

Case Study

Brandon and Ms. Beckett

“I don’t feel like I’m in control of my own classroom!” Theresa Beckett hung her head feeling overwhelmed and defeated. She taught high school social studies for seven years and had recently decided to return to graduate school to continue her education in special education. She often had students with learning disabilities in her classes and enjoyed working with them. Ms. Beckett thought, with her years of experience and her patient nature, she would do well teaching students with learning disabilities. She knew she could get her students excited about History; that was what she thought before she met Brandon.

Brandon was 15-years-old and was identified with a learning disability and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Brandon always arrived late to class and made a grand entrance to attract the attention of the students in the class. He was also extremely disorganized and had poor executive functioning skills. Ms. Beckett tried different consequences, but Brandon continued to arrive to class 5 to 10 minutes late and loudly announced, “I’m here! Did you miss me?” During class, when Brandon struggled with a concept or assignment, he would stand up, sigh with exaggeration, and often announce, “You know we are all too dumb to get this work!” During quizzes and tests, Brandon asked other students if they had the answers or lean over and copy their papers. There were also times when Brandon called out students’ names and stated each student’s disability was and why they were in her class.

Ms. Beckett had called home to discuss this behavior with Brandon’s parents. She also kept a journal and recorded Brandon’s disruptive behavior to share with the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team. The IEP team asked Ms. Beckett to collect data to determine the antecedents and consequences of the behavior. The school psychologist offered suggestions for replacement behaviors and worked with Brandon and Ms. Beckett to implement a new behavior plan. However, Brandon’s behavior did not improve. Ms. Beckett felt there was nothing that could help her address Brandon’s behavior and questioned why she was Brandon’s only teacher experiencing these difficulties.

Ms. Beckett wondered how she could help Brandon. She also wanted to help the rest of her class without letting Brandon take control of different situations. Brandon’s behavior was beginning to have an impact on other students in her class; other students were talking out in

class about their frustration and how they were too dumb for her class. Ms. Beckett thought about the characteristics of quality instruction she had learned in her graduate classes and decided to take charge and create a classroom environment that empowered her students.

For her next class, Ms. Beckett developed a lesson plan to teach the students about the causes of World War I (WWI). She had an engaging starter to introduce the lesson, a catchy mnemonic to help the students remember the causes of WWI, and a culminating activity that tied all of the information together with the students creating a cause and effect graphic organizer. She reviewed the class agenda. Then the students completed an anticipation guide in pairs for the day's lesson. While the students worked, Ms. Beckett watched the door and as she saw Brandon approach, she walked to the door, opened it, and welcomed Brandon to class. She handed Brandon an anticipation guide and asked him to join a group and get started. As the class worked, Ms. Beckett walked around the room, listened to conversations, and made notes of students' comments to use later during their discussion.

After students finished the anticipation guide, Ms. Beckett began her direct instruction. She called upon her students to answer different questions. Ms. Beckett provided behavior specific praise if students answered the questions correctly. If students struggled with the answers, she asked more questions and guided students to the correct answer. During this direct instruction, Ms. Beckett noticed Brandon watching other students and checking his paper when the students stated their answers. Ms. Beckett felt Brandon's behavior was about to escalate because he had a look of confusion on his face. She moved to stand by Brandon's desk in anticipation of him acting out. As she announced to the class to transition to the next activity, Brandon exploded and shouted, "Wait, I don't get it! How can everyone be right on this paper? Everyone has a different answer!"

Ms. Beckett answered, "Brandon, if you look at the agenda on the board, we will review this sheet again at the end of class. Then, you will see for yourself, which answers are right and which answers need to be changed."

Brandon blurted out, "That doesn't make sense!"

This time Ms. Beckett ignored Brandon's statement and introduced the next activity. Ms. Beckett divided the students into pairs, grouping strong readers with students experiencing difficulties with reading. She passed out a small reading passage and provided students with time to read. Brandon was paired with another student and he began reading quietly with his partner.

Ms. Beckett was pleased that she steered Brandon away from an outburst. As the students completed their cooperative reading activity, she walked over and saw that Brandon was drawing pictures on his paper instead of answering the questions. Again she chose to ignore the behavior, and thought he would get better in time, especially with a natural consequence of a failing grade.

As the class transitioned back to whole group discussion, Ms. Beckett was asking for students' responses to the questions they had answered. She felt confident that Brandon had well-developed comprehension skills and since she heard him reading the passage she decided to ask Brandon a difficult question. Ms. Beckett felt sure if Brandon was praised for answering a difficult question he would see for himself how smart he is and he would begin to engage more in class. Ms. Beckett read the question aloud and as she looked up to call on Brandon, she saw him tearing up his paper. Ms. Beckett did not understand Brandon's behavior or why he was not engaged in the activity. This activity was from the 8th grade curriculum guide which was two grade levels below this class's current placement. It was also at the reading level where Brandon's cumulative records and IEP records indicated he was able to work independently. Ms. Beckett rephrased the question and prepared Brandon for what was being asked by telling him to think back into the reading.

Brandon stood up, walked to Ms. Beckett, handed her the torn and crumbled worksheet and said, "I don't care about your stupid dates and facts. I didn't live back then, I don't need this crap!"