

West London Teacher Education Collaboration

Mastery Level: Module Four

Title: Dealing with difficult conversations

Module 4: Case Study on Handling Difficult Conversations.

You may wish to undertake this case study by yourself or use as a discussion with your Professional Mentor as part of a mentor development programme

Setting the scene

This case study explores the challenge of managing a talented but mature trainee who, in his middle block of a very successful teaching experience as a teacher of English at Hightown High School, uses verbal aggression towards a Year 9 pupil. The school has a very good reputation in the area. In the past five years, under a new head teacher the school has acquired a 'Good Outcome' with Ofsted and raised pupil attainment remarkably. The school is over-subscribed, with a very proactive parent teacher association.

There is no doubt that the trainee's actions are a cause for concern and possibly disciplinary proceedings. However, the pupil is a notoriously disaffected and disruptive character with a history including fixed-term exclusions for foul and abusive language to members of staff. The trainee teacher is well regarded by both pupils and staff alike.

Hightown has a well-established ITT programme in that trainee teachers are allocated to a subject mentor who in turn is managed by a professional mentor (a member of the senior Leadership Team). In this case study, the head teacher, in consultation with the professional mentor, has agreed that the most judicious and sensitive approach would be to ask the subject mentor to initiate discussions with the trainee about his alleged misconduct.

Given this highly professional environment it is essential to consider the parameters of the subject mentor's role. Hightown has developed a job specification for subject mentors. The preamble for the job description is:

'Hightown expects subject mentors to work in a close professional relationship with a trainee to ensure that he/she receives the support and guidance required to achieve the Teachers' Standards at the end of their teaching experience. The school recognises that mentoring is a complex and demanding role, Subject mentors are given considerable autonomy in the management of their trainees. Although final assessment remains the responsibility of the mentor, professional mentor and ITT tutor, in reality subject mentors will provide the necessary evidence upon which decisions are made.'

The incident

Peter Baggley has been in Hightown High School for six weeks. He has made an excellent start to his teaching experience. His work in the English Department at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 has shown close attention to detail. His preparation, planning and resource generation are excellent, His marking is thorough. His performance in the classroom is very assured and confident He expects (and largely achieves) pupil behaviour of the highest order. This is probably a by-product of Peter's maturity and to some extent his sheer physical presence. He is a former semi-professional rugby league player. He has already started to coach the junior rugby team in the school and the boys are rather in awe of him. His mentor enjoys working with Peter although she realises that he has some very fixed views about the role of a teacher. On Friday of last week the head teacher received a letter from the father of a Year 11 pupil alleging that Peter had used foul and abusive language to his son. The father expects the school to deal with this through some disciplinary action. The head teacher asks the mentor to investigate and submit a report within two days.

The evidence is that Peter was on dinner queue duty and the boy jumped the queue in an effort to get an early lunch. Peter spotted him and moved him to the back of the queue. The boy tried the same trick again and Peter became agitated and took the boy by the arm to the back of the queue for the second time. The boy did not like his treatment and resisted, calling Peter a 'f***ing bully', it was at this point

that Peter called him a 'stupid little p***k'. Several boys in the queue back up the story. The boy in question does not deny his own comment.

What immediate conversation would you have with Peter regarding this incident?

The morning after your conversation

Peter speaks to you in the staff room and informs you that he intends to see the boy's father on a man-to-man basis to 'sort this nonsense out'. He also tells you that the pupil is taunting him and he will not stand for it. This is an unexpected development. Later on in the morning Peter's union representative advises you that the matter has been referred to his regional office as Peter feels he is being unfairly treated and that the correct procedures have not been followed by the school, Peter has agreed to attend the next training meeting with you but only accompanied by his union representative who has told you (off the record) that he is eager to see the matter resolved before it becomes unnecessarily painful and blown out of all proportion.

How do you deal with this new situation?

A conversation with the head teacher

The head teacher has spoken to the father about his son's inappropriate behaviour and rudeness which provoked the situation. He has emphasised Mr. Baggle's excellent work in the school and reminded the father that Mr Baggle is nevertheless a very inexperienced teacher in his first six weeks of teaching. He emphasises that Mr Baggle has an excellent career in front of him. The father accepts that the school will deal with the matter but expects the school to keep him informed of the outcome. The head teacher talks to you to explain the conversation with the father. He asks you to speak to Peter Baggle to gain his full understanding of the implications of his actions and to ensure further training for him in the management of challenging behaviour. The head teacher is well aware that incidents like this stem from normal human behaviour. He wants to be assured of no further repetition and that Peter really appreciates the expectations placed on him by the school, parents and the law.

In the light of this information you decide to reschedule her meeting with Peter. Peter agrees to meet later in the week but his union representative will join him in the discussion and has confirmed that Peter will make no direct contact with the boy's father.

How do you prepare for this next meeting?

What would you see as the best outcome in this whole scenario?

How would you assess the trainee at the end of this teaching experience around his professional behaviour?