

CASE STUDY 10.1

Elaine Adams

Elaine Adams entered Littleton's Roosevelt Elementary School with her customary feeling of anticipation. She had been student teaching during the spring semester, but on this May morning she would be witnessing, rather than practicing, something new. Since early March, Elaine had been responsible for planning the daily learning activities for the twenty-one students in Lorraine Green's third-grade class. Mrs. Green had allowed Elaine, a mature student completing her certification in elementary education as part of a master's program in education, to assume a great deal of responsibility. Elaine jumped at the opportunity to practice her craft in this safe setting with a cooperating teacher who was helpful and supportive. Mrs. Green regularly gave Elaine feedback and shared her methods, her materials, and her insights. All of this, coupled with a real affection for the students in the class, had made student teaching a pleasure for Elaine. Nevertheless, it was a tremendous amount of work, and Elaine felt lighthearted today because she could relax and observe rather than plan and perform.

Elaine's workload was so sharply reduced this week because students would be taking the various subtests of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). Mrs. Green put most of the regular class work on hold during this week, explaining to Elaine that the students needed to concentrate on the tests and that other schoolwork would distract them. Elaine volunteered to administer the tests, but Mrs. Green said that according to district guidelines the classroom teacher had to be in charge. Elaine could assist only by monitoring the class and circulating among the students during the testing.

About two weeks after Elaine started student teaching, Mrs. Green told her that they were going to begin preparing the students for the ITBS, which all Littleton students in grades 2 through 12 took in the spring of each school year. She showed Elaine the practice sheets and activities she had used in previous years, explaining that the district took the scores on the ITBS very seriously. And Elaine knew from her comments that Lorraine did too: "Most teachers feel that we are judged by our students' scores, even though the administration denies it. And the parents—it's really unbelievable how they zero in on the scores. They get frantic about their own kids, and they want the school to score close to the top in everything."

"What do you mean—score close to the top of what? How do they even know what the school scores are?" Elaine liked working with Lorraine Green because she could ask dumb questions without worrying about it.

“The scores for every school district in the county are published in the local paper. Individual school scores are known only at district headquarters, but they become the stuff of rumor and reputation, too. Parents want Littleton schools to look as good as Radisson’s, and they want to be sure we don’t become an Alton.” Elaine had lived in the area long enough to know—mostly from the local press, now that she thought about it—that Radisson was the wealthiest (and most homogeneous) community in the county, and that Alton was its antithesis: a suburban school system being inexorably overrun with urban social ills.

Mrs. Green gave Elaine a list of the third-grade skills that were included on the tests. “I think it’s important to incorporate these skills specifically into different lessons. I don’t like to just drill on this stuff, so I’ll show you the ways I’ve incorporated test practice so that the students won’t be bored. It’s important for them to become familiar with the test formats and with the skills.”

Throughout the semester, Elaine was impressed with Mrs. Green’s ability to prepare students for the test while teaching the normal curriculum and maintaining a lively, student-centered classroom. She told a friend that Mrs. Green was an expert in “teaching to the test” without seeming to drill the students.

Class on the morning of the first ITBS subtests began with the usual activities. For the hour before the test was to be given, the students wrote in their journals and shared their work with their writing partners. Just before ten o’clock, Mrs. Green asked the students to help her move the desks out of the clusters they had been in since April and into rows. The students complied rambunctiously, enjoying the opportunity to push their desks around the room.

The testing started with Elaine handing out the booklets and Mrs. Green reading the instructions from the manual. At her signal, the students opened the test booklets and began to respond to the items. The room was very quiet as Elaine and Mrs. Green circulated among the students. Several times Elaine noticed Mrs. Green bending over to speak softly to individual students. After some time had passed, Mrs. Green returned to the front of the room.

“Pencils down, everybody. Let’s take a quick stretch before we begin the next part.”

Students scrambled to their feet, extending their arms up into the air and out to the sides, imitating Mrs. Green’s movements. When she indicated, they sat back down.

“OK, kids. Now it’s time for the vocabulary portion of the test. This first part is about words and their opposites. Turn to page 27 and follow along with the directions as I read them aloud to you.”

The students complied, and Elaine circulated to make sure everyone was on the right page. Mrs. Green read the standardized set of instructions and

went over the two examples provided. Then she asked, “OK. Does anyone have any questions?”

Angela raised her hand. “How much time do we have, again?”

Mrs. Green responded, “You have twenty minutes for this part, and remember to close your booklet when you are finished. You may read, or draw, or work on the puzzle Ms. Adams gave you if you finish early. You may start now. Remember to bubble in carefully.”

Mrs. Green and Elaine then circulated quietly around the room to make sure everyone was on the right page in the testbooklet and marking in the right place on the answer sheets. Elaine turned to her cooperating teacher.

“Was there a problem during the earlier section?” she whispered. “I saw you talking to some kids.”

“No—I was just helping them figure out any hard vocabulary words by showing them with my fingers where to break the word down into syllables. I wouldn’t pronounce the work aloud for them, but I want them to see that they know the words. You can do that too, as you walk around.”

Just then, Jordana called out, “Mrs. Green, I don’t get number 15.”

Mrs. Green put her finger to her lips. “Shh! Raise your hand. Class, if you have any questions you need to raise your hand quietly.” Then she bent over Jordana and Elaine heard her say, “OK. Let me show you how to figure it out. Here—break it down into parts like this and try to figure it out.” With her fingers, Mrs. Green split the word—*a-ma-teur*. Then she said, “Now try to say it to yourself and think what the opposite could be.”

Justin raised his hand and called, “I don’t get number 15 either.”

Mrs. Green responded, “OK, let’s just try our best on these. Remember, class, no one expects you to get 100 percent on these tests. If you get them all right, then you should be the teacher, not me. Just do the best you can.”

Justin responded to her comments by repeating, “But, Mrs. Green, I still don’t get this one.”

Armand agreed. “I don’t get number 15 either. It’s hard.”

Mrs. Green said, “Don’t worry about missing one if you don’t understand the word. Make a good guess and move on.”

Elaine looked around the room and realized that some students had stopped working on the test and were making comments. Several students were complaining about the difficulty of the test, and one said loudly, “I don’t feel good.”

Mrs. Green raised her voice a bit to be heard above the comments. “Look, you guys, I know some of these are hard, but I don’t like the *amateurish* and *unprofessional* attitudes you are displaying as you take this test.” Mrs. Green had emphasized the two words the students needed to know for item 15, and she winked at Elaine in a conspiratorial way.

Armand smiled and said, “Oh, I get it.”

“Get what?” Justin asked.

Mrs. Green again held her finger to her lips. “Shh! Let’s be quiet so everyone can work now. Besides, you only have five minutes left.”

The remaining five minutes passed without further disruption. After the test was over and the children had left for lunch, Mrs. Green walked over to Elaine. “I probably got a little carried away there. But I hate to see the kids sweat stuff they really know. And people take these scores so seriously. Do you think I went too far?”

Elaine felt uncomfortable and a little irritated. It seemed clear to her that Mrs. Green had breached the rules of administering a standardized test, but she didn’t consider it her place to say so. The uncharacteristic tension in the room had affected her, too. She smiled, though, and swallowed hard. “Well, I don’t know how far ‘too far’ is. Maybe some of the kids got the right answers because of your hints, but it seemed like they knew the meaning of the words. They just didn’t recognize them.”

Elaine was relieved to see that she must have responded appropriately, because Mrs. Green nodded. “That’s the problem with these tests. They don’t really measure what the kids know. I hate watching them be frustrated and then feel like they’re dumb. I work too hard helping them feel good about themselves.”

Elaine asked, “Do the test scores really affect them?”

Mrs. Green looked surprised by Elaine’s question. “Sure! Everyone talks about the scores. Those reactions influence how they view themselves as learners. Teachers really worry about that. My guess is that everyone did a little of what I did this morning to help the kids.”

Elaine took her lunch from the desk drawer and asked, “Coming to the teacher’s room?”

Mrs. Green shook her head. “Today is Timmy’s birthday. I’m going to pick up his cake and some supplies for the family party tonight. See you after lunch.”

Elaine walked to the teacher’s room and joined the other third-grade teachers at a table in the corner. Madeline Smith greeted her with a rueful grin. “What a morning! How do you think Lorraine Green’s kids did on the Iowas?”

Elaine just shrugged and looked at the other two teachers. Harriet Andrews shook her head. “It didn’t look good, I’m afraid. Seeing my kids struggling with those vocabulary words out of context was really painful.”

“Your class, too?” Madeline asked. “At one point I had six kids waving their hands and saying in the middle of the test that they didn’t ‘get it.’ ” Madeline waved her fork in the air to demonstrate her point, then she lowered it in resignation. “And I couldn’t help them. I felt so frustrated, particularly since I knew that with a little help, they would’ve figured the words out. Their scores are going to stink, and Mr. Johnson is going to be all over us about it.”

Sandy Simmons joined in. “My kids bombed both the vocabulary section and the vowel sounds part; I just know it. They looked completely thrown. I felt so hurt for them.”

Elaine looked at the three teachers. “Do you ever help them? I mean, just a little?”

There was a moment of silence as the three women returned Elaine’s gaze and looked at each other. Harriet spoke first. “You really want to. . .” She paused for a moment and went on, “But you just can’t.”

Madeline and Sandy nodded in agreement. Sandy said in a tired voice, “We’ve been so well trained—we know we can’t. Besides, if one of us helped and the others didn’t, it would be even worse, I think. In a way, since we’ve moved to a whole-language curriculum beginning with third grade, poor scores across the third grades will demonstrate how inappropriate the test is.”

Elaine’s discomfort returned with a vengeance. Would Mrs. Green’s class results be strikingly different from those of the other classes—particularly if Mrs. Green kept helping the children the rest of the week? And would that reflect upon Elaine, if she was in the room?