

## Case Study

### Ernesto and Mrs. Coulter

Mrs. Coulter was feeling discouraged and vulnerable during her fifth year of teaching high school students with mild/moderate disabilities. Each school year, she began to feel more confident as she worked to establish her own teaching practices and classroom management methods. She reviewed her students' Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals and objectives and aligned their IEP goals and objectives to her instructional plans. At the start of the year, she collected different assessments on her students' knowledge and recorded their academic progress in her Progress Journal. In her journal, Mrs. Coulter compared her students' academic progress to their goals and objectives and towards the general education curriculum. As she reviewed her Progress Journal and evaluated Ernesto's performance, Mrs. Coulter was baffled. Why wasn't Ernesto progressing towards his IEP goals or the general education curriculum? Why wasn't she reaching him? She knew he was intelligent and after reading his cumulative file, she realized that he had the ability to succeed academically, but she did not understand why he wasn't succeeding.

During her first three years of teaching, Mrs. Coulter worked as a resource teacher and worked with small groups of students. With two or three small groups, she felt she had good classroom management skills and could differentiate lessons well to support her students. For the past two years, though, Mrs. Coulter was co-teaching four sections of algebra and was the general educator for two sections of pre-algebra. The students in her pre-algebra classes struggled with math; they either failed the class last year or did not achieve proficiency on the district math test. Although it was a general education class, it was designed as a class for struggling learners who required a lot of academic support.

This year, Mrs. Coulter implemented a new behavior management plan and it has been effective with her four co-taught classes, and one pre-algebra class. She was using the plan to reinforce positive behavior while teaching record keeping for deposits and withdrawals. Mrs. Coulter laminated a poster that looked like an accounting spreadsheet. The account balance began with 2 minutes. As the class worked together to accomplish tasks in helpful and encouraging manners, time was "deposited" with an entry of the *desired behavior*. If students delayed starting tasks or became off task, she entered *needless* under expenditure on the spreadsheet and subtracted 30 seconds. This usually inspired students to get back on task and assist their classmates in completing their work. When students did not have homework, or

needed materials, she would subtract time as “unprepared.” This led to students being more prepared. Mrs. Coulter felt her plan was working because she did not have to interrupt her instruction to redirect the class; her non-verbal cue of walking to the poster seemed to be enough to get students back on task. At the end of the week, Mrs. Coulter used the class “balance” of time to facilitate class discussion in topics the students chose. The students shared their weekend plans, and Mrs. Coulter used this time to model appropriate conversation skills.

This behavior management system, however, was not as successful in one of her pre-algebra classes. One student, Ernesto, especially did not seem to appreciate the management system. It appeared as if Ernesto thrived on derailing the class instruction and relished the attention this drew from his peers. Ernesto, a tall, handsome young man, often used his looks and streetwise demeanor to manipulate others around him. He was a sophomore in age, but life circumstances made him grow up faster than his peers. Some students were in awe of Ernesto, while some students feared him. Students in his classes did not correct him or tell him to get to work. Mrs. Coulter wasn't sure if he actually bullied anyone or if his reputation spoke for him.

Mrs. Coulter reviewed the entries on the poster and praised her students because she did not have to subtract any “unprepared” time for three weeks. Ernesto shouted, “That’s because Shelly always comes prepared for me!” The class snickered and Mrs. Coulter ignored Ernesto’s comment. She continued reviewing the entries and stated, “I wish I could say the same for ‘off task’ behavior. You keep losing time in this category.” Ernesto shouted again, “It doesn’t matter, we take time now, we take it on Friday; either way *take* the time! Besides, you know we are going to do whatever we want anyway, why do you bother?” At that, she walked away from the poster and began her instruction for the day.

Mrs. Coulter wanted to have a parent conference. Ernesto’s mother was always willing to speak to her but her heavy accent and broken English made phone conversations difficult. Mrs. Coulter felt it was important to establish a relationship with Ernesto’s parents to address his behavior. Mrs. Hernandez was delighted that Mrs. Coulter had taken an interest in Ernesto and made an appointment for her, her husband, and Ernesto with Mrs. Coulter. At the meeting, Mr. Hernandez shared that he and his wife had worked hard to come to this country to give Ernesto and his brother a better life. Ernesto’s older brother, Juan, had fallen prey to the gang life and was in jail for taking the principal’s car for a joy ride. Mrs. Hernandez shared they were trying to be more lenient with Ernesto because she felt her husband’s strict rules pushed Ernesto’s brother

into the gang life. Ernesto sat through the conference and continuously contradicted his mother; Mrs. Coulter also noticed he used the same demeaning tone with his mother as he did toward other female students in her class. When his father spoke, Mrs. Coulter sensed Ernesto was more respectful. At the end of the conference, Ernesto agreed to give more effort in class and Mrs. Coulter agreed to email Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez every Friday with weekly progress reports.

The next day in class, Ernesto entered the classroom, leaned back in his chair, and started flirting with the girl behind him. Mrs. Coulter walked to his desk and reminded him to sit properly and focus on the assignment. After the warm-up activity, other students volunteered to share their work on the board. As one student finished, Mrs. Coulter called on another volunteer. After a few students volunteered, no one else volunteered. Mrs. Coulter then called on students. As some students worked at the board, they struggled; this prompted Ernesto to make stuttering sounds and call them names. No one agreed to come to the board when this behavior started.

After the students finished, they discussed the assignment and talked about the concepts they were practicing. Ernesto laughed at other students' responses, called them names, and told them to shut up before they really embarrassed themselves. Mrs. Coulter again walked to Ernesto's desk hoping her proximity to him would discourage the comments. Instead of guided practice, Mrs. Coulter asked the students to begin their independent practice. When a couple of students grumbled, she walked to the "spreadsheet" and subtracted 30 seconds. This encouraged some of the students to get to work, but others mumbled that it wasn't fair or that they didn't understand the assignment. Ernesto mocked them and said in a whining voice, "Yeah, Mrs. Coulter, you're a bad teacher, you are a real idiot!" Mrs. Coulter asked Ernesto to step out into the hall to speak with her. He stood up, looked around, and smirked as he announced to the class that Mrs. Coulter wanted his body. The entire class laughed and Mrs. Coulter become so flustered she blushed; prompting Ernesto to tell the class this was a sign that he was correct.

In the hallway, Ernesto told Mrs. Coulter that she should mind her own business and leave him alone. He told her that he is only in school for four more months and as soon as he turns 16, he is dropping out and there isn't anything she can do about it. He said not to bother calling his parents; they were only pretended to care. He also told her not to bother sending him to the principal, because the principal was afraid of him too. Ernesto told Mrs. Coulter Juan,, Ernesto's brother, threatened the principal after his trial. Juan promised to have Ernesto "get her" for testifying against him. Then Ernesto just grinned, waved at Mrs. Coulter, and left.