

CHAPTER 5

Emotional/Behavior Disorder, Learning Disability, or Just Sensitive?

Germaine: *"Why you looking at me?"*

I can qualify Germaine for LD. . . . His reading was OK but his math was very low. His verbal IQ was low. He doesn't really have LD, but with this [special education] teacher, he'll get the nurturing and individual attention he needs. (Psychologist's comment)

Germaine was an African American boy attending Centerville Elementary School, which served a low-income population in a historically African American neighborhood. Although we conducted between 8 and 12 observations in Germaine's second-grade classroom between late fall and spring of that academic year, we did not notice him particularly during the course of those observations. In fact, when we heard of his referral in the spring, we were surprised that we were not aware of him or his difficulties.

We discovered that Germaine had been **retained in the first grade** and had been evaluated for special education **midway** through his repeat year. He was found not eligible for special education services at that time.

REFERRED AGAIN: BUT BY WHOM AND WHY?

In April of his second-grade year, Germaine was referred once again for evaluation. It was not clear from the record, or from our conversation with the teacher, who had initiated the referral. We were not sure if this was part of the administration's new policy of initiating referrals rather than relying on teachers to refer. We were told that a **parent conference** had been called to consider retention again for Germaine, **but the outcome of the conference was to refer for evaluation.** We assumed that this decision was made in view of the school district's ruling that a child could not be retained twice.

We first heard of the referral in May, when we saw Ms. Taylor, Germaine's upbeat Black teacher, writing anecdotal reports for Germaine. She had writ-

ten notes almost every day from May 1 through May 19, as follows: In the column for "antecedents" she wrote "normal condition" for each date. In the column for "behavior," she wrote: "Smiles to self; looking at pencil; talking to self; playing with pencil; writing on desk; fingers in mouth; sitting on feet in chair; looking at worksheet with hands on head." Under "consequences," she wrote: "Direct student to task; frowns; does not complete work; teacher asks, do you understand what you're doing? He replies, no."

Ms. Taylor told us that she wondered if the child might be "hearing voices or something" because sometimes he seemed to "have tics," just looking around, playing with his pencil. When asked if his facial expression changed as he did these things, she said no, "he just gazes around." She commented that she knew the child's mother was in a "mental institution." She went on to say that she was "told to do anecdotes on him." Shrugging, she looked at the paper and said she really didn't know what else to write. She added that she was told to "just keep writing."

The psychologist's comments on Germaine's referral were equally vague. Remarking that he had been evaluated previously and found ineligible, this time "they" were telling her that there definitely had to be "something wrong." She said she agreed to test him but only if they furnished her with "ironclad anecdotes." She did not recall the details of the child's previous evaluation, beyond the fact that "the home situation was part of it."

The referral was also supported by behavioral checklists filled out by Ms. Taylor, the homeroom teacher; and Ms. Cooke, a White, veteran second-grade teacher. Of a total of 50 items across four domains, the teachers' selections included difficulties with attending, interpersonal skills, and self-concept, but the actual items chosen differed greatly. Ms. Taylor checked only 8 of the 50 as excessive items and Ms. Cooke checked 19.

EVALUATED AGAIN

Germaine was evaluated by a White female psychologist perhaps in her 60s. Her finding regarding Germaine's emotional condition was unequivocal: "Germaine continues to be an emotionally healthy child." Nor did she find any evidence of attention disorder. Rather, the report stated, over a 2-day period of testing, Germaine attempted all the tasks, seemed to be motivated, and never tried to stop or avoid the testing. Further, the report noted that he approached his tasks "very methodically and handled his frustration very adequately, maintained good eye contact, and sat still." Specifying that his responses to the projective testing were generally "happy and upbeat" and indicated a solid sense of right and wrong, the report concentrated on Germaine's academic needs.

Tested on the WISC III, Germaine's overall IQ score remained at 83, as in the previous testing. However, instead of his verbal and performance scores remaining evenly balanced, his performance score rose to 93 and his verbal score fell to 76. Based on this information, as well as the fact that in his previous evaluation his expressive-language score was 29 points below that of his receptive language, the psychologist concluded that Germaine was finding increasing difficulty in expressing himself. Stating that the performance score represented the most accurate measure of his intellectual functioning, she instructed that this score be recorded for purposes of comparisons with other test scores. When interpreted in this way, Germaine's scores did reflect a discrepancy between his IQ score and his achievement levels, especially in math. This made him eligible for special education services under the category learning disabled.

Germaine's academic levels ranged widely. At the high end, he scored at a 3.3-level in writing samples; within the second-grade range on letter-word, passage comprehension, and calculation; and within the first-grade range for applied problems and dictation. The report concluded that he was having "great difficulty in math; can't regroup; poor money concepts."

The psychologist noted one contradiction within Germaine's performance in the testing. According to the report, although Germaine scored low on several verbal items, later in the evaluation he used some of the words that he claimed not to know. Our observation notes specified some of these; for example, when asked what the weather was like in a picture, Germaine replied quickly, "Summer." Earlier, in response to a question about the four seasons, he had failed to propose the word *summer*, even with some helpful prompting from the assessor. Most striking to us was the sudden increase in Germaine's vocabulary when he began making up stories based on a set of pictures, an activity in which he engaged with great enthusiasm. His statements included, "He don't have no children. He childless"; "She tried to escape into the house and the police came and they arrested the thief. . . . He choked her and she got unconscious"; "The suspect . . . the police search for him with helicopters and canines and they catch him and put him in jail for life."

The outcome of the recommendation was that Germaine should be placed in a program with a smaller teacher-pupil ratio and an IEP. Deficits in language should be addressed daily, and he should receive small-group counseling.

SPECIAL EDUCATION: PRIMARY OR INTERMEDIATE?

We began observing Germaine in October that year. In all, we conducted 12 classroom observations, which included his two special education classrooms,

his general education homeroom, and one observation in a music class. We also interviewed both his special education teachers and his father.

Germaine had three special education teachers throughout his third-grade year. Ms. Perez, the primary special education teacher to whom he had been assigned, was a young Hispanic woman who ran a structured classroom in a gentle manner that supported the psychologist's description of her as "nurturing." Within a month, however, Ms. Perez found it necessary to send Germaine to the intermediate special education class for reading because his reading was "fluent" and "on grade level." That class served fourth and fifth graders who had an IEP for reading and was taught by Ms. Merriweather, a young White woman whose excellent rapport with her class resulted in a flexible but constructive learning atmosphere. However, she resigned late in the fall and was replaced by Ms. Church, a young Black woman who was a recent college graduate.

Ms. Perez was baffled by Germaine's having an IEP for reading. She suggested several reasons. Perhaps, she surmised, in writing he didn't "want to be bothered to write a long sentence," a problem common to most of her students. Or, perhaps, she said, he may have been "fighting in class" and falling behind in his work. Finally, she mused that it was probably his "attitude . . . processing problems. . . . He needs to verbalize more. He will not tell you what he feels. . . . But you know the story, don't you? [At home,] that's hard for him."

In math, Ms. Perez described Germaine as taking a long time with his work because he was very unsure of himself. **Her approach was to allow him to do a smaller number of sums than other students, emphasizing correctness rather than quantity.** She reported that his skills were progressing—he was doing addition of three digits with regrouping, which was third-grade level. His subtraction with regrouping of three digits was weaker but he did grasp the borrowing steps. She stated that upon his mastering the three-digit subtraction with regrouping, he would be on grade level.

Reading was the big puzzle. The intermediate special education teacher, Ms. Merriweather, reported that Germaine, reading at a 3.1 level, was actually ahead of all her students. Most were at least one grade below, some more than that.

"WHY YOU LOOKING AT ME?"

Germaine's behavior in class seemed to vary with the context. Ms. Merriweather, the intermediate special education teacher, described him as "day-dreamy," tending to "zone out." Even in the middle of writing something, he might just stop and daydream. She stated that he was never disruptive,

but he would always report someone else who was. Ms. Perez, in contrast, did not find Germaine "daydreamy" or "zoning out," but she was concerned that he would get very upset if any of his peers bothered him at all. She said he was also slow with his work because he was "too busy complaining and minding other people's business." He had low self-esteem and would always think others were saying something bad about him. He would exclaim, "Why you looking at me?" Ms. Perez would encourage him to be positive by saying that maybe his peers were admiring something he was doing. Our observations did note Germaine pouting and becoming very irritated if someone took his pencil or seemed to be teasing him.

As the year progressed it became evident that Germaine was very sensitive to classroom context, but we also saw that he was capable of staying on task in circumstances that were quite distracting. However, he could also join in with a misbehaving group of peers. In his primary special education class, Ms. Perez's strong instruction and gentle but firm management seemed to bring out the best in him. The same was true in his initial placement in Ms. Merriweather's intermediate special education program. When she left the position in the middle of the school year, however, a number of unfortunate events occurred.

First, it took a month or more to find a replacement for Ms. Merriweather. During that time, all the special education students were sent to the primary program and Ms. Perez found herself, along with a paraprofessional, responsible for 42 students in an age range from kindergarten through fifth grade. Like many of his peers, Germaine became very unsettled during that period. Yet in the midst of considerable classroom uproar, we noted Germaine talking quietly to a peer—no worse than the rest of class. However, Ms. Perez said that he was frequently "whiny and complaining," talking a lot and tending to be rather aggressive, getting into arguments, or would "just sit there" when he didn't understand something.

The other unfortunate result of this staff change was that the replacing teacher, Ms. Church, had great difficulty establishing and maintaining classroom control. In February, the class, which in the fall had consisted of about 16 students, now had 24, whom the teacher divided into four groups, by level. In one of our observations in February, we noted that there were 31 students in the classroom.

Through our four observations in Ms. Church's classroom, the atmosphere was chaotic. There was always excessive loud talking among the students. Sometimes the class would begin quietly but the arrival of the fifth graders would convert the situation into an uproar. Germaine would sometimes cooperate with the teacher's attempts at instruction, but at other times he would join in the talking and laughing. We never saw him engage in any disruptive behavior, even on a day when a fight broke out in the class and

security had to be called. In April, after two months of this atmosphere, Ms. Church informed us that an administrative decision had been made to "split" her class, taking the fifth graders out.

Germaine's general education third-grade classroom was also characterized by a great deal of chatter. Classroom management consisted mainly of exhortations by the teacher, Ms. Harris, urging the children to "be quiet, be quiet!" In our observations we never saw Germaine create or get into mischief. On one occasion we saw him become very upset when a girl took his assignment and refused to give it back. Glaring at her, he gestured with his hand that he'd like to sock her in the face.

Perhaps because of this atmosphere, or maybe because of stereotypical expectations based on Germaine's special education placement, this general education teacher did not seem very aware of Germaine's skills. In a science lesson, Ms. Harris told our researcher that she knew that he "probably could not do the work, but she would make him do it anyway and not give a grade." However, as the lesson progressed, the teacher asked Germaine to read a passage and he did so quickly and accurately. The passage included words such as *dinosaur* and *fossils*. With a surprised expression, the teacher gently tapped his head and said, "Boy, you're trying to fool everyone around here!" Germaine smiled.

There was one occasion when we saw that Germaine could behave just as badly as his peers. This was in a music class, taught by a White woman in whose class we had seen normally well-behaved kindergartners run wild. In this case, as Germaine's third-grade classmates chased into the room, shouting and running, Germaine jumped on top of a chair and started running on top of the row of chairs, laughing loudly. Soon he was playing catch with another boy while other children argued, cursed one another, banged on the piano keys, and walked out of the room as they wished. From this class, we followed Germaine back to his primary special education class, where he sat quietly and got quickly to work.

"MOST IMPROVED"

At the end of Germaine's third-grade year, Ms. Perez told us she was "very pleased" with his progress and she would describe him at the "most improved" in her class. As we spoke, Ms. Perez went over Germaine's scores on the reading portion of the Woodcock Johnson (WJ). As she came to his name, she exclaimed: "OK! Germaine! Look at that! All math calculation, 4.5, so this is telling you fourth grade!" Ms. Perez had not tested Germaine on the reading portion of the WJ, explaining that the intermediate special education teacher would do that. However, she was confident that he would be scoring toward the end of the third grade.

Regarding behavior, Ms. Perez saw Germaine's difficulties as being primarily social: "He needs to be away from the kids in order for him to work." She added that it was "hard for him to know behaviors if they are good or bad." However, as we pressed for more detail, Ms. Perez's answers seemed to point more to Germaine's competitiveness, his unwillingness to wait his turn to offer an answer. She summarized:

I tell him, "If you know the answer that is fine, but you don't have to give the answer all of the time!" I think he wants people to know that he knows all of the answers, he always has to be perfect.

Germaine was to be promoted to the fourth grade, continuing to receive special education services.

In our last conversation with Ms. Perez, she spoke of the importance of trying to get her students ready for the statewide testing. Even though, at that time, the scores of students in special education were not counted in the assessment of schools, Ms. Perez's students did as well as many in general education, and she felt a responsibility to prepare them for the testing. This underlined an issue we knew to be of great concern in this and all the schools in our study: The competition for improved grades in the state's standardized testing. In this school, as in some others, we had been explicitly told both by administrators and teachers that there was a great "push" to get special education placement for all those children "who needed it" before their year to take the state testing. This meant careful monitoring of children at the lowest academic rungs, in order to have them evaluated for possible special education eligibility.

GERMAINE'S FATHER

An interview with Germaine's father made it clear that this child had full and individualized support at home. His mother's psychological difficulties, it seemed, had resulted in her being away from the home for long periods, and in his father's opinion, Germaine was missing his mother and demanding more attention as a result. The father described his son as very competitive. He was concerned that Germaine should be doing better both academically and behaviorally and appreciated the school's efforts to individualize his educational program. He felt that the special education placement was a good solution because of the small class sizes and individualized attention. When we met this father, unexpectedly, some years later, he said that he believed that Germaine had improved a great deal because of the placement and he was satisfied with the school's efforts.

Questions

1. In your opinion, why was the school so eager to try to qualify Germaine for special education services?
2. Review the current definition of *specific learning disabilities*. What do you believe to be the causes of Germaine's difficulties? Do you consider Germaine to be a student with a disability?
3. Review the No Child Left Behind Act (available online) to find out what current policy is on standardized testing for students with disabilities. Do you believe that students with disabilities should take the same tests as their nondisabled peers? Do you think their scores should count in the evaluation of the school?
4. What effect, if any, do you believe that class size has on a student's ability to learn? Contact a school in your local district and find out what the average class size is for elementary school classes and special education classes. See if you can find research on the effects of class size.
5. It seems that the psychologist interpreted Germaine's scores in such a way as to allow him to "qualify" for special education services. She believed that the placement with a strong, nurturing teacher would be to his benefit. Do you think this was achieved? Do you believe that the ends justified the means?