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Managing Conflict When Working With Educational Partners

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In this case, a teacher rediscovers that Annie, her student with special needs, is the reason for her continued efforts in teaching. The case commentators, Becky Wai-Ling Packard, Nancy L. Hutchinson, and Anne Jordan examine issues of trust, and the conflicts that surround the effective teaching and assessment of Annie.

❖   THINKING AHEAD

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

- Consider the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experience of the teacher.
- Consider Annie and her special needs. What supports have been put in place for Annie at home and at school?

- Consider the contextual elements that impact the dilemmas.
- What role does the private tutoring company play in the case?
- Consider the diverse needs and perspectives of the people in this story. Why might tensions arise when dealing with Annie's mother?

"How is this possible? How are you teaching Annie to add three-digit numbers when she's having difficulty understanding the concept of adding? Does she even understand what adding means?"

The questions just fly out of my mouth. I can't understand how a private company that provides evaluation services is better able to make these kinds of promises for educational improvements when my student, Annie, isn't demonstrating this knowledge at school. Although I am new to the school, I have observed Annie on many occasions prior to this intense parent meeting that is presently taking place. What I have recorded in her classroom, and what the tutoring company claims she can do, are two very different things.

"She can do the work" is the response.

The meeting ends without a consensus. My principal, Mr. Miller, reassures me that we are going to continue with what we are comfortable.

"Annie obviously hasn't generalized in class what she has learned with the private company," Mr. Miller explains.

A few months before this meeting, Mr. Miller had called to offer me this position. I felt excited about changing schools. I had requested a transfer from my former school and hoped that I would get a special education position. I had been working in special education for a few years, and I felt that I was ready for a new school environment, and was looking forward to working with a different group of students. I anticipated that it would be a lot of work to change schools, but I felt I was ready for the challenge.

My new school is in the suburbs and located in a multicultural community. The school is highly populated, with approximately 900 students, many with special needs. Most are integrated into regular classrooms. As a special education teacher, I have the option to work with a child within his or her own classroom, or withdraw that student and concentrate on a specific skill. This decision depends on the needs of the student.

Annie, who has been diagnosed with a developmental disability, is my greatest concern. She is a curious, happy girl, famous for her huge smile. She is nonverbal, and functions academically at the early primary level. Due to safety issues, she receives full-time support from an

educational assistant in her fifth-grade classroom. I see her for 30 minutes every day. My goal in September is to get inside Annie's brain and understand how she learns. With my knowledge of students with high needs, I am confident that I can achieve this objective by the end of September.

At the beginning of the school year, Annie's classroom teacher, Mrs. Hilton, informs me that Annie's learning is supported by a private company at home for 3 hours a week. This private company works specifically with students with developmental disabilities.

Part of my role as a special education teacher is to provide a liaison with outside agencies and other support services that are linked to my students. I've done it before, and I am actually looking forward to meeting Annie's tutor. Perhaps this person will be able to give the school some useful suggestions that we can adapt to Annie's Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

After meeting with members of the company and Annie's parents for the first time, I begin to question everything I do with Annie. Maybe they're right and I'm wrong. Maybe I'm missing something. Second guesses flood my mind all through the first term. The excitement of being in a new school with new students is quickly deflated, leaving me confused, exhausted, and discouraged.

During the second term of school, I meet again with Annie's mother. At this point, I am feeling apprehensive. At the beginning of the year, I believed I would be successful in developing parental trust: it would be a given. They would just have to see how dedicated, knowledgeable, and caring I am, and I, exuding concern and confidence, would gain their trust. I quickly realize this hasn't happened the way I had planned it. This part of the process is consuming much more time and energy than I had expected. I walk into the school the morning of the meeting, my shoulders drooping, my feet dragging on the floor, dreading the coming battle. My colleagues try to lift my spirits, but to no avail. I know that I must meet with Annie's tutor and Annie's mother, and I will leave the meeting feeling even more confused.

Annie's mother is the first to enter the room. She has a big smile on her face. In a gentle voice, she greets us. I quickly remember my first impression of Annie's mother: easygoing, approachable, and polite. She takes a seat in the office. Mrs. Hilton and I greet the mother. Annie's mother informs us that the owner of the company and Annie's tutor will be joining us as well. Mrs. Hilton comments on how much progress Annie has made since the beginning of September. Annie's

mother agrees. We comment on how Annie is beginning to interact more with her peers, she's much more compliant, and she is even beginning to use some spontaneous language to communicate.

At that moment, the owner of the company and the tutor arrive. The owner is the first to stride into the office. She makes direct eye contact with me. She has a very serious look on her face. The tutor follows closely behind. The two women take the seats on either side of Annie's mother. I am so nervous that I imagine I am in a scene from a courthouse rather than a school meeting.

I introduce myself to the owner of the company and offer my hand. She shakes my hand and pairs it with an awkward smile. I invite the group into the principal's office. The principal and the classroom teacher join me. I take a deep breath and begin reviewing Annie's updated Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

As we review the IEP, the tutor tells me what goals they have been reviewing at home. I am happy to hear that both of us are working on developing Annie's receptive and expressive vocabulary. These are in alignment both at home and at school. The tutor then says, "We have also been working on developing reading comprehension."

Reading comprehension? Those words intrigue me. Out of curiosity, I ask her to elaborate on the reading comprehension. "What kinds of activities do you do with Annie?" I ask. After a few seconds, she confidently responds, "Annie and I write a sentence together on a sentence strip, we cut it up, and Annie puts it back together."

I'm stunned. I wonder what is the purpose of this activity for Annie? How will this activity assess Annie's reading comprehension? How can Annie "write" a sentence? This does not make any sense to me.

I have to comment: "Annie has a strong visual memory. That activity sounds like it's assessing her visual memory, and not her reading comprehension."

No one responds. There's an awkward silence. The owner of the company begins to change the subject, but then decides to widen the scope of the conversation: "Why doesn't Annie have her own computer at school? What is the school doing to improve her social skills outside at recess?"

Annie's mother takes over: "We taught Annie this math in the second grade. Annie is beyond this. Why doesn't she work on the same math that her tutor completes with her? Don't you understand that this math is too easy for Annie?"

The room is silent. Mr. Miller looks over at me. Mrs. Hilton buries herself in her notes. I am fighting this battle on my own. For each

question, I am able to produce strategies that have been working well at school. For the comment about the math, I ignore it. I picture Annie sitting at her desk while she is completing the math. No, the math isn't too easy for Annie.

I feel some relief because I am able to answer a few questions. But I am left feeling that we do not share a common understanding of Annie's learning. My self-doubt sets in once more. Am I a good teacher? Maybe I shouldn't be in special education. I wonder if there's a regular classroom position available next year.

The meeting ends abruptly. Finally, the tension in the air dissipates. It is quite clear that we are not going to agree today. Annie's mom obviously will continue to put her faith and trust in the tutoring company and not in the school. My heavy heart sinks even further when I think that I have not been successful in gaining her trust. I feel as though I have lost the battle.

After the meeting ends, we decide that, at the school level, we are going to continue with the program that we have set up for Annie. We've seen an impressive amount of progress because of the current educational program, and that's what counts.

After some reflection, I can't help but wonder—is it even disagreement among stakeholders? Would I ever gain the parents' support when we do not see Annie's learning in the same way? Do we even share a common understanding of Annie's needs and abilities? Are we seeing Annie for who she is? Is the tutoring company telling the parents what they want to hear? What is in Annie's best interest?

A few days later, I walk into Annie's fifth-grade classroom for my scheduled time to work with her. She looks up from her desk. Her eyes immediately widen, and she gives me her famous smile—her big, toothy grin. At that exact moment, I realize that it is her smile that has helped me so many times when I was up to my ears in paperwork or filled with self-doubt. Her smile reminds me of the reason why I entered teaching in the first place—to help children learn and grow.

As I smile back at Annie, I hope that I have done just that.

❖ EXPLORING THE CASE

An elementary special education teacher with 5 years of experience wrote this case.

Identification

Identify the key facts of this case. What 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. How do the interactions between the teacher and the tutoring company, the teacher and the parent, the teacher and colleagues, and, finally, the teacher and her- or himself create tensions for the teacher? What role does Annie play in all of these discussions?

Evaluation

Examine critically the teacher's strategies for handling the challenge(s) with Annie's mother, the tutoring company, and Annie. 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 dilemmas? 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

Although the teacher appears to be able to deal with the conflict at the story's conclusion, does her or his concluding reflection provide a satisfying ending? Why is the student, Annie, herself a way for the teacher to refocus her or his thinking on working with students with special needs? 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 Becky Wai-Ling Packard

Students learn and develop across multiple contexts, including the home and school. Thus, facilitating communication between home and school is an important aspect of supporting student learning. However, each party must act on the information gained from communication—not only the home reacting in response to the school. This case highlights the difficulty school-based educators can face when engaging in negotiations with the home in the effort to engage in a bidirectional model of change.

The author provides a special education teacher's perspective on her or his work with a student at her or his school named Annie. Specifically, we learn of this teacher's encounter with agents from the home, which include the parent and the staff from a tutoring company hired by the family. Because the student develops and learns in multiple contexts, the student's potential may be perceived differently in each context. In other words, identity, learning, and potential may not be stable entities, but rather are influenced by context. What a student appears capable of in one context may change when placed in another context. What is "true" of a student, then, may depend on context. Although obvious in some sense, this notion can be difficult to conceive of when an educator only has the opportunity to see a student in one context. This is illustrated when the author writes, with some sense of astonishment, "What I have recorded in her classroom, and what the tutoring company claims she can do, are two very different things." The terms used by the author are important. She or he uses "recorded," implying objectivity, to describe her or his own actions, and "claims," suggesting perception, to describe the actions of the home-based agents. Perhaps, too often, the teacher's perspective is taken as fact, and one is left to wonder why the teacher appears to be in the position of underestimating the student's potential.

Moreover, the teacher interprets the alternative perspective provided by the home context as a challenge to her or his authority and makes her or him feel that she or he is not "trusted" by the home. A teacher could think that believing a student is performing better at home with the tutoring company means that she or he, as the teacher,

is not doing everything she or he can to support the student's learning at school. Although surely unintentional, this possibility appears to be devastating to the teacher's perception of her- or himself as an effective teacher.

The author writes, "After meeting with the company and Annie's parents for the first time, I begin to question everything I do with Annie. Maybe they're right and I'm wrong. Maybe I'm missing something. Second guesses flood my mind all through the first term." Thus, the teacher may feel she or he has to choose between believing the home account, which would mean she or he is a "bad" teacher, and denying the home account, which would mean that she or he has done everything right. A teacher, however, can resist entering into a paradigm that leads her or him to making a choice, as neither choice leads to supporting the student or sustaining her or his development as a teacher.

Instead, a teacher could conceive of new information from the home context as a gift, rather than evidence of her or his own ineffectiveness, and view points of disagreement as places to begin conversations, rather than a battleground where she or he must strive to appear "right." If we can operate out of a "teacher as learner" framework, we can begin to see multiple possibilities of where to go next. Adopting this framework wholeheartedly is difficult, especially for teachers, but necessary. Openness to learning may be what makes individuals truly great teachers. And perhaps this quality can help lead to greater trust among parties.

Finally, over the long run, one must also consider what factors sustain teachers through this challenging, albeit rewarding, profession, especially when the students, families, or schools do not readily provide gracious, instant feedback as to the worth of their investments. For the teacher in this case, a few smiles from her student Annie appeared to be enough to sustain her on a given day. But one can consider alternative scenarios with students who differ from Annie and what incentives there are for teachers to engage in rigorous self-examination, continued reinvestment in one's own learning, creative problem solving with students, and complicated negotiations across contexts.

❖ EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Trust Relationships

Wai-Ling Packard suggests that a main focus for this teacher is her or his perceived inability to gain parental trust. How important is this goal? Describe how teachers might attain this.

Power Struggles

The commentator considers how the teacher in this case feels that her or his authority is being threatened and/or challenged. How does this influence her or his actions (both positively and negatively) in the meeting and in the classroom? When stressful meetings occur, how can a teacher deal with the residual effects on her or his identity?

Assessments for Students With Special Needs

Why is the context critical in assessing students' with special needs ability to learn?

Teacher Choices

Examine the paradigm choice that the commentator presents in the second to last paragraph of this commentary. Do you support the framework she proposes to avoid either "bad" choice?

Case Commentary by Nancy L. Hutchinson

This case brings us face-to-face with some of the most important dilemmas faced by teachers in publicly funded education systems. Parents know their children well, having been their children's first and most enduring teachers. Teachers must respect and work collaboratively with the parents of their students. However, parents of exceptional children often have little experience of their children's participation in the academic and social contexts of the classroom and of the school. What parents see in the very familiar, very supportive, and, in this case, probably very predictable context of home—and of private tutoring—may not represent what the child can do or is willing to do at school.

Private tutors can spend long periods of time, under ideal conditions, working with children on small tasks drawn from the curriculum, sometimes in quite decontextualized ways. With repetition and predictability, exceptional children, such as those with developmental disabilities, may develop quite accomplished responses to specific tasks. In many cases, private tutors have frequent and close contact with parents, and much more opportunity to develop friendly and trusting relationships with them than with teachers. Because continued payment for services may depend on the exceptional student making

documented progress, the choice of tasks in tutoring can vary greatly from the curriculum-based sequence usually adopted in schools.

Teachers are acutely aware of the professional and ethical guidelines that they adopt when they enter the profession. In my experience, teachers worry a great deal both about disappointing and about misleading the parents of exceptional children. Teachers know that they must neither overstate the accomplishments of these learners nor contribute to parents' unrealistic expectations. At the same time, they must be encouraging and help the student to believe that meeting the next goal is possible. Sometimes the small learning and curriculum gains that buoy special education teachers and their exceptional students, made in the context of active, noisy, child-filled schools, are not sufficient to meet parents' high expectations. Such teachers face a moral dilemma.

While the teacher in this case must question her or his own teaching and collect reliable evidence of the child's progress at school and in private tutoring, she or he must also offer opportunities for the parent and tutor to observe the child learning at school. When everyone has the same data, a future meeting could profitably explore the importance of context to the learning and assessment of a student like Annie. With the common understandings that could be developed with such an approach, progress toward shared goals and consistent planning for Annie at home and school might be more possible.

This case reminds us that to meet the ethical demands of their profession, teachers must be scrupulously honest with parents and avoid fueling unrealistic hopes while providing encouragement and the best possible education for the exceptional students in their charge. A tall order, to be sure!

❖   EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Working With Students With Special Needs

Hutchinson considers the contextual elements that impact the dilemma faced by the teacher. Explain how differing situations may alter performance. How might a student like Annie be assessed and how does a teacher know that the assessment and tools selected are reliable? If skills can only be performed in individual contexts, then have they been learned?

Teacher Identity

Why does Hutchinson suggest that student performance influ-ences a teacher's self-confidence? Should a teacher evaluate her- or himself based upon a student's level of success?

Trust Relationships

Hutchinson in her conclusion refers to the ethical dilemmas that teachers will face. Examine the moral dilemmas she presents (referred to in paragraph 3) and discuss how teachers must balance needs and make decisions that are honest.

Case Commentary by Anne Jordan

This case is a good example of how poor communication can destroy the best efforts and intentions of educators. The meeting between the private tutoring company owner, the private tutor, the author, mother, classroom teacher, and principal could have been the key to establishing successful collaboration on behalf of Annie.

Instead, it starts with confusion among the participants about the purpose of the meeting, then degenerates into opposing "camps" and a bid for each camp to score points against the other. The meeting is later described by the author as a "battle." The principal has to take much of the responsibility for the breakdown in collaboration. He or his designated team leader should coordinate the meeting to arrive at a consensus about Annie's needs, and clarity about the roles of each participant at the meeting and beyond. The point of no return occurs in the meeting when the author challenges the owner about what is essen-tially a semantic question: What is meant by the term "reading com-prehension." In the silence that follows the challenge, each group retrenches to a position of blaming the other for failing to understand Annie's needs.

This meeting could have resulted in a different outcome. But before considering how, some questions need to be answered. First, why was the meeting called and who called it? Was the school holding an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) review, and, if so, what is con-tained in the IEP? Why was the author so insecure and confused about her or his role and responsibilities in the meeting?

Let's assume that this was an IEP review meeting, called by the school with the intention of collaborating with the tutoring company and Annie's parents to develop a suitable plan for Annie. Let's also assume that the participants have been asked to bring their records about Annie's current achievements, such as assessment data and samples of work. Mr. Miller should begin the meeting by establishing the purpose of the meeting (e.g., to find out how Annie is progressing and to collaborate in developing the Individualized Educational Plan). He should then ask each participant to describe how he or she sees Annie's current strengths, progress, and needs. Participants would be encouraged to illustrate their perspectives from the materials they brought.

The next step would be for the group to discuss what were the priorities for revising Annie's placement in a special education program, known in Canada as an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IRPC), including the expectations for the next term and the balance of the school year. A discussion of the evaluation criteria would complete the proceedings ("If this plan is working, what will Annie be doing differently that we will all be able to see when we next meet?").

An astute team leader would demonstrate skills in leading a collaborative team process: making people comfortable, acknowledging achievements, listening for agreement, and, if necessary, intervening by reminding participants that they hold a common interest in meeting Annie's needs. He or she would close the meeting with a summary of what had been accomplished, the tasks to which the group had agreed, and asking how well the group felt the meeting had gone.

❖ EXPLORING THE ISSUES

Communication

Working with parental and community groups can be challenging. Anne Jordan points out that the poor communication among all involved parties adds to the challenge. When parties disagree on the best plan of action, what other steps might be taken to facilitate solutions?

Leadership

Anne Jordan speculates on who called the meeting and why. What role might the principal have played to ease tensions and work toward a more positive outcome?

❖ ENGAGING WITH THE COMMENTARIES

Assessment

Consider the teacher's assessment of Annie's academic performance versus that of Annie's parents and tutor. Becky Wai-Ling Packard and Nancy L. Hutchinson point out that contextual elements may influence learning. Compare and contrast these two commentaries.

Students With Special Needs

Dealing with students with special needs can be stressful. How can a teacher know if content, teaching approaches, and student development all align? How can teachers ensure that they have met the needs of their students?

Collaboration

Hutchinson focuses on ethical issues, whereas Jordan takes a very practical stance. How would Hutchinson's ethical consideration affect implementing Jordan's suggestions?

Teacher Identity

The commentators write about the upsetting impact the meeting with Annie's team had on the teacher. How do Wai-Ling Packard and Hutchinson suggest the teacher find ways to cope and preserve sense of self?

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, 7, and 10.

❖ ADDITIONAL READINGS

Alberta Education, Special Education Branchs. (1996). Partners during changing times: An information booklet for parents of children with special needs. Edmonton, AB: Author.

This is a guide for parents with children with disabilities. There are four parts: responsibilities and resources for parents; assessments and planning for exceptional children, supports, and resources; dispute resolution and appeals; and funding. Appendixes include helpful tips.

Boesel Dunn, K., & Boesel Dunn, A. (1993). *Trouble with school: A family story about learning disabilities.* Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.
    Based on a true-life experience, one family's narrative reveals the stress when a child is diagnosed with a learning disability and the family learns to cope and adjust.

Cohen, E. G. (1994). *Designing group work: Strategies for the heterogeneous classroom* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
    The focus here is group work at any grade level. The authors suggest that group work alleviates challenges that teachers face. Strategies, perspective on group dynamics, and creative team building examples are presented.

Friend, M., & Cook, L. (1992). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals.* Toronto, ON: Copp Clark Pitman.
    This book provides a look at how teams of school professionals effectively work together to provide a range of services for classroom teachers, special education teachers, and counselors for students with special needs. It addresses collaboration as a style, stressing the need for accompanying knowledge and skills to guide practice. Future teachers may learn how to collaborate with school professionals and families of students who are often placed in general classroom settings.

Hargreaves, A. (1995). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. New York: Teachers College Press.
    This book features a discussion by Hargreaves on modernity, postmodernism, postmodernity, and a view toward teachers' roles against a materialistic, functionalist view of history and social change.

Kilbourn, B. (1990). *Constructive feedback: Learning the art.* Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Press.
    The 13 stages in this case study inquiry provide a model that features a teacher and his colleagues. In order to foster professional development, two teachers engage in (1) Beginning the Process, (2) Feedback

Overload, (3) Different Perspectives on Success, (4) Being Explicit in the Process, and so on, until they reach (13) Stress of the Process.

Loughran, J. J. (2002, January/February). Effective reflective practice: In search of meaning in learning about teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(1), 33–43.

Reflective practice is useful and informing to practice. It is important, however, to identify the nature of reflection to provoke ways of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and noting diverse points of view. By examining teacher practice and the relationship between time, experience, and expectations of learning through reflection, Loughran explains how reflection can influence professional knowledge.

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.