

## Student Confrontations

Summary 1: Two students (a boy and a girl of Hispanic descent) were slapping each other and being somewhat silly about halfway through the presentation. I saw it and immediately walked over, reminding them about the one rule. The boy said, "What did I do wrong?" I explained the one rule to him, which he said he couldn't see because he didn't have glasses (and the girl said the same thing). The boy said, "It wasn't distracting to her." I said that it was distracting to other people. The boy said, "No one else seems to be bothered by it." I told him that it's a distraction to me, the substitute, and the speaker. The boy said, "Well, that doesn't count." I pointed out that the rule included "anyone", which also included the adults in the room. The boy said, "You said that we could do *anything* in the room, which means that we can slap each other and do whatever we want." The girl said, "Honestly, this is really boring and we've already heard this." Though I tried to be objective about the situation, both kids were being combative about taking responsibility for their actions and showing respect to the speakers. I presented them with the option to either pay respectful attention to the speaker or be separated. This caused some hostility, as the boy insisted that he wasn't doing anything wrong and the girl muttered about how stupid the situation was. It got to the point where it was very distracting to everyone involved and I had to ask them if they wanted to go to the dean or to stay in the classroom. Both chose to go to the dean's office, excited that they got to leave class. Considering that I was told by my education professors that students see the hallway as Disneyland, I walked with them to the dean's office. They didn't seem pleased that I accompanied them.

The dean invited students in one at a time, and I was invited in with them. The boy was talked to first, and he became a little less combative with both of us there. He was asked to share his story first, to which he insisted that he didn't do anything wrong and just validated and justified that all of his actions were in the right. He also admitted that he could read the one rule from a distance, but still tried to cover his tracks that he was in the right with his actions. I was invited to share my observations. I gave the student the choice for me to share my insights when he said that I would skew things to get him in trouble. I told him that I didn't have to share my story if he didn't want me to, but he said, "It doesn't seem like I have a choice." So I objectively told him what happened. The dean thanked me and asked me to return to my classroom.

Afterwards, I met with the dean and discussed what happened, just to check how it was resolved. The dean said that things had been taken care of once the two were separated, as it was less likely for them to save face. The dean suggested that I never do any sort of discipline in front of peers, since they were more likely to act tough and gang up on me. It was also possible that the boy was acting the way he did to save face in front of the girl. To do that, I would have to take students out one on one in the hallway. The girl was also known for going to the dean's office regularly, and the parents are involved to help alleviate the behavioral issues. The substitute also said that I have to be more careful about kids stretching the truth to try walking all over me. If I were alone in the classroom, I would call the dean at the end of the day to make sure that the students made it to the dean's office, and I would have to tell them that.

Summary 2: Three students sat in the back of the room at the beginning of class, since Kendra is pretty open and flexible about how and where students sit as long as it's not a distraction to other people. I told the students that they needed to sit in chairs and at a table in order for them to show respect to the speaker, but they said that they could focus while they were sitting on the ground. I told them that I would give them a chance to prove that to me or else I would have to move them to a table. Over time, the students were having side conversations with each other and playing on their phones. They were also laughing very loudly in the back, which disproved that they were able to be attentive. I walked towards them and said that they were being disruptive. The boy said, "What did I do wrong?" and "It's not my fault." I told them about the one rule and the boy said, "I'm not distracting my friend or anyone else." When I explained that it was a distraction to the speaker and that I didn't trust he was paying attention, the student said that he was having a rough day with family issues. I didn't feel that I was in the right to criticize this, so I squatted next to him and said, "I am not going to argue with you on that. I don't know what your family situation is like, but I respect that it might be hard for you to focus if that's the case. All I ask is that you show respect to the speaker, even if you need some time to tune out a bit." The student said okay and I let him be. I also had a talk with the girl, asking her to show respect to the speaker by quietly being attentive.

About five minutes later, the boy was on his phone and laughing with his friend, poking at her to see what was going on. When I started walking towards him and made eye contact, he froze and tried to put his phone away. I motioned for him to come over, but he shook his head. This happened a couple more times before I walked towards him. I told him that he needed to move to a table (though not necessarily one at the front of the room) because I didn't trust that he was able to give respectful attention to the speaker. He said that he wasn't going to move, to which I gave him the option of either moving or going to the dean. At that point, he glared at me with a somewhat combative expression, clearly stating that he was not going to budge and that he would fight me on it if I made him. I didn't know what else to do but give him a chance to move. At that point, the other two students started slapping each other, leaving the substitute to take care of the other student while I addressed the behavioral issue with the two other ones.

When I returned back from the dean's office, I saw that the student was sitting at the front desk engaged with the conversation (I assumed that the substitute teacher somehow made him move). Figuring that I could use love and logic to rebuild the working relationship I had with the student, I said, "Hey, I noticed that you were focused and attentive during the discussion, and I appreciated that you gave the speaker your respect and attention." The student's smile immediately went away, and it seemed like he really didn't want to hear what I had to say to him. Since I'd been used to being the peer/friend kind of teaching assistant in the past, I told him to keep up the good work and offered him a fist bump. He shook his head and walked away from me. I felt embarrassed by the interaction and didn't know how I could've handled it better.

## What Went Well

### Summary 1 and 2:

- I kept myself calm and objectively presented the information about why the behavior was inappropriate in a calm, detached manner.
- I attempted to use love and logic by trying to give the students choices to hold themselves accountable for their actions.
- When I returned to the classroom, I was really good about being in the present moment and putting the conflict behind me to focus on being positively engaged in the classroom. The atmosphere changed once the students were removed.
- I gave the student a choice for sharing my insights. Though he suspected that I would share my insights anyway, I gave him a little bit of control and authority to make the decision that he did.

## What Didn't Go Well

### Summary 1 and 2:

- I didn't know how to respond or mediate the conflict when the students were refusing to take responsibility for their actions. Even with rational statements that prove the behavior was inappropriate, the students were still trying to insist and persuade that they weren't in the wrong. I didn't know how to handle that without letting it get to me personally. I guess I took it personally because I'm used to the positive rapport I had in previous settings to help them calm down and make sense. It's also probably the reason why I'm uncomfortable in elementary settings.
- In light of the dean's suggestion, it was probably not a good idea to handle the debate of getting them to behave during class time during the lecture. I probably should've told them to stop and walked away. It could've affected their social image and saving face.
- I think that engaging the students in a debate wasn't super effective. I learned pretty quickly that it was just going to become cyclical without it going anywhere productive. A lot of people have told me to just state what you need to and walk away. But I feel like that has a connotation of being authoritative or evasive, which could trigger a students' emotions. I think that it's important to give the students a chance to say how they're feeling without losing control of the situation.
- With summary 2, I probably should've tried to handle the conflict without the friends around. However, I don't know how I would've been able to do that if the student wasn't willing to budge. I also had not idea how to handle students that were willing to become confrontational when I suggested that they go to the dean.
- In both situations, I think they were combative and off-task because the lecture wasn't personally engaging to them. Though this wasn't really something that was in my control to fix, but I tried to handle it as calmly and respectfully as I could to match the wishes of the substitute, Kendra, and the speaker.

## What I would do differently

### Summary 1 and 2:

- Take the dean and sub's advice. Make sure that I'm sensitive to the people around the students when I am doing any sort of discipline. I should also try to be more tactful about making my point and leaving without giving the students a chance to argue their way out of it.

### *Presence*

#### Teacher

- My demeanor was calm and composed. I responded to situations immediately and made sure that they didn't linger. Though I had minor moments of annoyance and uncertainty about how to handle conflict with pre-teens, I never felt like I lost control of the situation. Even though there were little things that I could've handled better, I always knew in the back of my mind that I was in the right for handling the situation because their behavior was not respectful to the speaker and it violated the one rule Kendra had.
- I tried to be mindful of my body language. It's still hard for me to not come off like a teacher sometimes with my arms at my hips or behind my back, but I think that's because I'm still trying to figure out the middle school culture and make sure they don't walk all over me. My tone probably sounded a little more parent-like rather than empathetic to the students. While I'm sure that affected some of the combativeness, I don't feel like it was wrong with me, at the beginning, to keep the tone that I had. However, I think I would work on having a tone that might work better for middle school students.

#### Student

- Summary 1:
  - The girl has somewhat of a combative attitude, but she seems smart. She seems very justified in her reasons for not being interested in partaking in school activities. There's an aspect of school being boring to her, and that putting her intention on social interactions are more worth her time. Though her logic isn't very sound either, her reasoning is valid. "I'm misbehaving because I'm bored. And because I'm bored, I have every right to do what I am meant to do." I wouldn't take it personally if she doesn't approve of me. She's somewhat of an independent thinker and wants to operate on her terms. This could be because she's had a lot of people in her life telling her what to do. The fact that she was able to give me eye contact in a calm and direct manner, telling me how she felt in a matter of fact way, means that she is comfortable interacting with adults even in confrontational settings. She wants to feel heard about her opinions and have changes made to satisfy her. She's in a situation where she feels like no one really hears her out and she's constantly being told how to behave.

- The boy is somewhat of a young soul, or at least a young child. He operates with an attitude like a child being upset when a toy is being taken away from him. It's pretty normal for kids to put themselves in the victim situation to get empathy from teachers. While this should not be overlooked on all fronts, in this case, it's appropriate to hold him accountable for his actions. Logic doesn't work with this child because it puts him at fault, and he doesn't want to be seen as the bad guy. He wants to be seen as the victim, or the justifiable activist just like his friend. This victim mindset comes from a fear of being treated as the bad guy, ultimately putting the teacher at fault for everything. This is a strategy that most kids use to get what they want. Giving him choice won't always work because he will do whatever he can to make sure that he is the victim that deserves to be treated with respect. The most important thing to keep in mind is that just because boys are teenagers doesn't mean that they're developmentally mature enough to handle being in a classroom.
- Summary 2:
  - This student, I can tell energetically, has some sort of hitch with a family situation. Either this is actually what's going on or there's something in the child's mind that's blown way out of proportion. Either way, it's smart of me not to question it. I sense that questioning it would've definitely caused a fight with this person, for sure. There's also a sense of immaturity, but I also sense that there's a need for escapism and play necessary for this student to feel okay being himself. He also really doesn't like being lectured about what he does or doesn't do wrong. Some parts of him play into that child victim while other times he is not afraid to step into his power and start a fight. HE's not the kind of person that would pick a physical fist fight, but he might stonewall and refuse to follow orders as a way to express his authority in the situation. It's the best way he can control the situation.
  - There's also an aspect of this student that is friendly and personable with teachers. However, he doesn't really like the idea of being friends with teachers, especially after he's been lectured and disciplined for behavior. I don't want to say that this student has an issue with relating to teachers, but there's an aspect of trust that's not there. The records don't want to use the word "manipulate" as that's not really what's going on. But it's not uncommon for young students and kids to paint themselves as the victim of the situation and have their needs met in order to have some sort of power in the classroom. Sometimes, it's a good idea for the teacher to meet in the middle. Other times, it's important for the teacher to respectfully stand his/her ground. Modeling behavior is important because it teaches them accountability for their actions.

### *Communication/Relationship*

#### Teacher

- I didn't have an established rapport with any of the students that I had to discipline. I had somewhat of a friendly rapport with the student in scenario 2, but I noticed that he tended to be combative and not take responsibility with Kendra when he got in trouble

as well, saying that getting his phone taken away “was stupid and unfair.” What this told me is that even if there is good rapport with that student, he will get into a verbal debate about the fairness of his actions. The other two were students that I had zero prior friendly interactions with before that debate. This probably affected seeing me as a safe resource.

- Behavior and discipline were probably an issue because there were multiple adults in the classroom. In one class period there were three adults (myself, the speaker, and the substitute). In another period, there were seven adults (me, the substitute, three speakers, and two student teachers). I can't say that more adults necessarily affected behavior. There were barely behavioral standards being addressed, and they were discussed like a parent disciplining a child. But having more adults in the room made me less willing to be the authoritative person because it felt like overkill.
- I had good communication with the other adults in the room, and I guess there was a good sense of teamwork. The one thing that I didn't like was that by the time I had to give three redirects, I had to alert the substitute to take action. At that point, it almost seems like I'm telling on the kid rather than actually handling the situation. It made me feel like the conflict was drawn out longer than it needed to, and getting the student to behave was kind of like a circus act. I think this had more to do with my position as the TA than the person that had power over me.

#### Student

- Summary 1: The girl was at least taking advantage of the one opportunity to let the teacher know her opinion on the situation, in the hopes that something could be changed. With the boy, the presence of me coming towards him triggers the notion that I'm a parent rather than a peer. This set him off to be in the victim mode to not take responsibility. Even though I was calm and not shaming them, they still saw me as the parent. This got worse with the choice that I gave them. The right thing to do was to send them to the dean's office, at that moment with the resources that I had. Applause for keeping it calm. There is no empathy because I am the adult that will discipline them.
- Summary 2: The student really didn't like me by the end of the situation, but there's a lesson in this that it's okay to let the student be angry and process it, coming back fresh next time. I reacted the way that I did because I was uncomfortable with things being tense and wanting to resolve it in one day. Sometimes time does this. Same thing going on. I took on the parent/adult figure in the situation, which was a trigger for the student. Even if I were a peer, it wouldn't work because I'm a person in power or authority. The records are encouraging me to continue being kind to him when he's behaving, but not going out of my way to build rapport. This could be a boundary violation. I get the sense that the student liked me before the situation, but he's comfortable with getting his way. There's an aspect of masculine pride that comes from asserting his dominance by not moving. He's essentially trying both to see what works. Being calm no matter what is important. He is trying to see what he can get away with.

## *Cultural Responsiveness*

### Teacher

- In summary 1, the students were both of Hispanic descent. I'm not saying that played a role in the mediation, but it's worth pointing out. I'm not sure at this time if race had anything to do with the conflict.
- The other student in summary 2 was Caucasian, but he mentioned that he came from a difficult family situation. I know that this is somewhat cultural at Conrad Ball, though not universally true for all the students. I didn't feel that it was right for me to critique that, as I'm not him and I don't know his situation. I wanted to show respect for something that was tough. However, I wasn't sure if he was using that to his advantage to get away with being on his phone and talking with his friend during the lecture. That is something that I'm unsure of: how do you show respect for someone's background without letting them use it to walk all over you?

### Student

- From the perspective of the records, I don't get the impression that the issue had anything to do with race. However, the issue definitely comes from the culture of the teacher/student dynamic. In both scenarios, the students feel victimized of having to sit quietly and listen to a boring lecture. It puts them in a place of disempowerment, and showing respect to the speaker that bores them is something that's very dehumanizing to their sense of power as children and pre-teens. The records aren't really indicating that either situation should've been handled differently, but the root of the issue should be examined. The students want to make it clear that they want to be engaged more with the content in an entertaining way that relates to them. Though there still might be some combative issues at play, this is a good start.
- From a discipline standpoint, the anger and frustration comes from being talked to like a kid. Yet their behavior and method for navigating conflict comes from the perspective of the child. In both situations, the records are applauding me for attempting to give them choice for their actions. But they are not able to process it because they know they are in trouble. In those situations, it's okay to not be the empath in the situation. This is important because the students might see it as a power move. Empathy might help after the fact, once tension is down a bit.

## *Critical Reflection*

- It seems to me that the root of the issue is that the lecture was boring and it was causing disruptive behavior. Students feel like they are in power when their voices are being heard and acknowledged. However, this doesn't really work during conflict. For the unique situation I was in, it was great that I gave choice and gave the students a chance to prove themselves. But if it wasn't handled responsibly, then it's important to be objective about the situation.
- I also need to realize that I come off as the adult or parent rather than the peer. Even if I do the textbook classroom management tactics, it doesn't mean that I will always be friends with the student by the end of it. The important thing is to be calm and tough

but fair. There isn't anything that I need to majorly tweak according to the records, but it would be a good idea to not try being friends with the students after a conflict has been registered.

- Also, don't have long reflective conversations with them. Make the points short and sweet. It's up to them to have a long dialogue if they want.

#### *Embodied Action*

- For the girl in summary 1, I would talk to her about what she would like to improve the situation and see if she could give some constructive feedback to improve the situation.
- For the two boys, that's tricky because there's an aspect of their behavior that's reminiscent of little kids. I'm not really sure how to handle that. I might talk to Kendra and my professors about what to do. But in the meantime, I will keep an eye on summary 2 boy and respect his distance. Engage with him cordially but also fairly. Give him space (and a lot of it) to be himself and rebuild trust with me. Don't seek it out with him unless he finds me. For the other boy, there's a part of him that's kind. I'd do the same thing. Be cordial and ask about his interests, but don't get too much in his space with the goal of repairing the relationship. It's okay, in this situation, for the relationship to lay dormant in the tension and let it work out naturally.