

## CASE STUDY 4.2

### Anne Holt

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“I’m not sure how you will be able to make sense of this room, but I know you’ll love the children.” Anne Holt’s voice was warm as she welcomed Marcus Washington into her classroom. “Where would you like to begin?”

“If it’s OK with you, I’d like to just watch, at first. Since I’ll be here for five mornings, I’d like to take today just to observe, if you don’t mind.” Marcus Washington was a graduate student working on a master’s degree and certification in elementary education. He was required to complete five weeks of half-day observations in each of five different elementary classrooms for the program, and he was beginning his second group of observations this February morning in Anne Holt’s first-grade classroom at the Willow Street School in Littleton.

A hint of her southern heritage crept into Holt’s cheerful voice as she said, “You do what’s best for you. The children have library today at 10:15, and I can answer some of your questions then. They’ll be here in just a few minutes, and you should feel free to ask them questions, work with them, or join in a group.” While she was speaking, Holt had written the date on the board and underneath it, “Please read.” The books she was suggesting the children read were *How to Hide a Polar Bear*; *Let’s Tell Time*; and *The Cake that Mack Ate*. To the left of the date Holt had already written:

1. Read with partner
2. Journal
3. 100 stars
4. 100 words I know

Washington began to walk around the room. The desks were arranged in open clusters of three, four, and five. The walls were covered with children’s work, and books were everywhere—on shelves, on bookracks, in baskets on countertops. Other materials were stacked neatly in various storage containers. Above the chalkboard ran a long strip of paper, with numbers on it, from 1 to 97. A large easel with lined chart paper stood near the wall across from the board, and another stood at the front of the room. A basket was filled with books written by the children and bound by the in-school publishing house, a group of parents who volunteered to type children’s books and to bind them in materials of each author’s choice. The first-grade books were brief, and most of the pages showed one or two lines typed at the bottom. The child’s illustrations covered most of the sheets.

Washington was surprised to see that the books, though typed, contained the actual spellings the children had used when they wrote. He found himself smiling as he translated “I folod them. They led me to a hotd hous” into “I followed them. They led me to a haunted house.” The next page read, “I cood stil heru the wichs lafing.” which he translated into “I could still hear the witches laughing.” He wondered why spelling English words needed to be so complicated since he was able to read this story, and he found the spelling adequate to tell him what the author meant to say. He also wondered who had made the decision to allow students’ work to be published with errors when he found this statement at the end of the story: *The author’s work is unedited and typed in its original form, as requested by her teacher. Her work reflects not only her personal style, but also her level of written language at this grade and age.* The last page of the book was headed “About the Author,” and it read, *Brooke Jefferson is six years old and in first grade. She lives in Littleton and enjoys playing with her cousins. This is her second book.*

Laughing aloud, he picked up several other books and saw that all contained words spelled idiosyncratically and that each of the books ended with the statement about the spelling and with an “About the Author” page. He turned to say something to Anne Holt just as the bell rang and students began entering the room. Holt stood at the door, greeting each child and collecting occasional notes. It was clear to Washington that the children followed a consistent routine. Those students who carried lunch put their lunchboxes in one of two large plastic containers by the teacher’s desk. Coats and backpacks were hung on marked hooks in the cubbies to the right of the door. Some books were piled on a red chair beyond the cubbies, and others, in clear plastic bags, were laid on the floor near the red chair. Curious, Washington picked up one of the plastic bags and saw a typed letter inside the bag along with the books. The letter, which had the child’s name handwritten on a line at the top of the sheet, read, *“This book bag is for reading books only. It is to protect our books. I want the children to be able to use the reading books by taking them home. I need your help. Please listen to your child read his or her book and place it back in the protective bag and place it back in your child’s book bag. Your child will need your help remembering this in the beginning. It is most important that we have all the books back in class each day.”* The letter was signed, “Sincerely, Mrs. Holt.”

When Holt saw him looking at the bags, she came over and said, “The children love to take home the books we’ve been reading in class, and when they read at home they get wonderful practice. But I need the books back each day because we use them in class, and this has been my system to get them returned. Each child has only one bag, and at the end of the day, when children gather the books they want to take home, if they don’t have their bag, it means they still have books at home and they must return them before they can take more home.”

“Great idea,” Marcus told her. “Does it work?”

“By now it does. Children almost never forget books at home. But early in the year it took a lot of practice, and I sent notes home to parents regularly reminding them of this and other policies.” She laughed and said, “It almost looks easy by the end of February,” and moved off to attend to some of the children.

Marcus was suddenly aware that there was a hum of noise in the room. He looked about to see what was happening. All around the room, pairs of children were reading aloud. In some pairs, one child was reading an entire small book to his or her partner; in others, the two children were taking turns reading alternate pages; in still others the two children were reading in unison. “OK,” he thought. “Number one: ‘Read with partner.’”

He also noticed that two more women had come into the room. Mrs. Holt motioned for him to come to the front of the classroom and introduced him to Sylvia Secor, the classroom assistant, and Maggie Dunlop, the special education assistant. Each of the first-grade teachers had a classroom teaching assistant for three hours a day—two hours in the morning and one in the afternoon. Dunlop was also in the classroom for three hours because there were two included children in Holt’s room. The Littleton School District was involved in a special education inclusion program, and special education assistants spent ninety minutes daily in the classroom for each included child. Just then the intercom came on and the assistant principal greeted the children, “Good morning, Willow Street School boys and girls.” The children stood, when the voice over the intercom asked them to, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. Washington glanced at the clock. It was 8:50.

Once the children were reseated, Holt stood at the board and asked for their attention. Their faces turned to her and she began, “Children, this morning we have a visitor. This is Mr. Washington and he’s going to be with us every morning this week. Mr. Washington is a student, just like you-all are, and he’s studying to be a teacher. Would you like to say good morning to him?”

Choruses of voices called out greetings, and Marcus smiled gratefully at the teacher and the children, appreciating their welcome.

Holt then said, “Now children, I need your attention here. Eyes on me, please.” Pointing to the list on the board, she said, “I saw you all reading with your partners this morning. That was great!”

Children turned and smiled at each other, clearly enjoying the compliment and the pleasure in their teacher’s tone.

She went on, “Before we begin reading groups, let’s go over all the things that we have to get done. If you haven’t already started to write in your journals, be sure to do that before you begin anything else. Then, we need to continue to get ready for our 100-day celebration. I thought we could decorate the room by hanging 100 stars from the ceiling. Would you like to do that?”

The children greeted this question with cries of affirmation.

Holt continued, “Up front we have several different star patterns. What does *several* mean?”

Washington heard children respond, “A few,” “More than two,” and “Three or more.”

Holt smiled, nodded, and held her hand up for quiet. “Yes, you are all right. What do we say to indicate *two* in another way?”

“A couple,” several students responded. Holt nodded again.

“Good understanding of math terms,” she said, and continued, “We should think about how many stars each of us has to make to be sure we have 100. There are twenty-one children in the room. Is everyone here today?”

The children began looking around, and several said, “Maria is still absent.”

Holt agreed. “She’s not back from Brazil yet. So that means there are twenty children here. Can anyone figure out how many stars you each need to make to be sure that we will have 100?” She waited while the children thought about how to figure this out. After several children called out seemingly random numbers and others looked perplexed, Holt asked, “Do you remember how to count by 20?” Children nodded. Holt held up her hand, pointed to her thumb, and said, “OK, let’s count.”

In unison the children counted, “20, 40, 60, 80, 100.” It seemed to Marcus that every child was responding.

Holt asked, “How many fingers?”

“Five,” the children shouted.

“Yes, five.” Holt agreed. “So if each of you makes five stars, then we’ll have 100 all together: 5,” Holt held up her five fingers, “times 20,” she said as she waved her arm wide to include the entire class, “is 100. So everyone is responsible for cutting out five stars. You can use the stars here to trace from or you can draw your own. Use different colors so the room will look interesting and bright.” Then, Holt pointed to the list of items that began with 100. “The last thing you have to finish before Wednesday is your 100-word paper. Remember, we said you could find . . .” (as she pointed, the children read with her) “100 words I know, 100 words with endings, . . .” until they had finished the list on the board. “Has anyone begun?”

Meredith raised her hand. When the teacher called on her, she held up a piece of orange construction paper that had words cut from magazines pasted on it. “It looks like Meredith is working on 100 words. Anyone else?”

Several more children held up their work for the others to see. Two teachers walked into the room as the children were showing their pages, and Holt concluded by saying, “Thanks, people, for sharing your work. Those of you who have started, try to finish up. Those of you who haven’t begun your lists, today’s the day to get going on that. OK, it’s time for reading. Those of you at your seats should do what?”

“Journals, stars, hundreds, . . .” the children were calling.

Holt was smiling as she put her hands over her ears and said, “It sounds like you all know what to do to keep you busy this morning. Would Kareem, Isaiah, and Rosina come to the back with me now?”

Marcus watched as one of the two women who had just come in took Celesta to a desk in the back of the room by the window and the other took Vera to a small table. Mrs. Secor called five children to the front easel, reminding them to bring their phonics books. He moved over to Mrs. Dunlop and asked, “Who are these other people?”

“That’s the reading teacher and her assistant. They’re in the room for forty-five minutes every day but C day and they see six children, each one for about 15 minutes, for individualized reading instruction.”

“Is it always the same children?”

“Not exactly. Celesta, Vera, and Jacob have been in the program since September, but Mrs. Holt shifts some children in and others out based on what she observes during her reading time with them. If she makes a shift, she’ll tell the reading teacher why, and what particular help she thinks the child needs.”

“And what do you do now, since Celesta is with the reading teacher?”

“I circulate and help students who seem stuck.”

Marcus went to the easel where Holt was sitting with the three children she had asked to join her. She had written the words “care” and “bear” on the chart paper and was working with them on words that had different endings but still rhymed. In the next hour, four other children met individually with the reading teachers, and Holt called three more groups to the easel where she sat. Washington noted that every student in the room came to work with her in a small group, including those who had been with one of the reading teachers. The groups she called were of different sizes; in addition to the group of three, she called a group of two, a group of seven, and a group of eight. Each group was working on different skills, but the students in the two larger groups were reading the same section of a book. The children who were not working with one of the teachers were writing in journals and cutting out stars.

At 10:15, the reading teachers were gone, the teaching assistant had left to prepare some materials, and the special education assistant took the children for their library time. She returned a minute later and began to cut lengths of ribbon to hang the stars from. Holt turned to Marcus, smiling. “So, any questions?”

Marcus started to laugh. “I have so many questions it’s hard to know where to begin. Uh, is everyone reading from the same material?”

“Almost everyone. I use a literature-based basal series, and there are six children not quite ready for the reading demands of the stories. When school started, I was able to start nine children in the basal series and now we’re up to fifteen. My goal is to have all the children reading literature soon.”

“How would you describe the children not yet ready?”

“Well, Tomas, Jacob, and Rosina are all English-as-second-language (ESL) children, though their English has improved dramatically this year. They see the ESL teacher twice a week. Of the three of them, Rosina has developed her language skills most rapidly, and I may be able to bring her into the basal series next. Celesta, Vera, and Isaiah need more language practice and development before they can be successful with the reading program. I think they would be frustrated if they tried to read in the basal reader, and they’re successful with the small books they read. Of that group, Isaiah seems to be moving the fastest and will be in the literature program soon. Vera is a particularly interesting child. She doesn’t seem to know the most basic concepts. Every once in a while I wonder if anyone ever speaks to this child.” Holt looked upset as she spoke. It was the first time that morning that she had lost her smile and warm countenance.

“Can you give me some examples?”

“Well, she doesn’t know that *bunny* is another name for *rabbit*. She actually didn’t know what a rabbit was in September.” In response to Marcus’s surprised look, she went on, “Yes, animals, the ones *all* children seem to recognize and name—like elephant, horse, cow, and pig—were unfamiliar to her. She didn’t know the alphabet song, and she couldn’t count in sequence, even to five, at the beginning of the year.” Holt paused and pursed her lips. “I think she suffers from neglect. And it’s most obvious in her language development. She doesn’t have the vocabulary to begin to read. We’ve worked hard in here to give her practice with the concepts that most children master before they enter kindergarten. But reading won’t “take” if children don’t have the basic words and concepts in their own vocabularies.” Again, Holt looked troubled. “I feel so sorry for her. I’ve met her mother, and she’s not able to be a lot of help. Vera is the youngest of four girls and I have the feeling her older sisters just ignore her. So while she’s not neglected in the traditional sense—she comes to school clean and dressed—her other needs aren’t being met. It’s so sad.”

Washington had the feeling that Holt was really touched and troubled by Vera’s situation. He nodded sympathetically and asked, “What about Celesta and Isaiah?”

“Celesta is a classified child who is fully included this year. Last year she was in the special education kindergarten.”

“What’s her classification?”

“I’m not sure. I’m not into labels—they just don’t tell me anything. I know from working with her that she’s not retarded. She has some speech problems and she’s very needy. She demands a lot of attention, and we’re trying to encourage her independence. She has some good skills, but she won’t use them without one of us encouraging her.” Holt paused, thinking about Celesta. “I think you would enjoy looking at her journal. It’s an interesting progress report. Actually, that’s true for all the children. They’ve been

keeping journals since the first day of school. The journals are a running record of the children's growth. Celesta has learned a lot."

"And Isaiah?"

"Isaiah's also a language-deprived child, but his improvement has been rapid. He's like a sponge absorbing concepts. When you compare him to Vera, he's made much more progress, though the two of them seemed very similar in their language development in September."

"Are there other students I should watch, do you think?"

"Oh, they are all so interesting and unusual." Anne Holt laughed. "This is a wonderful group of students. I have several high-achieving students as well. It would be good to watch Michael for a while. He's a wonderful reader and writer. Brooke reads beautifully, but she needs more help with her writing than Michael. Oh, and keep an eye on Elenora. She's quiet and doesn't demand much attention, but she has a quick and creative mind."

Anne's eyes traveled around the room, and Marcus could see that she was picturing the children.

Again she laughed and said, "They are all very special. Each one is just fascinating to observe. For example, Max is very quick, but he's also impulsive and has problems staying on task. Because he's noisy when he's not working, you notice. Todd also has problems with attention, and I have to pay special heed to him because—unlike Max, who reminds me that he's off task—Todd is very quiet. And did I tell you that Meredith has made great progress this year? She's also quiet but very skilled, and she has a wonderful imagination."

Holt's face lit up and her voice was animated as she spoke about the children. Marcus had to ask the obvious question. "So, you like teaching?"

"Oh my, yes. Can't you tell? Being with children all day puts magic into my life. Each one is so special. Of course, it also exhausts me, and there aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done. Why, I'm always behind on correcting and recording student work. . . ."

The children returning from the library interrupted Holt's comments. Mrs. Dunlop had hung about twenty stars from the ceiling, and they mesmerized the children, who started counting them and noting the differences between them. Holt shared their excitement and talked with them about whether there would be room for all 100 stars to hang from the ceiling. After about five minutes, she clapped her hands in a pattern that the children immediately imitated. The room fell quiet.

"In another fifteen minutes, it will be time to read aloud from your journals, so that should be what you work on now if you don't yet have three sentences. Who remembers how we count sentences?"

Brooke raised her hand. "Every sentence ends with a period."

"So since every sentence ends with a period, we have to read our work, make sure we put a period at the end of each sentence, and count our periods. How do we know when we've written a sentence?"

Max's hand was waving in the air. The teacher called on him and he said, "It has to be a thought. A real thought."

Holt smiled. "A whole thought?"

"Yeah. A whole thought."

"Can you give us an example?"

Washington was smiling about Max's exuberance, watching the boy bouncing up and down in his seat. "Like, 'the doctor' isn't a whole thought. You have to tell something about the doctor, like 'The doctor gave me medicine.'"

"That's a good example of a complete sentence. 'The doctor gave me medicine.' Look in your journals and identify your complete sentences. Ask yourself, 'Is this a whole thought?' If it is, make sure you've put a period at the end."

The students bent over their journals, and Holt circulated among them, asking questions and making observations. Marcus Washington noticed that she stopped at each desk but typically stayed for less than a minute. She was able to cover the twenty children in about fifteen minutes. At 11:00, she again clapped and the children imitated her. The room quieted, and the teacher perched on a tall stool at the front of the class.

"Who is ready to start?" she asked.

Several hands went up, and Holt called two children to come to her. As Vera, the first one called, read her journal, she leaned against her teacher's side. Holt had her arm around the child. Vera slowly read, "The boy is getting a dog for his birthday. He will have fun." Holt helped her sound out some words she had written but couldn't recognize. When she was done, Holt said, "You're writing so much more, Vera. I can't wait to hear what happens after the boy gets his dog."

Meredith was next. She also stood close to the teacher, but she read with more assurance than Vera had. "I didn't like soccer try outs. Today I had library. I had fun reading my new book. The stars look good in our class. I only have sixteen pages in my journal."

When she finished, Holt said, "Meredith wrote a lot, didn't she?" Several students agreed. "Let's have Meredith read her journal entry again and we'll count her sentences to ourselves, counting on our fingers, OK?"

Once again, Meredith read, and this time the other students counted. Despite Holt's instructions, several children counted aloud. When Meredith finished, Holt asked, "How many sentences?"

"Five," many voices shouted.

"I counted five too," Holt confirmed. "Meredith, do you have five periods?"

Meredith buried her face in her journal and shook her head. "I only have four."

"Well then, what's your job now?"

"To go back and check my sentences," Meredith said with a smile as she returned to her seat.



One and two at a time, more students came to the front of the room to stand by Holt and read from their journals. Most nestled up next to her, encircled in her arm. She showed each student that she appreciated his or her efforts, and used the time for miniconferences.

When Luke finished reading, she held her hand over his journal and pointed to a word. "I've got my magic light out. What does it show you?"

Luke gazed down at the page and raised his head. "I need a capital."

"For which word?"

"June."

"Why?"

"It's the name of a month."

"Yes. Did everyone hear what Luke said? Luke, say it again, loud so everyone can hear."

"The name of a month needs a capital."

"Very good. That was good correcting."

In less than thirty minutes, each of the twenty children in the room had read from his or her journal. Marcus Washington had made several observations. He noticed that with many of the children, Holt used the time to quickly teach something relevant to that student's story. Sometimes she turned to the board and involved the class in a spelling or pronunciation problem, and other times she had the student solve the problem or correct the error with her help. On several occasions she quieted the class, but Washington noticed that the children were surprisingly attentive for first-graders. He also observed that Kareem was in and out of his seat during the entire lesson. It looked to Washington as if he were on an invisible tether. The child would stand up, walk around his desk, walk toward another child's desk but not bother him, return to his desk, and sit down. Soon he'd be up again, following a similar routine. Other students were also active in their seats—bouncing, standing up and sitting back down, playing with things in their desks. Holt only stopped the class when the noise level prevented the children from hearing each other.

When the last child had read, Holt reminded the students of the upcoming afternoon activities and called them, group by group, to line up for lunch. The children gathered their lunchboxes and coats as they headed for the door to get in line. Several children asked if they could come in after lunch, and Holt nodded, telling them she would be in the room. When the bell rang, she led the students down the hall to the lunchroom. She returned almost immediately and said to Marcus, "I know you will need to leave soon. Are there things you want to ask me now? If you don't mind, I'll eat while we talk. Some of the children will be back soon to work on the computers and complete other projects."

"One thing I really want to know is how you decided not to try to correct Kareem or other kids who were out of their seats. It seemed to me like you understood that they weren't disturbing anyone."

“Oh, you noticed that. I hope you don’t think I’m a bad teacher because I don’t make the children sit quietly in their seats.”

Mark assured her that he approved of her style, and she went on. “I wouldn’t have been able to do that when I first started to teach. Then, I thought that a good classroom was quiet, and I’d spend an awful lot of time stopping lessons to correct children, to make them sit still, or quit whispering. I think what changed me was a combination of having children of my own and seeing how hard it was for them to sit still for long periods when they were little, and gaining some maturity and experience on my part. Teaching for eighteen years has helped. I no longer care as much what other people might think when they come in. I don’t define my success as a teacher based on how quiet my students are. I know when I have their attention or not; that’s what I care about. Kareem’s an interesting student to watch. He has a lot of excess energy. I think he gets rid of some of it by walking around the way he does. Did you notice? He doesn’t really bother other kids. He’s just in motion. I figure he needs to be in motion. But he’s almost always right with the lesson. To me it’s the equivalent of doodling when I’m on the phone. Keeping my hands busy doesn’t mean I’m not listening.”

Marcus nodded his agreement, shrugged into his jacket and told the teacher, “I can’t wait to come back tomorrow. Maybe I’ll stay the whole day.”

Once in his car, Marcus opened the notebook in which he had been scribbling observations. Two things that he had written down caught his eye. In one corner he had written and then circled, “So much good humor and spontaneous joy and laughter in this room.” Close to the bottom of the last page of his notes, in the margin he had written, “At the end of the morning, Holt had *not once* raised her voice.”

“How does she do it?” he wondered.