

THE CASES

This Suit's for Wearing

It was Tuesday morning, and as usual Miriam, Noor, Alejandra, and Ngoc were meeting in their favourite corner of the Valley Secondary School library. All four girls had found their way to the school because of their common interest in the performing arts and to the library, where they found comfort in one another's company. Their meetings had drawn them closer over the past three months, and the corner suited them well. There was a table large enough to accommodate them comfortably, and because they were so often found there together, they quickly became known as the "corner girls."

The girls enjoyed their corner and found they could still hear each other without having to raise their voices and catch the unwanted attention of Mrs Cruikshank, who was vigilant in maintaining a well-run library with a quiet working environment. On this occasion, the group was meeting to help one another make sense of their assignment on homonyms. The task was somewhat challenging for them. It not only involved understanding how a word can sound the same as another and have a completely different meaning, but also required students to demonstrate their understanding in the form of a skit. Their teacher, Mr Dyer, didn't hold out much hope that the corner girls would actually be successful given that they were mostly new to the school, were non-native speakers of English, and had remained aloof from the other 30 members of the class.

The girls had been placed together in a Grade 6/7 split, since the school didn't know what else to do with them. Some of the four girls struggled more with English than the others, and a few had serious "family issues." On occasion, one or another of the girls had an emotional outburst or displayed rude behaviour. No one really knew what went on in their homes after school, and no one dared to probe.

Although Miriam and Noor spoke English well enough to get by, they had been categorized as "slow learners." Some of the staff wondered whether their learning difficulties were actually linguistic rather than cognitive, but Miriam's behaviour seemed, at times, to be symptomatic of ADHD. In any event, the school counselling department was booked for months in advance and it was highly unlikely that any more diagnostic tests would be arranged to make a proper determination.

Noor, on the other hand, had undergone a series of formal and informal tests and was found to have dyslexia in addition to some auditory processing difficulties. She was also observed to take more time than usual in thinking through

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what she should do in simple situations where neither language nor reading seemed to be a factor.

Ngoc, who had come to Canada as a young child, was the daughter of boat people who had received little formal education in Vietnam. At home, she had no access to technology or books since both were beyond her family's reach. She was often restless, and although she seemed to relate well to the other corner girls, she remained distant from the rest of the class.

Of the four, Alejandra, a daughter of Nicaraguan parents, was the best "adapted" and the most adaptable. Her teachers had identified her as being well-read and being gifted academically, but she had annoyed the other students by frequently challenging her teachers. Some of her peers obviously felt threatened by Alejandra's precociousness, intelligence, and talent. When they began to call her a "geek," "freak," "brain bore," and "know-it-all," she realized that she was out of favour with her classmates and requested a move to Mr Dyer's class. When cyber-bullies got to her on Facebook, she was resourceful and confident enough to use a message-blocking system to prevent them from spreading derogatory messages about her.

Morris Dyer enjoyed the support of his superiors. They praised him publicly as a "quality educator" who could be counted on to maintain high educational standards even with increasingly diverse students under his charge. He was highly enthusiastic about evidence-based teaching and, if requested, could print out a complete numerical profile of any student he had taught in the past five years. When he took on the Performing Arts course in addition to his regular load, Morris simply continued to teach in the same way, breaking down the course into measurable outcomes that he could assess through so-called objective tests, quizzes, and well-defined performance tasks. He was aware that most of the outcomes in this course might be better assessed with rubrics and anecdotal comments, but he had always found these to be too difficult, time-consuming, and subjective for the kind of data analysis he preferred. Morris liked to be able to defend his grades as being standards-driven, norm-referenced, and accurate.

However, he was beginning to wonder whether his approach to teaching and assessment was going to work as well as it usually did, given the nature of this course. Although he had been very confident about his data-based teaching in the past, he was no longer sure he could rely on the validity of his assessments when used with such a diverse group of learners, including the "corner girls." He also began to wonder whether he had fallen out of step with current thinking on assessment and was inadvertently causing some of his students to disengage from their own learning. Anxious to find out, he scheduled back-to-back performance assessments. Tablet and stylus in hand, he was ready to keep score.

As he tallied the results, he felt both pleased and frustrated at the same time. He was not surprised to find that most of the class had easily grasped the point

about homonyms and had creatively acted out the words assigned to them. The corner girls had been assigned the word "suit" and were expected to show three different meanings: (1) a two-piece matching garment, (2) a combination of playing cards, and (3) the process of trying to win a woman's affection with a view to marriage. Alejandra and Miriam had not only understood the object of the lesson, but had also performed delightful pantomimes, complete with costumes and music. However, the other two members of their group, Ngoc and Noor, either didn't understand what they were supposed to do or were stubbornly resisting the opportunity to participate in any approved or expected ways. They barely took part in their group performance, and even words of encouragement from the other two had little effect. Morris realized that his usual assessment methods were inadequate for grading Ngoc and Noor fairly: on the basis of the performance, he really didn't know what they had understood.

As he began to think more carefully about these apparently disengaged students, he saw them clearly for the first time as individuals with very different needs instead of just being one of the corner girls. He realized the time had come to re-evaluate his teaching methods, his expectations of his students, and his approach to assessment.

Questions

The Case

At the beginning of the case, Morris Dyer assumes that his class will meet quality standards if he teaches the same content in the same way to everyone. Why does he begin to question these assumptions?

History

In the past, schools segregated students on the basis of various differences. How do schools continue to segregate students today? Justify your response.

Philosophy

What do you think it means to be a "quality educator"?

Sociology

In what ways do Morris Dyer's evidence-based teaching practices advantage or disadvantage certain learners in his classroom?

Implications for Practice

Whether we like to admit it or not, the myth of the normal child affects our perceptions of our students. How will you challenge this myth in your own practice?