

The Case of Jim Peterson

Jim had begun student teaching only a week ago, and his enthusiasm was already beginning to wane. Mrs. Fitzgerald, the cooperating teacher, was strict and inflexible with the students, in Jim's opinion, and he felt that she treated him that way, too. Nevertheless, she was the wife of the principal, and Jim wanted to make a very positive impression on her so that she could, hopefully, make positive comments about him to the principal. Jim had waited so long to get a regular teaching job and, as an older student at 35, he was desperate for any hopeful situation.

Jim thought of himself as "laid back," easy to get along with, and usually liked by the adolescents with whom he had previously worked. He believed that when the curriculum addressed students' interests and needs, behavior problems would be minimal. The key to good classroom management, in Jim's opinion, was a relevant curriculum. Furthermore, the profanity used by some students and talking out without permission by many did not really bother Jim as long as the behaviors were not too disruptive. Yet these were the very behaviors that Mrs. Fitzgerald would not tolerate.

Mrs. Fitzgerald explained her inflexibility to Jim as necessary because "These students have serious behavior problems, and you cannot let up or they'll take over." She repeated to Jim many times that "Behavior management is more important than anything else you do." The principal agreed with her in his comments to the teacher and students and in his expectations. Mr. Fitzgerald insisted that all classroom doors remain open at all times. He would patrol the corridors frequently to shout at students out of class without permission or to intervene in a noisy classroom. At close to 7 feet tall, his height and deep voice easily intimidated both students and teachers.

The eight-week summer program served students with disabilities who were eligible for twelve-month educational services. Thirteen classes were located in the bright, cheerful building of U-shaped corridors painted in vibrant colors. However, there was no air conditioning, and life in the building became difficult for students and staff on many sultry afternoons. There was a schoolwide discipline system in which students began each day with 100 points and lost them for various infractions throughout the day, a response cost system. At the end of the week, points were exchanged for rewards. Mr. Fitzgerald expected every classroom to operate accordingly.

Mrs. Fitzgerald's class consisted of seven students, ages 11 to 13, who were classified seriously emotionally disturbed. Six students were African American and one was White. However, the composition of the class did not represent the population

throughout the region. In each county of this semirural and small urban region, minority students were only 3 to 5 percent of the school population and in some areas they were less than 1 percent. The largest numbers of students of color came from the older urban areas of the region. Mrs. Fitzgerald's class did represent, however, the disproportionate placement of African American students in classes for students who are emotionally or behaviorally disturbed, which exists throughout the country. Also, because it was a summer program, students came from many schools in several counties, and Mrs. Fitzgerald's students did not know each other, a fact that Mrs. Fitzgerald did not consider important. Nor did she consider important the fact that she was White, as were the majority of teachers in the school.

She preferred to begin academic lessons the first day of school and she used traditional materials and methods. Thus, when Jim began to plan instruction, she told him, "I use basal readers and various easy paperback books. There are teacher editions available for the science, social studies, and mathematics texts that I use, and they will be helpful to you in planning lessons." Jim silently disagreed with her traditional approach, and he looked forward to being more creative.

Jim believed that he had a good understanding of the students' interests and needs. In fact, Mrs. Fitzgerald's students reminded Jim of others whom he had recently tutored at the college he attended. Actually, Jim thought of himself as an experienced teacher, since he had also worked the past summer at a school for adolescents with serious emotional disabilities. He had been a childcare and residential counselor and later a teacher's aide at the school. Many of the students with whom he had worked were African American and Latino, and Jim felt that he had been very successful with them. Although Jim was White, he had worked in many situations in which he was in the minority. He had worked as a sergeant in the military and had no problems with discipline. Jim's other jobs included work in a restaurant and convenience store. He felt quite proud of the experience he had accumulated and his preparation for teaching.

Actually, as the time for student teaching approached, Jim had smiled when his classmates expressed anxiety about beginning student teaching. "I don't feel any nervousness at all," he told one classmate. "I have worked with lots of students like those I will have in my student teaching." In fact, he also expressed his confidence and experience to Mrs. Fitzgerald on the first day. However, he was somewhat disappointed when she responded, "Don't forget that you are a student teacher, after all, with lots to learn, and the students here are very challenging."

Jim searched for some way to remain optimistic, and he found it in the makeup of the class. The majority of the students were African American, and Jim became excited about implementing many of the ideas that he had learned about in his courses on multicultural education. He had learned about materials that he could use immediately.

His first responsibility in Mrs. Fitzgerald's classroom was to take over the reading instruction. Jim believed that stories about African American sports heroes would motivate the students and hold their interest. As required, he met with Mrs. Fitzgerald to discuss his plans. It was obvious to Jim that she was not too pleased when she said, "You can try the material, but you must remain firm and consistent and maintain control. I do not want chaos in my classroom."

On the following Monday morning Jim began reading instruction with the story on Jackie Robinson. All the students were present and curious about the new material. Motivation was not a problem. They were all seated at a rectangular table and, after Jim introduced the story, students took turns reading aloud as he provided cues and prompts. After each chapter of the story, there was a brief discussion, which Jim led using stimulating questions. This procedure was followed each day until Thursday, when the classroom fell into chaos.

The single White student in the group jumped out of his seat, threw his material on the floor, and shouted, "I ain't reading this no more. I'm sick of niggers!"

Two of the African American students immediately responded with, "We'll whip your ass."

The White student ran out of the room with Jim running close behind. Mrs. Fitzgerald remained in the classroom.

As he returned to the room holding the student by the shoulder, Jim could see that Mrs. Fitzgerald was angry. She shouted at him, "Mr. Peterson, put away that material immediately and do not plan to use it again!" Jim found her words really piercing when she added, "You have created chaos in my classroom!"

He was devastated. All he could think of was how well prepared he had been and that he never anticipated this kind of problem. What went wrong? His good intentions, his knowledge of multicultural education, his prior teaching experience, all the training in working with students who have emotional disabilities—all seemed useless. He hated to think about tomorrow and his shaken confidence. Sure, he would ask for a conference with his university supervisor, but Mrs. Fitzgerald was obviously unhappy with him. He did not believe that he could change that.

Besides, he had some questions that he couldn't answer about diversity and multicultural education. What happened in this situation? Was it too risky to use such materials in a group where only one student was different? What should he have done with that student? The practicum was only eight weeks and already two weeks were completed. Would he make it through? He needed a job so badly . . . should he ask to start over in another placement?

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the students' classroom situation and the particular aspects that might prove challenging for any teacher.
2. What discrepancies exist between Jim's expectations for his student teaching and what actually occurred? What discrepancies exist between what Mrs. Fitzgerald expected and what actually occurred?
3. What perceptions did Jim have of himself when he began student teaching? What were the beliefs he held about multicultural education, instructional approaches, and classroom management?
4. How did Jim's beliefs about teaching conflict with Mrs. Fitzgerald's? With the students' views of what and how they were to learn?
5. What do we know about multicultural education and culturally responsive classroom management from experts in the field that would help to guide the decisions that need to be made in this situation?

6. How could the university supervisor reframe the issues in this conflict to help Jim and Mrs. Fitzgerald move forward in the student teaching experience?
7. What goals should Jim and Mrs. Fitzgerald set for themselves and for the class from this point on?