



CASE STUDY #19: MAX

(The Exceptionally Hostile Student)

Dealing with kids who are failing classes, having problems at home, in trouble with the law and using/abusing controlled substances made me uncomfortable for the first few months of this program. The single decision that helped me the most was adding another adult to the equation. Just being able to bounce ideas and observations off another caring person got me through a lot of misery. I'm sure there are readers who would feel completely comfortable working solo with this population. (I would like to meet you and take you out for lunch. I imagine that you are so much more "together" than I'll ever be and I'd like to learn from you.)

I made just about every mistake possible during the 37 years of "I CARE". After a while I got to the point where each boo boo became a cause for celebration because I could add that to the things to avoid in the future. One snafu that comes to mind is addressing a person by their perceived gender. One session the most masculine person in class went by the name of Max. "He" had a deep raspy voice, wore military shirts, combat shoes and was quite physical in nature. Putting the pronoun in parentheses tipped you off about Max's actual gender. So there is a mistake you don't have to ever have to make. Another benefit of a team approach is being able to debrief after each session.

My first partner was a lot more confrontational than I was. If I was going too easy on a kid he might jump in and "jack them up" a little and conversely if it seemed that he was overreacting I would offer to meet with the offender "in my office" (out in the hallway). It became kind of a "good cop/ bad cop kinda deal.

Now let's address some specific behaviors that you will probably encounter from this clientele. Open aggression; this can look like talking back or side remarks designed to challenge your authority. The student can do this to gain admiration of classmates or maybe put you off your game. This needs to be dealt with post haste. If you have the luxury of a co-instructor or volunteer adult the best tactic is to quietly adjourn to your "office" and ask the offender some questions. "It seems that you are angry with me? I'm wondering what I did to piss you off? I think we can both get what we want if we show each other respect. My goal is for you to pass this class and not disrupt other people's learning. If this doesn't work for you, suggest something else OK?"

First and foremost, check your need to dominate every situation by "winning". Developing positive relationships with tough clients by remembering this is a marathon and not a sprint! Another thing that always worked for me was to "size up" every class member during the first meeting. Look for "natural leaders"...kids that others look up to and maybe ever fear a little. One of these people can help you. Check with their counselor and see what specific background information is in their folder (both disciplinary and academic). Design early worksheets where students share their favorite groups, sports teams, activities outside school. I'm really talking about getting to know them as PEOPLE. The aggressive types may surprise you with some common values of your own. Sharing interests with your clients can help tear down walls and replace them with bridges. Teen-agers are universally interested in music. I would keep up with the "music" scene by collecting favorites for a

“Family Feud” game. Don’t forget to include video games. If you were researching a master’s thesis knowing the leaders in your field of study would be important for the opening chapter...? Getting to know your clients as people is every bit as important. “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you CARE!”