rather critical of the teacher. I wondered why she objected when Marc insisted on bringing his dinosaurs to school—was his interest only acceptable in the context of a school-sanctioned topic? But then, as she began to describe Marc in more detail, my attitude changed. I could hear the screams of the child, and see his clenched fists and purple face. And I could feel the frustration of the teacher as she dealt with inanelly repeated questions, preposterous comments about flights to Mars, and the complaints of his peers.

This case makes it very clear that detailed descriptions of behavior convey more information and have a greater impact than conclusions

or analyses of that behavior. My attitude became more understanding when the picture became more vivid. When I began to relate this teacher's experiences to my own, it became much more difficult to sit in judgment of her or him. We have all been there—we have all worked with difficult children and with difficult parents and it is never easy.

As I read through this case, however, I was reminded that working with parents, like working with children, is not about accomplishing a specific goal, but about sharing a journey. In many ways this cliché is even a more apt description of our work with parents than it is of our classroom teaching. From this perspective, each meeting with parents can be viewed as a step on that journey rather than as yet another futile attempt to get the parent to see things our way.

The case writer describes how she or he told the father that she or he knew he must be frustrated and that he only wanted the best for his son. These types of comments, which affirm parents' feelings, can be extremely helpful, but they should also be viewed as a beginning. The purpose of such comments is not to short-circuit a confrontation, but to serve as a foundation for a meaningful and trusting relationship.

Near the end of the case, the writer poses some very poignant questions, "I wonder if Marc is doing things differently on purpose, just to be different, or if he really doesn't get it." I wonder if she shared these questions with Marc's parents. In my work with parents, I have found that voicing exactly those kinds of questions can often be the link we need. When I admit that I am confused or bewildered, parents will often (not always) confess that they have similar concerns.

But having said all of this, I must close by pointing out that many of the families we serve have problems that are beyond our capabilities as teachers. And it seems that the children and families with the greatest problems are the most likely to move from setting to setting. We work to establish trusting relationships and then, often, just as we begin to see some progress, they leave. And we are left knowing that all we can do is our best, knowing full well that trying to meet the needs of these families is quite literally like trying to hit "a moving target."

❖ EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Student Behavior

Dresden describes Marc as a complicated child. Feelings of empathy but also annoyance trouble Dresden. Evaluate her proposition to think of a process for children like Marc as a "journey."

Schools in Society

Dresden sadly concludes “that many of the families we serve have problems that are beyond our capabilities as teachers.” Is this statement a result of frustration, insight into teacher limitations, or a comment on the inability of schools to deal with societal issues?

❖ ENGAGING WITH THE COMMENTARIES

Support and Resources

This case provides a variety of time shifts as well as a source of deep reflection for teachers who encounter tense situations. Booth, Wilson and Ritchie, and Dresden all present practical strategies to help teachers respond to students like Marc whose needs continue to change just like a moving target. What other supports, resources, and reinforcements would help teachers reflect in similar situations?

Schools in Society

All commentators point to several “dual worlds” in this case. Identify those worlds that compose Marc’s interior and exterior environments. Compare and contrast McLaren and Jaramillo and Wilson and Ritchie’s suggestions about how to deal with the inner worlds of student and the teacher.

Assessment

When students fail, whose responsibility is it? How would each commentator answer this question? How is failure measured? Have both Marc and the teacher failed?

Connecting Questions

The Connecting Questions located in the introduction highlight themes that are threaded throughout the cases. You may continue your exploration of the issues raised in this case by addressing those connections. For questions pertinent to this case, please see questions 6 and 7.

❖ ADDITIONAL READINGS

Cartledge, G., & Johnson, C. T. (1996). Inclusive classrooms for students with emotional and behavioral disorders: Critical variables. *Theory Into Practice, 35*(1), 51–57.

The writers discuss issues related to the social integration of students with emotional and behavioral disorders with a focus on mainstreaming and the education of the disabled. The social integration and development of all students may be impeded by failure to proactively teach social skills, especially to students who are at risk and who have behavioral disorders. Critical teacher, student, and program variables that affect and aid successful social integration are discussed.

DeGeorge, K. L. (1998). Friendship and stories: Using children's literature to teach friendship skills to children with learning disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 33*(3), 157–162.

Using children's literature in the classroom enhances teaching strategies for children with learning disabilities, providing valuable skills for making and maintaining friendships. Friendships result from using children's literature: steps to follow, practice in context, and reflection or analysis of lesson and skills. A practice lesson illustrates this strategy, while enabling students to relate to feelings in the story. Activities of modeling and guided practice are described.

Garbarino, J., & Stott, F. M. (2004). *What children can tell us: Eliciting, interpreting, and evaluating critical information from children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This book will aid adults in listening more carefully to children and asking relevant questions. The focus is on abuse and other stressful situations that affect children in a variety of settings.

McCombs, B. L., & Pope, J. E. (1994). *Motivating hard to reach students*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

The authors work with students who have developed negative attitudes toward themselves and school. The authors present strategies and theories for improving classroom management. The book showcases ways teachers can improve relationships by working with students' motivation. There is a focus on classroom context and working towards learning goals. The book has activities and guidelines

that describe how to individualize programs for the development of self-determination and academic risk taking.

Napier, E. (1995). *Integrating students with special needs: Effective strategies to provide the most enabling education for all students*. Vancouver, BC: Educational Service.

This book focuses on critical issues facing every school district. With a view to provide an appropriate enabling education that accommodates all students, the book offers practical strategies and ideas for creating systemic changes in school districts. The aim is to provide opportunities for students. The authors maintain that adaptation and accommodation by the school system are necessary factors for successful results.

Newman, J. (1987). Learning to teach by uncovering our assumptions. *Language Arts*, 64(7), 727–737.

Newman presents the notion that research is messy. It is a quest that often leads the searcher into new areas and reveals truths previously unknown. Newman's focus includes the use of critical incidents to discover teachers' current beliefs about assumptions that underpin practice.

Reif, S., & Heimburge, J. (2002). *How to reach & teach all students in the inclusive classroom: Ready-to-use strategies lessons & activities teaching students with diverse learning needs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This is a useful resource with strategies, lessons, and activities for helping teachers work with student with special needs. There is a focus on learning styles, ability levels, skills, and behaviors in inclusive classrooms.

Shulman, J., & Mesa-Bains, M. (Eds.). (1993). *Diversity in the classroom: Casebook for teachers and teacher-educators*. San Francisco: FarWest Lab.

The framework of Exploring the Case was adapted from this book.

Spaulding, S. (1994). Four steps to effective parent conferences. *Learning*, 23(3), 36–38.

Spaulding outlines four steps to enable teachers to make parents educational partners to support and strengthen students' academic, social, and emotional well-being. There are worksheets.