

CASE STUDIES ON

DIVERSITY & SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

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SAMANTHA, A VIVACIOUS seventh grader at Hillside School, a middle school in the predominantly low-income mountainous outskirts of northern Virginia, loves science class. By all apparent accounts, Samantha has a gift for the sciences, too. She aces all of her quizzes and tests and regularly helps classmates who are struggling with experiments.

This makes it particularly difficult for Ms. Grady to understand why Samantha rarely turns in her science homework. Wondering whether there was an issue at home, Ms. Grady

has touched base several times with her colleagues who have Samantha's younger siblings in their classes to see whether they were noticing similar patterns. To the contrary, she learned that her younger siblings always turn in their homework.

Ms. Grady has reached out to Samantha every way she knows how, from pleading with her to offering to give her more advanced work that might engage her in new ways. On several occasions she has asked Samantha why she rarely turns in her homework.

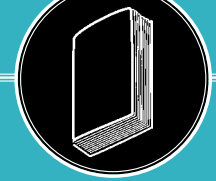
"It's nothing," Samantha typically

responds. "I'll do it next time. I promise."

Regardless of how often she calls Samantha's parents, nobody answers. *Imagine how successful Samantha could be if only her parents cared enough to support her education*, Ms. Grady has often thought to herself.

As a conscientious teacher, Ms. Grady wants to support Samantha. On the other hand, she has roomfuls of other students who also need her attention. And, when it comes down to it, Ms. Grady's grading policy is clear: students are allowed to turn in one homework assignment one day late without

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“FROM THE MOMENT SHE GETS HOME FROM SCHOOL UNTIL HER DAD RETURNS FROM WORK, SHE’S BABYSITTING FRANCIS AND KEVIN, HER YOUNGER SIBLINGS. SHE’S BUSY TAKING THEM TO THE PLAYGROUND, COOKING THEM DINNER, HELPING THEM WITH THEIR HOMEWORK.”

penalty—she calls this her “life happens” rule; but in every other instance, failure to turn in homework results in a grade of “0” for that assignment.

One day after school Ms. Grady approaches Mr. Burns, a social studies teacher at Hillside who had taken a particular interest in Samantha during the previous academic year.

“I know,” Mr. Burns says. “Brilliant young woman. I had the same experience with her. I didn’t know what to think until I decided to pay her family a visit at home.” Having grown up in the area and attended Hillside as a low-income student, Mr. Burns bristled at some of his colleagues’ deficit-laden perceptions of the local community.

It never occurred to Ms. Grady to visit Samantha’s home. “Wow!” she responds, taken aback by her colleague’s “direct action” approach to student success. “What did you learn?”

“A *lot*,” he answers, explaining that Samantha’s father finally found a steady job four months after the local mill shut down. As she has done for years, Samantha’s mother continues to piece together multiple jobs. “She usually sneaks in the door around 11 p.m., an hour or so after her husband, trying not to wake the kids,” Mr. Burns explains.

“From the moment she gets home from school until her dad returns from work, she’s babysitting Francis and Kevin, her younger siblings. She’s busy

taking them to the playground, cooking them dinner, helping them with *their* homework.”

“Well,” Ms. Grady reflects, “that explains why her siblings’ homework is always in on time and how well Samantha does helping her classmates with their work.”

“Now all I have to do is figure out what to do about Samantha’s grade. And I wonder how many of my other students are in similar situations,” Ms. Grady says.

There exists no magic formula for solving the conundrum in which Ms. Grady finds herself. This is why, in our estimation, we must develop and hone the sorts of competencies that help us

to make sense out of real-life messiness. Otherwise, we risk allowing ourselves to be swayed by popular mythology (“poor people do not care enough about their children’s education”). We risk responding without a contoured understanding for why certain conditions exist in our classrooms and schools.

We have the power to strengthen our abilities to create equitable learning environments and to maintain high expectations for all students by considering contextual factors in addition to the everyday practicalities of our work as we shape our professional practice.

The Case Method

One tool—and, in our experience, a particularly effective one—for strengthening those abilities is what is commonly called the “case method.” The premise of the case method is that by analyzing real-life scenarios based on actual events, such as the situation involving Samantha and Ms. Grady, we can practice applying theoretical ideas (such as *educational equity*) to on-the-ground professional practice.*

Our process for analyzing educational cases is comprised of seven steps. The steps are accumulative, building steadily and holistically toward a set of informed, mindful responses to often complex classroom and school situations.

* Darling-Hammond, L. (2006) *Powerful Teacher Education: Lessons from Exemplary Programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

STEP

IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM OR PROBLEMS POSED BY THE CASE

1

Begin by naming the challenges or problems (or potential problems) that are explicit and immediately apparent to you. Once you have a grasp of those more obvious dynamics, try to dig a little deeper. Look for less explicit, not-so-obvious examples of existing or potential bias, inequity, interpersonal tensions, stereotypes, prejudices, or assumptions. What does the case tell us about school or classroom policy, about instructional practices or curricula, about individuals’ attitudes that might hint at something deeper than those surface-level biases and inequities?

STEP

TAKE STOCK OF VARYING PERSPECTIVES

2

Our case has at least a couple of obvious stakeholders. Our first task, then, for Step 2 is, as best we can, to walk in Ms. Grady and Samantha’s shoes. How might they, given who they are in relation to one another, be experiencing the situation?

Complicating matters, despite being at the center of the scenario, Samantha and Ms. Grady are only two of many affected parties. Samantha’s parents, whose other two children, Frances and Kevin, also attend the school and in the future might even have Ms. Grady as a teacher, are involved. Then there are Samantha’s classmates, the “bystanders.” How might Ms. Grady’s decisions affect other students who are from families in poverty?

STEP

CONSIDER POSSIBLE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

3

Our next task is to imagine the potential challenges and opportunities presented by the case. Start with the individuals involved. We might surmise that Ms. Grady has an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of low-income students—of both the hurdles they might face and the resiliencies they demonstrate. Of course, she also faces a number of challenges, not least of which is overcoming her own biases. What sorts of opportunities and challenges does the case present for Samantha? For her classmates?

We also want to consider the *institutional* challenges and opportunities. We might assume, by way of challenges, that Ms. Grady might not get a tremendous amount of support if she chose to enact a homework policy that did not conform to those of her colleagues. An institutional opportunity, on the other hand, might be the chance to collaborate toward more equitable school-wide policies and practices in order to more effectively engage low-income students and families.

STEP

IMAGINE EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

4

[W]e turn, in Step 4, to imagining what a fair and equitable resolution to the situation might look like. This is a critical step, as Steps 5 through 7 are designed to facilitate the process of working toward the outcomes we define in Step 4.

First, it’s important to distinguish *equitable* outcomes

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from *equal* outcomes. Equality, as we see it, connotes *sameness*. Equity, on the other hand, connotes *fairness*. Equity takes context into account.

Second, remember to *think both immediate term and long term*. What can be resolved right now, on the spot, and what will equity look like once it is resolved? You might decide, for example, that Ms. Grady needs to find a different strategy *right now* to communicate with Samantha. Perhaps an equitable outcome would be professional development on socioeconomic issues for the teachers at Samantha's school or a strengthened relationship between Ms. Grady and Samantha's parents.

Finally, *be specific*. Identify very specific, on-the-ground outcomes. How, specifically, will things be different in that classroom and school if we commit to resolving the issue and all its complexities equitably?

STEP BRAINSTORM IMMEDIATE-TERM RESPONSES

5

Now that you have some equitable outcomes in mind, it is time to begin brainstorming strategies to get us there. What are some of the things you might do *right now*, if you were in Ms. Grady's shoes, to achieve those outcomes? This is a brainstorm, remember, so do not overthink.

All we are doing here is making a list. It's an informed list, based on all the work we have been doing in the previous steps. But it is still just a list.

STEP BRAINSTORM LONGER-TERM POLICY AND PRACTICE ADJUSTMENTS

6

In Step 6 we turn to longer-term strategies, often for more substantive change. This is where we might brainstorm ways to bolster awareness about the sorts of challenges Samantha faces throughout the school, if that is one of our equitable outcomes. It is where we focus on things such as institutional culture, school-wide practices, or even district policy, if we believe they need to be altered in order to achieve our equitable outcomes.

Here, again, we're brainstorming. Try not to self-censor. Just focus on recording whatever ideas come to mind based on Steps 1 through 5.

STEP CRAFT A PLAN OF ACTION

7

During this, the final step, we craft our brainstorms into a set of specific actions that will result in the equitable outcomes we imagined in Step 5. How would you respond in order to ensure, to the best of your knowledge and power, equity for everybody involved?

A Few Final Thoughts

We recognize, of course, that in the heat of the moment we do not always have time to sit down and think through the seven steps of a case analysis process. The point is not to memorize these steps. Instead, the idea is to use them to practice our skills by reflecting on classroom situations through a diversity and social justice lens. Practice enough, and that view will become second nature. ♦



Toolkit

Apply the seven-step case method to another case—or to a case of your own.

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