

Fighting Chance

Professional Versus Personal Orientation

Case Overview

Background

Teacher: Ms. Carmen Vegas
Experience: 3 Years
Class: 6th Grade



Storyline

Carmen Vegas is in her third year of teaching and is struggling with the conflict between her personal belief about needing to love all of her students and the reality of having a hard time liking one of her most difficult students. Jeffrey is an angry child who is continually causing disruptions in the school. One of Carmen's coworkers confronts her about starting the process to have Jeffrey tested for a behavioral disorder due to his experiences with Jeffrey on the school playground and in his science class. Carmen consults with other professionals in the school, including a colleague and a school counselor, as she struggles to help Jeffrey and to deal with her own disturbing feelings.

Star Teacher Function: Professional Versus Personal Orientation

Some key beliefs and behaviors that comprise this function include:

- ❑ Star teachers do not believe that love is a prerequisite for teaching a child.
- ❑ Star teachers care about, respect, and accept their students.
- ❑ Star teachers approach teaching with their focus on what is best for the student, not on satisfying their own emotional needs.
- ❑ Star teachers know that ultimately they need to instill in their students an intrinsic love for learning so the children will continue to pursue learning after they leave their classroom.
- ❑ Star teachers have the necessary emotional stamina to continue to invest themselves in their students despite the personal tragedies that their students endure.

For a more detailed description of this function, see pages 54-60 of *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (Haberman 1995), which accompanies this series.

Other Topics and Issues

Although the main purpose of *Fighting Chance* is to stimulate reflection on the star teacher function of professional versus personal orientation, the case provides an opportunity for examining other issues and topics: working with professional

colleagues for the benefit of students, dealing with physically aggressive students (fights, hitting, etc.), strategies for breaking up student fights, acting out behaviors, effects of home environment on student behavior, school collaboration with social service agencies, and obtaining and dealing with personal information on students.

Scene Summaries and Questions

Scene 1: A Day in November. Recess.

Summary: It is an afternoon in November, and teacher Steve Williamson is on recess duty casually talking with some students. He is interrupted by a student who tells him that two students are fighting on the blacktop. Steve rushes over to the two boys and breaks up the fight.

Possible Questions:

1. What preventive measures can be taken on the playground to prevent such fights?
2. What techniques did Steve use to break up the fight? What else might he have done?
3. (TQ) Which of the two boys seemed to be the most aggressive and difficult to control? Marty, the bigger boy in the yellow jacket, or Jeffrey, the smaller boy in the blue jacket?

Scene 2: Ten Minutes Later.

Summary: After Steve has taken Marty and Jeffrey to the principal's office, he finds Carmen (Jeffrey's classroom teacher) to report on the playground fight. It is evident from Steve's remarks that Jeffrey has been involved in similar situations in the past. Carmen patiently responds to Steve's report, but shows some frustration over the news. Her students interrupt the conversation by coming in from recess discussing the fight.

Possible Questions:

1. How do you read Carmen's reaction to Steve's report?
2. What are some of the possible behaviors and attitudes Jeffrey might display when he returns to Carmen's classroom?
3. (TQ) What advice would you have for Carmen relative to dealing with Jeffrey when he returns to her classroom?

Scene 3: Twenty Minutes Later. Carmen's 6th Grade Class.

Summary: Carmen is in the middle of teaching a social studies lesson on propaganda. She is interacting with different groups helping them write posters using propaganda techniques. Jeffrey interrupts the class by banging the door loudly when he returns to the classroom.

Possible Questions:

1. What assessment can you make of Jeffrey's emotional state?
2. (TQ) How would you respond at this point in time if you were Carmen?

Scene 4: Moments Later.

Summary: Carmen interacts with Jeffrey about the fight, and it is clear that she is quite frustrated with a continuing pattern of behavior. Jeffrey blames the other student for the fight, and Carmen responds that he is always blaming someone else and that she is tired of other teachers speaking with her about his behavior. After Carmen asks Jeffrey to sit down, he moves another student out of his chair, hits him on the back, and angrily asks another student at the table, “What are you looking at?”

Possible Questions:

1. What is your reaction to the manner in which Carmen interacted with Jeffrey?
2. (TQ) Do you agree with Carmen’s decision to have Jeffrey return to his group? What other actions might she have taken after their discussion?

Scene 5: Moments Later.

Summary: It is evident that Jeffrey’s behavior is affecting the behavior of other students in the class, especially those in his cooperative learning group. Carmen attempts to involve both Jeffrey and Steven in the group activity but meets with resistance from the other students who are on task. They would rather do their group work without Jeffrey, as “He never does anything anyway.”

Possible Questions:

1. How might you have responded to the comments from the students in Jeffrey’s group?
2. (TQ) What do you think are the dominant feelings that Carmen’s has toward Jeffrey?

Scene 6: Ten Minutes Later.

Summary: Carmen sends her class to art but asks Jeffrey to stay back to talk with her. She begins the interaction in frustration, but softens as Jeffrey shares some details about his living conditions. He lives at home with his older brother, and there is little food in the home. In addition, Jeffrey reveals that he sometimes loses sleep because of his brother’s parties.

Possible Questions:

1. What, if anything, did Carmen accomplish in her meeting with Jeffrey?
2. What others techniques or approaches might she have employed in an effort to draw Jeffrey out?
3. (TQ) What would you do next in your efforts to help Jeffrey deal with the multiple issues that are placing him in jeopardy?

Scene 7: The Same Day After School.

Summary: Following a faculty meeting, Carmen talks with a colleague who senses that Carmen “hasn’t been herself lately.” Nancy asks about what is bothering Carmen and if she would like to take some time to talk. Carmen responds by sharing several

challenges that are making her school year a particularly difficult one, one of those challenges being Jeffrey. Nancy empathizes with Carmen because she had Jeffrey as a student the previous school year. She goes on to share that she also found Jeffrey to be a difficult child but that she had received some excellent support from the guidance counselor, who was quite familiar with Jeffrey's problems. Feeling comfortable with Nancy, Carmen shares her personally held belief that it is important for her to love her students and that she is finding it increasingly difficult to like Jeffrey. Nancy interrupts and offers the following advice: "Carmen, accept them. Yes. Care for them. Yes. But love them? No."

Possible Questions:

1. What is your reaction to Nancy's suggestion that Carmen let go of her need to love her students?
2. (TQ) Should Carmen follow Nancy's suggestion to contact the school counselor? What assistance might the counselor provide?

Scene 8: Three Days Later. School Counselor's Office.

Summary: Carmen is able to arrange time with Mr. Guthrie, the school counselor, who shares information with Carmen that he has recently obtained from Jeffrey's case worker. Jeffrey's brother will probably be returning to jail because he is not meeting the terms of his probation. Consequently, Jeffrey will likely be placed in a foster home in the near future. Mr. Guthrie agrees to pursue medical information that may give insight into Jeffrey's small size. He also agrees to conduct a "Social Rating Scale" in an effort to better understand Jeffrey's aggressive behavior.

Possible Questions:

1. In what ways was Mr. Guthrie helpful to Carmen?
2. (TQ) How might Carmen use the new information in her efforts to help Jeffrey?

Scene 9: Five Days Later. Teachers' Lounge.

Summary: Carmen is on the phone when Steve Williamson storms into the teachers' lounge obviously angry. Jeffrey has knocked over Steve's science experiment that he had carefully prepared for his class. Broken glass is all over the floor, and the class has been completely disrupted. Steve angrily states that he wants Carmen to begin the paperwork necessary to have Jeffrey placed in a "behavioral disorder" class as soon as possible.

Possible Questions:

1. Have would you deal with the type of frustration Steve is feeling?
2. (TQ) How should Carmen respond to Steve's request?

Scene 10: Moments Later.

Summary: Carmen responds by offering to go with Steve to help him clean up his room. Regarding his request for her to file the paperwork, Carmen explains that she needs more time to think.

Possible Questions:

1. Do you agree with how Carmen handled the situation with Steve? How might you have dealt with such an interaction?
2. Do you think Carmen will agree to file the paperwork Steve has requested?
3. What do you think Carmen's dominant feelings are for Jeffrey at this point in time?

Fighting Chance Video Case Transcript



Scene 1: A Day in November. Recess.

(A teacher named Steve is chatting with a couple of students as he monitors a playground recess. Suddenly, another student runs up to Steve, informing him that there is a fight in progress. Steve quickly moves in and separates two boys, Marty and Jeffrey. Jeffrey, the smaller of the two, is difficult to constrain and continues to struggle as Steve takes the boys off the playground and to the principal's office.)



Scene 2: Ten Minutes Later.

Steve: *(teacher who broke up the fight)* Carmen, can I talk to you please?

Carmen: Yeah, Steve?

Steve: I just came in from the playground. I had recess duty out there. Things were going very well. Next thing I know a student comes up to me and says there's a fight going on. I turn around and there are two boys rolling on the ground. It's Marty and Jeffrey again, kicking at each other. I went over and separated them.

Carmen: Okay.

Steve: I took them straight down to the office, and that is where they are right now. I didn't see how the whole thing started. But, from what I heard some of the kids saying and from what the two boys were saying on the way down, it seems like Jeffrey is at the bottom of it again. So I just thought you ought to know where they were.

Carmen: Okay, thanks for telling me. I appreciate it. Thanks.



Scene 3: Twenty Minutes Later. Carmen's 6th Grade Class.

Carmen: *(working with students in teams and leading a lecture discussion, social studies lesson)* Propaganda was a way to try to get the American people to think and feel in a certain way. Remember when we looked at the story about Dixie Cups? The Dixie Cups were helping all the servicemen, right? And the Dixie Company promoted it in a way that made it seem like they were the only Dixie Cup in the world and that they were doing so much for the servicemen, right *(addressing a student working in a small group)*? “How might I help Stephen to feel like he had to join the service?” This was one that the people in Britain used. “Don’t let down our country-” You know you have to really feel like this was very important.

(Jeffrey enters the room and slams the door open.)



Scene 4: Moments Later.

Carmen: Let's have it?

Jeffrey: Marty started it.

Carmen: It's always somebody, Jeffrey, always somebody. I had a teacher already come up to me and let me know there was a fight on the playground and you were involved. Now what started it? What happened?

Jeffrey: I don't know.

Carmen: It has to be something. Come on, it has to be something.

Jeffrey: Don't blame me. It's not always my fault.

Carmen: Jeffrey, sit down. Just sit down.

Jeffrey: Get out of my seat (*to another student at his team table*). What are you looking at (*to another student*)?



Scene 5: Moments Later.

Carmen: Okay, what's this group doing over here? Steven, please put the magazine away (*addressing a student at Jeffrey's table*). Steven, excuse me. Put the magazine away. It has nothing to do with what we are doing.

Steven: Why should I have to do any work if he's not doing anything?

Carmen: Garret, would you please let Steven know what his job is? This is a group activity, and everybody has a responsibility. Jeffrey, what's your part in this? What's Jeffrey's part in this (*addressing the other students in the group*)?

Students: Well, he's not doing anything. He never does anything, anyway.

Carmen: Okay, please get to work, guys.



Scene 6: Ten Minutes Later.

Carmen: Okay, guys, it looks like it's time for art. You need to stop. Put your stuff down. You may start again when you come back in. just scoot your chairs in and line up quietly. Jeffrey, I need you to stay, please. Have a seat. Come on, bud. I need to talk to you (*sitting down on a couch in Carmen's classroom*). We have to do something, okay. Let me tell you, I can't have one more teacher come to me telling me about some situation that you were involved in, okay? We just can't go on the rest of the year like this. I just can't. All right, can you tell me what is going on? (*Jeffrey does not respond and refuses to make eye contact.*) What is making you do this? Jeffrey, come on, you have to work with me because I can't help you unless you work with me. You know the only reason why I'm taking the time to ask you to stay back here and talk with me is because I care about you, you know. I want to help you, but I can't unless you give me something to work with. How are things going at home?

Jeffrey: It's all right.

Carmen: All right? Are you still living with your brother?

Jeffrey: Yeah.

Carmen: And how's that been?

Jeffrey: I guess it's all right.

Carmen: All right? Are you getting enough sleep? Do you feel taken care of?

Jeffrey: Sometimes his friends have parties and it keeps me up.

Carmen: Is there anybody around to help you? Do you get enough to eat? Is someone there to fix dinner?

Jeffrey: Well, there's not always food.

Carmen: Why?

Jeffrey: Because when they have parties, they eat it all.

Carmen: Okay. I tell you, Jeffrey, I want to help you, you know-but I can only do what I can if you work with me, all right?

Jeffrey: Yeah.

Carmen: Go on. Go on to art.



Scene 7: The Same Day After School.

Nancy: *(a teacher)* Oh, Carmen, I am so glad to catch you.

Carmen: Hi, Nancy.

Nancy: You were just not yourself in the meeting today.

Carmen: It's been a rough way to go here.

Nancy: What's going on?

Carmen: Well, you have some time, like a week or a year? I've had a load full.

Nancy: What's happening?

Carmen: Well, you know, this year I've taken on this new classroom, and it has a new curriculum; and I've spent so much time just trying to get that developed. The balance of boys and girls in my classroom is off. I have more boys than girls, and to top off all of that, I have Jeffrey this year. And he has been more than I could possibly deal with.

Nancy: Well, I know where you are coming from. I had Jeffrey last year when he came to our school, and he was very, very difficult. But I had a lot of help from the counselor though. I spoke to the counselor, and he gave me some suggestions. He was very helpful.

Carmen: Oh, I hadn't thought about that. That's something I might pursue. You know, in the short time that I've been in the teaching profession, I've been brought to feel and to know that, you know, I have to love my kids and they'll love you back ... and ...

Nancy: *(interrupting Carmen)* Carmen, accept them, yes. Care for them, yes. Love them, no.



Scene 8: Three Days Later. School Counselor's Office.

Mr. Guthrie: Well, I'm glad you came in. I checked Jeffrey's folder, and I checked around, and I think I have some information that will be of assistance to you in dealing with Jeffrey. First off, I checked with Jeffrey's case worker, and I found that Jeffrey is living with his older brother.

Carmen: That's what I understand.

Mr. Guthrie: Right, and his older brother is on probation. However, he's messing up on the probation and as a result. . .

Carmen: I didn't realize he was on probation.

Mr. Guthrie: Right, and as a result, Jeffrey's older brother will probably be going back to jail, which means Jeffrey will probably be placed in a foster home situation.

Carmen: Oh, no.

Mr. Guthrie: So you need to know that news.

Carmen: I have some concerns about his home life, and one of the things that comes to mind is the fact that the boy is so small. He's in 6th grade, and he's the smallest child I have in class. I was just wondering whether or not he has any kind of medical problems. And two, do you see that maybe him being so small contributes to the social problems that he's having? You know he doesn't seem to be able to adjust in any way, shape, or form in a group, in any kind of group interaction. Could his size have anything to do with that?

Mr. Guthrie: I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll look into his medical records to see if there is any history of things that might have taken place, things involved with the birth, those type situations. I'll also perform a Social Rating Scale, which may help us understand whether he is being affected by his small size and why he is getting into a lot of fights. So I'll look into that, as well. Something else I wanted to share, in addition to those things, is the mentoring program. Mr. Johnson, who is the school contact for the school mentoring program ... I believe if I put Jeffrey with Mr. Johnson as part of the mentor program this will benefit Jeffrey. One of the positive aspects about the mentoring program, especially as it applies to Jeffrey, is the fact that Mr. Johnson is not involved with the school. He's not involved with the home, and I think that would be a good separation for Jeffrey.

Carmen: Oh, that sounds great! Jeffrey needs, you know, some positives in his life, and positive male role models is what he is in dire need of.

Carmen: Mr. Guthrie, I really appreciate you taking your time. I've just been at the end. It's just made me, you know, feel really good. I have somebody to bounce these things off of and have some guidance. You can just get back with me as soon as you can with any of the information that you are able to obtain. I would really appreciate it, but please let me tell you I appreciate you being here.

Mr. Guthrie: I want you to understand something. You're doing a good job, and you make a big difference in the kids lives.

Carmen: Thank you.



Scene 9: Five Days Later. Teachers' Lounge.

Steve: Carmen, are you in here?

Carmen: Can I get back with you (*to the person she is on the phone with*)? Thanks. Bye bye.

Steve: I spent about 30 minutes this morning getting a science demonstration ready for class. Your class comes into my room, and the next thing I know Jeffrey has knocked most of it on the floor. There's broken glass every place. Not only is the demonstration not going to work, the class isn't even going to work. I've had it with him. What I want you to do, as soon as you can, is get the paperwork started for placing him in the behavior disorder class. This has gone too far.



Scene 10: Moments Later.

Steve: It needs to be started, and it needs to be started soon.

Carmen: Okay, Steve, he's driving me crazy, too. I know how you feel. Okay, let me help you clean up your room. We'll get the glass taken care of. We'll situate your class and then I'll think about what you said. Okay? I ...

Steve: You still have to get it started and get it started soon.

Carmen: Okay, I just need some time, Steve. I just need some time.