**Case Study**

**Section 1: The Case Description**

Throughout the course of the year, I have been struggling with John Smith, a student of mine who has class with me during the last hour of the day in one of my 8th grade general science classes. At the start of the year, I was very frustrated with his lack of motivation to focus and complete in-class assignments. He was also known to have extreme outbursts when told to sit down or be quiet. As a teacher, the faculty at the school and myself saw this student as being very immature from these outbursts, high pitched whines, lack of social interactions and even by his physical appearance. In all of his classes, he refused to do any work and in turn, was failing all of his classes with a 20% or below. 

During the beginning of the year, we had a parent-team conference with John and his mother. A couple days before the meeting, the English teacher on my team had “warned” me about the parent saying that she was very defensive about the child and would never admit to the problems he has. (She had this student last year in her class because this was John’s second year taking 8th grade.) The first thing the mother said when she walked in the class door was about some of the problems that her son had been going through this year. Some of these problems included: they had no permanent home (currently living in a homeless shelter), death of dog and grandmother, mother was sick with illness and almost died last winter and the father ran out giving no explanation as to why. I thought that this information was very important and I was glad she told us about it. The teachers on the team, including myself, then told her about how John never did his work, goofed off in class, and seemed to not respect any of his teachers. After hearing this, the John’s mother got
very mad after this and said, “How could my son be failing if you teachers are doing your job correctly and walking around making sure he does his in-class work.” She then went on to say, “If my son is failing all of these classes, I really wonder if any of the other students in your classes are learning anything either.” These statements really made me as a teacher upset because I worked with this student very day and so did my mentor just to keep him awake and working. Generally speaking, I had to constantly talk with him at least four times a day telling him to work and most of the time he would just ignore me and go on with sleeping or talking with his peers. Once in a great while, I could get him to finish an assignment. She than proceed to “threaten” all of us by telling us that she was going to come into the classroom for the next two weeks to actually see if any learning was taking place in our classes. Only a couple of the teachers stood up to her and said that it was his responsibility to get the work done and that we could make no exceptions when it comes to student grades. During the entire conference, the student showed his attitude and disrespect for authority in front of his mother as he refused to write down his goals for the coming up semester. And still, the parent did not trust the school and blamed the teachers for her son’s misbehavior and lack of motivation.

After many observations from my field instructor, she suggested to me that I inquire about trying to initiate the process of placing John into a special education program at the school. My field instructor saw that he had emotional/behavior difficulties and that to succeed in an education system he needed the more one-on-one that special education services could provide. I discussed this with my team and we all agreed that something needed to be done about the situation. We started the process by calling in a counselor and looking at his school folder to find a little more about his academic background. When looking at his scores, we noticed that every year no matter the school John attended, he failed most classes after about 5th grade and placed in the lower 20 percentile for standardized exams. We also found a copy of a letter that the mother had written to a
teacher in a different school out of the district. This letter was to John’s fifth grade teacher complaining about her teaching style and the mother’s frustration as to why her child was not succeeding in her class. The counselor did agree that there was a good chance that his case could be up for review for special education but the parent had to consent before the process could begin. Unfortunately, the mother declined the offer and became more aggravated and received the action as a personal insult to her and her son.

During the course of events at the beginning of the year, a normal day for John would consist of a constant struggle to grasp a moment of his attention. Each time John was yelled at, he proceeded to start shouting at my mentor or myself about how he was being treated unfairly. It even got so bad that if we saw he was going to start acting up in class we would tell him to draw and that normally kept him occupied for awhile so as not to distract others in the classroom. There was even a time in class where I told him that I was going to call home, and he replied to me, “I do not have a home, remember Miss Carpenter”. As a teacher, I remember feeling a sense of shock and sadness when hearing this come from him.

Over the course of the year, I learned what techniques worked better with John. Instead of raising my voice and yelling at him, I would walk up to him and quietly say, “Please sit down and I will help you with this assignment, John.” I also had various conversations with him during class about how he was doing at home and that he could possibly pass the class if he pushed himself and stayed focused. On various occasions, I noticed another student of mine helping John during class and it seemed that he felt comfortable enough to ask her for help. To encourage this behavior, I talked with the student outside of class and told her how much I appreciated her helping John and if she didn’t mind if she could check on him once and awhile in class after she completed her own work. I also asked permission to place him next to her and she gladly agreed.
I noticed dramatic changes in John’s academic and behavioral attitudes by the end of the third marking period. John seemed to have much less, if any, angry outbursts in class and could sit down after being told once and begin to work on the assignment. I also found that on numerous occasions when I was giving notes to the class, John would stop what he was doing and would move to any open seat near the front of the class and take notes along with his peers. He would even tell me to slow down when I was talking or writing too fast. This of course was a huge improvement because little by little he was showing me that he did, in fact, care about his education and his future.

A specific event that occurred when the students were visiting Sexton High School as they were walking into the school, I heard that John was being yelled at by one of the counselors by the bus. He had one pant leg rolled up past his knee and understandably the counselors and teachers did not want him with this appearance because of the gang reference. I heard the counselor shout, “John, put your pant leg down or you are not going into the school!!!” John replied back stating that there was no way that he was going to push his pant leg back down and he started screaming back in defense. I was almost to the entry of the school and I heard over the crowds of students and teachers a very loud, “Miss Carpenter, come here now!!!” The counselor walked him to me and John almost in tears told me what the counselor was shouting at him. I said to him, “John, now you know the rules and really what kind of statement are you trying to make about yourself when you look that way.” To calm him down, I then proceeded to comment by saying, “John, it is also way too cold out here to be dressing like that. Aren’t you cold out here John?” John replied back that he was cold and he put the pant leg down and entered the school. This situation is just one example of many others where John came to me after being yelled at by others for verification. Each time, I would calmly explain why he was wrong and he would accept it and do what was told of him. This
made me feel good as a teacher because I know that I was doing something that John could respond to while avoiding the negativity and embarrassment that he probably receives so frequently.

**Section 2: Issue Identification**

The major notion that I believe is the contributing factor to most of John’s emotional and behavioral difficulties is that no one in the school was aware or was able to take the extra time needed out of their schedule to show concern for his personal situation at home. While at the same time, his mother was ignoring his needs, which demonstrated to John that the best way to solve a problem was to overlook them and to blame others instead of dealing with the problem from within the core of the situation. I think that John’s reactions at the beginning of the year were an immediate result of these two things. The teachers were not aware of his delicate, emotional state and therefore would result to yelling and embarrassing him in front of the class thus causing him to have to react negatively back. John did not feel a state of comfort or sense of security with hardly any of his peers or his teachers which might have made it seem to him that he would always have to be on the defensive because he was seen to be constantly being threatened by others. I believe that for a short moment, I tried to give John safe conditions so he was able to talk with me openly about his problems and it also gave him an opportunity to enforce the goals for him to try to succeed. The evidence for this was during the numerous times he came to me for confirmation of situations. I knew that John did not come to me because he thought that I could get him out of trouble because I never did let him off the hook. I believe that instead, John wanted me to be aware of the situation and this was his way of finding out my opinion of it. Knowing that I would be fair with him because I showed care and concern towards his situation, he always accepted my decision.

John’s mother and his personal background played a role in his emotional sensitivity issues because these were all things that symbolized instability and lack of trust. The father leaving, dog and grandmother dying and their home was even taken away from his life, leaving only his mother
to grab on to. Unfortunately, his mother only reinforced this lack of trust because she came from the same life experiences as John did and it was very apparent from the parent-teacher meetings that she was not trusting of the people around her or anyone willing to help her within the school system.

The major issue on my behalf is how can I, a science teacher, establish these close relationships with my students and parents in order to best serve their educational and personal needs. Unfortunately, most science teachers would never consider bringing personal accounts about a student’s background into a science atmosphere. In contrast, English and History content areas seem to be more flexible with this idea due to the fact that in many of these classes students need to reflect on their lives and past history in order to determine or explain a certain belief or feeling they may have. In order for this teacher-student relationship to develop over the course of the year, science teachers need to find ways to initiate communication from students, making sure to be very careful that the student does want to share this personal information about himself/herself.

Section 3: Reflection and Analysis

To know how to teach them, we must understand our students better. We must have a clear-eyed view of who they are, where they come from, how they have been instructed, what values they hold, and what their expectations and goals are (Erickson & Strommer, 1991). This quote summarizes the idea that in order to educate children to the best of our ability as teachers we must know and understand them. To do this, one needs to find the weaknesses, strengths, personal and academic history so that the teacher can accommodate to the student. If teachers are not able to relate with their students, they will not feel free to take the risk of learning in the classroom and instead block all outside stimuli and no academic or behavioral progress will be made.

I learned that as a teacher, it is our responsibility to be aware of the psychological basis for effective teaching. Teachers must be able to demonstrate an ability to come to know pupils as
individuals, to assess their personal and academic background, and show a willingness to work with
parents to serve the best interests of students. The attitudes presented by teachers toward students
should always include patience, friendliness, caring, concern, respect and involvement. If these are
not included in everyday interactions with the student, there will be an emotional strain on the
teacher-student relationship thus, causing over time poor academic and behavioral progress on
behalf of the student in the classroom.

From this experience, I have grown in my personal and professional definition of what a
science teacher responsibilities are. I understand now that all students should be seen as obtaining
the capability of learning and should never be pre-judged. A science teacher can accomplish this
task by using a variety of icebreaker activities at the start of a year or try to include more parental
involvement into the classroom. One activity that can be done with the students to find out about
their experiences in other science courses, with the particular subject matter in this course and
especially in prerequisite courses, would be to have the students write a science autobiography
about themselves. This encourages the students to open and share their thoughts and/or experiences
about science with the teacher. For example, a student might write that he/she does not enjoy lab
activities because he/she had a past incident with a fire accident. In turn, as a teacher, this would
change your perspective as to how you deal with this child especially if there were some anxious,
resistant feelings shown by the student at the start of a laboratory exercise. Other ways teachers can
get to know their students better is by: arranging for regular informal lunches with different small
groups of students, write personalized comments on assignments returned, and require students to
pick up their exams in person to discuss the outcome briefly. One good method of gaining parental
support and trust, other than sending newsletters home and making calls to report on student
progress, is to invite parents into the classroom to help with normal daily routines (such as passing
out paper and to help set up laboratory equipment). This allows the parents to observe what the
class is doing and also gives the parent an opportunity show support for the student’s educational future.

In conclusion, I believe education should be a life-long pursuit and for students to adopt to this attitude they need to associate positive experiences with education and learning and need to be confident enough to want to expand their educational horizons through risk taking. My goal as a teacher is to help my students develop a joy of learning coupled with an understanding of how being educated by giving them choices. In this way, a teacher-student relationship can be established which helps sustain student motivation and optimism even during challenges. The primary attribute for an effective teacher-student relationship is trust. Gaining trust and establishing a rapport with the student can often prove challenging but is essential to getting the student to become a confident active member of the class and begin to take interest in his or her own educational progress. Positive coaching and feedback are integral to my teaching approach, but these can only be effective if the student’s academic and personal history is acknowledged.