Case Study 1

On my first day as an assistant teacher at a large Head Start center, I approached the classroom building with excitement and anxiety. I had just completed my education and moved to the city. The center was eager to hire me because the assistant teacher in one of their 4-year-old classrooms just had a baby and has retired. This was my chance to reach out to the children I care so much about and use my creativity in new ways.

My class of 20 children was all African-American, as were all the other teachers at the center. I was somewhat self-conscious because of the racial and cultural differences between myself and the families and staff, especially since I had a different accent and was trying to fit into a new, city style of living. I knew that one challenge I would face immediately was learning as much as I could about the social expectations and home lives of the children so that I could honor my commitment to child-centered learning.

After a few weeks it became clear that my transition was not going the way I hoped. I felt like an outsider with my fellow teachers, with the children, and with the families. The other teachers, including Shawnda (my head teacher) had all worked at the center for at least 2 years. They had established their own way of doing things and they made it clear that they weren’t interested in changing anything.

I could understand how they felt. Who was I, a young woman full of new ideas and without much experience, to tell them how to manage their classroom? Everything had been just fine (according to them) before I came. They didn’t understand the developmentally appropriate strategies that I was trying to use to encourage children’s communication and thinking.

For example, each morning the children ate breakfast and then lined up to brush their teeth and use the bathroom. Shawnda always insisted that the children line up quietly to wait their turns. The bathroom only holds 3 children, so the line took a long time, and the children would start to talk or move around. Every morning I cringed as Shawda yelled at the children to stand still and wait quietly. I finally decided that this had to change and I worked out a plan for the children to use the bathroom in small groups while the rest of the children took part in a group “follow the leader” activity.

The center uses a standard Head Start curriculum model with large and small group times, choice times, and outdoor activities. I planned many hands-on science, art, and sensory activities for our choice centers. When we met for curriculum planning and review, Shawnda couldn’t understand why I was doing this type of manipulative and exploratory activity. I kept wondering to myself, “What were the children doing before I came?”

Shawnda let me know her dissatisfaction with me in words and behavior. I often found myself doing housekeeping chores or setting up materials while she taught the whole class. She complained about my lesson plans, criticized
my habit of allowing children to use materials in unplanned ways or change the songs, stories, etc., and she repeatedly brought up her belief that the children and parents had difficulty understanding me because of my accent and style of speaking.

We also had major differences in how we handled misbehavior. We had a few children who brought a lot of anger and stress from their family lives into the school. When they became upset and hostile, I preferred to separate them from the rest of the group. Then I could talk to them in a quiet setting to help them come up with ways to control their anger. I thought it was critical to preserve their sense of self and not add to their anger by embarrassing them.

Shawnda, on the other hand, resorted to punishment. She relied heavily on a “time out chair,” which was next to the door of the classroom and which put the children who were being punished on display in front of all the other children. I often heard her threatening the children with time-out, loss of privileges or activities, or calling their parents. Sometimes she just yelled at them or criticized them, and sometimes she called all of the other children’s attention to their mistakes.

I was gradually losing my self-confidence and I wasn’t happy with the child care experience the children were receiving. Meanwhile, though, the director gave me positive feedback. She told me that she respected Shawnda’s history and experience, but she valued the creativity and innovation that I brought.

My probationary period is almost over and I know the director is going to offer me a permanent position. What I don’t know is if I can eventually fit in at this school and help make a difference in the education of these children.

Activity:

1. What are the elements of the story that are problematic or require action? For each, 1) summarize the issue and 2) identify the type of ethical problem presented (danger to children, confidentiality, effective professional practice, etc.).

2. For each identified problem, propose a solution. Explain how the solution would ensure ethical practice.

3. If you were the teacher writing the story, would you stay at the school? Explain your answer.

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This case study was adapted from Rand, M. (2000). *Giving it some thought: Cases from early childhood practice*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.