

CASE STUDY 1.1

Megan Brownlee

Megan Brownlee looked up in response to a knock to see Terri Ernst, the mother of two of her former students, framed in the doorway of her fourth-grade classroom.

“Terri. How nice to see you,” Megan greeted her visitor.

“Meg, I hope this isn’t a bad time. I know you always stay after the kids have left, and I need some advice. If you’re too busy now, let’s make a date for when I can pick your brain.”

“There’s not much left of my brain to pick at the end of the school day, but I’ll give it a try,” Megan responded. “I’m just packing up to go home. Sit down and tell me what’s on your mind.”

Megan had been working at a long table. She motioned to her visitor to take a seat and pushed papers and books aside to allow Terri some room. In truth, while it had been a long, hectic day, Meg was delighted to see Terri Ernst. Megan had taught both of Terri’s children, and Terri had been a frequent classroom visitor, helping at parties or special events and coming in weekly as a parent volunteer to work with small groups of students. Meg appreciated her gentle, caring way with the children, and the two women had been very companionable during those years.

“Meg, I’m coming to you because I really need some advice. I’m thinking of going back to school to become certified in teaching, and I remember that you came into teaching as a second career. So I thought you’d be able to give me some insights. Besides, you’re both of my kids’ favorite teacher, and I’d like to be the kind of teacher you are, if I could.” Terri started to laugh. “Does that sound too gushy?”

Meg was laughing also. “Actually, it sounded really nice. I’m flattered. But what about your job? I thought you liked what you were doing.”

“Well, yes and no. I love the flexibility of being able to work at home and make my own schedule, but our company is getting larger and there are more demands on me. Up until now, I’ve been able to arrange a four-day week, spending only one day in the office and one day in the field. But there’s been yet another company reorganization, and I’m getting the message that it’s full time or nothing. That will involve a lot of traveling, and I’m not interested in being away from home that much.” Terri was a hydrogeologist, working for an environmental engineering company. She had helped Meg design some wonderful hands-on science lessons, and had provided her with unique materials about environmental issues that Meg’s students had

found very exciting. “I loved the work I did in your class, and I think I’d be a good teacher—my science background and all.”

Meg nodded in agreement. “Yes, I think you’d be great. Do you want me to convince you that teaching’s for you?”

Terri laughed. “Sort of, I guess. I think I want to know what it’s really like. What I observed in your classroom was the fun stuff. Working with kids is great, but I know that you get here early and stay late and that you spend your lunchtimes with kids.” She smiled at Meg. “I’m doing it again. By the time I’m through, you’ll think you’re a saint.”

“I have a feeling that I’m about to convince you that I’m definitely not a saint,” Meg responded. “Would it surprise you if I said that I’m not sure I’d do it again, knowing what I now know?”

It was clear that Terri was surprised. “Why do you say that?” she asked.

“Well, you’ve already identified the good part—that’s the kids. But there are a lot of bad parts, and some of the things that make me most crazy are the ones that the system seems to perpetuate that are antikid, like the scheduling.”

Terri nodded in agreement. “I know just what you mean. The six-day rotation, in which every day is different. There’s no consistent pattern the kids can count on. The question every morning was, ‘What day is this?’ Not ‘What day of the week?’ but ‘Is it an A day, a B day, or what?’ I remember how we were always checking to see if it was B day for instrumental music or E day for school store. Why do the Littleton schools operate like that?”

“It’s funny you should mention the six-day schedule. I wasn’t even thinking of that. I’m so used to it by now that I’ve stopped being annoyed by it. But you’re right, it’s designed for bureaucratic convenience.”

“I don’t think I know what you mean.”

“OK, here’s the dilemma. The kids get six specials in a rotation, two periods of gym, two of art, and two of music. But since there are only five school days in a week, instead of putting two specials in one day, or only having five specials, the entire calendar is reorganized into six-day units. I describe that as bureaucratic convenience, since neither the kids nor I can plan anything long term without lots of confusion. Ask any teacher. Every teacher I know hates the system. But it no longer makes me nuts, so that wasn’t even on my list.”

“So what scheduling problem did you mean?”

“Well, I was thinking specifically of pullouts. I understand that some of my kids need more intense help than I can give them. And I know that Speech and English as a second language (ESL) support are important. But what I don’t understand is why there can’t be a consistent schedule of pullouts. Of the twenty-one students in my class, seventeen leave for one reason or another at different times during the day.”

“Seventeen? You’re kidding?”

“Really, seventeen. One student leaves for ESL, two for resource room, six for the gifted program, and eight for remedial reading. And since there’s no overlap of kids, I have different students leaving at different times all day.

Oh, and I forgot the five who leave for instrumental music on C days and the six who are pulled out for counseling. At least they take the kids for the gifted program in a block, every F day. Except for today, of course.” Meg ended her litany with a smile.

“What happened today?”

“The Gifted & Talented (G&T) teacher took the students for calligraphy from eleven o’clock to two o’clock.”

“Is this your G&T day?”

“No, that’s F day and today is B day; but today is the day when the calligrapher could come. I understand, and I’m happy for my kids to get the extra experiences. It’s OK if they miss some class time. But when my ESL or remedial reading students leave, I don’t want to introduce anything that they also should be part of. Same for the resource room kids. They all leave at different times, so there’s seldom a time in the day when all the students are here, particularly all the students who need all the instruction time they can get.” She caught the look on Terri’s face. “See, it really *is* confusing. Look at my schedule. Here it is April, and I still have to check it every day.”

Daily Schedule

	9:15–9:50	9:50–10:30	10:30–11:30	11:30–12:30	12:30–1:30	1:30–2:00	2:00–3:10
A day	Music	Resource room	ESL Counseling	Resource room	Lunch	Library	
B day	9:30–10:30 Resource room	9:50–10:30 Remedial reading	10:30–11:50 ESL	11:50–12:30 Art	12:30–1:30 Lunch	1:30–2:15	2:15–3:10 Counseling
C day	9:00–9:45 Resource room	9:45–11:00 Gym 9:50–10:30 Remedial reading	10:50–11:30 Lunch ESL	11:30–12:30	12:30–1:30	1:30–3:10	
D day	9:00–10:30	10:30–11:10 Remedial reading	11:10–11:55 ESL	11:55–12:30 Music	12:30–1:30 Lunch	1:30–2:40 Resource room Instrumental music	2:40–3:10
E day	9:00–10:30 Resource room	10:30–11:55	11:55–12:30 Remedial reading ESL	12:30–1:30 Lunch	1:35–2:15 Art	2:15–3:10	
F day	9:00–10:05 Gym	10:05–10:45 Resource room	10:45–11:15 G&T	11:15–12:30 Lunch room ESL Counseling	12:00–3:00 Resource	12:30–1:30	2:30–3:10

Megan handed Terri a copy of the daily schedule she had created. “If I’m reading this right, you almost never have all your students together,” Terri noted.

“Right. On A days, I have all the kids for the last hour of the day. There’s no two-hour block when we can all stay together working on something. There aren’t any one-hour blocks either, except late in the day.”

“Surely there’s a better way,” Terri said, still looking at the schedule.

“If they could design a schedule where all the special teachers took each teacher’s kids at the same time, then I could do something with the students who are left that the ones who are gone won’t have to make up.”

“That sounds like such a simple solution. Why don’t you mention it to Mr. Hamilton?”

“Several of us have been asking for that change for years, but we’re told it’s too complicated, too many special teachers’ schedules would have to be altered, and it would be confusing. I feel as though no one cares what the impact on the kids will be.”

“What else?”

“Are you sure you want me to go on?” Her listener nodded, so Meg continued, “The mix of kids this year is the most difficult I’ve ever had. There are kids with really serious family problems that affect how they act in school, both in terms of their readiness to learn and the support they get from home. Three of my children seem to have no impulse control. As for reading, two students in this class are reading on a first-grade level, three at about a second-grade level, and six at a high school level. The math disparity is even greater. It’s funny—I chose to teach in Littleton because I wanted to be in a diverse community. I did my student teaching in Radisson and knew I didn’t want to work there. I found the heterogeneity of Littleton more interesting and more challenging. I still feel that way, but without any support, a class like this one is extremely difficult.”

“I thought Littleton had great support services.”

“It does, if you want to refer a student for special education. But that’s not the answer for these kids. I need special help, so I can help the kids. I’ve tried most of the things that worked for me in the past, and they’re just not effective. I don’t want to get rid of the kids, or refer them out. I want people with more expertise than me to help me reach them. When I discuss the children I’m most concerned with at grade-level meetings or at staffings, it doesn’t help when people tell me to try something that I already know won’t work. I need someone to spend some time in the room, observe what I’m doing and what the children are doing, and help me make a long-term plan to improve some kids’ attention, or a plan for organizing instruction so I have more time to work with students who need extra help. The day is so short, and so fragmented, that I often don’t complete what I had planned. I don’t know where to find time for extra help. That doesn’t mean there’s not a way. It’s just that I don’t know what it is. But no one wants to come in and

help me. They either want to make general suggestions or staff the kid for special education services. The students I'm concerned about probably don't need special education. They need better teaching than I'm able to provide under the circumstances."

"Come on, Meg. You're a great teacher. I know several teachers in the building who need a lot of help, and you are not one of them."

"Thanks, but we all need help, in one way or another. Teaching should not be something you do by yourself behind closed doors. And don't get me started on some of my colleagues."

"How much bad teaching is there, really? What's your sense?"

"Terri, you've been in a lot more classrooms in this school than I have. You tell me."

"It's true that I've spent time in the rooms where my kids have been, but I'm not always sure that I know what I'm looking at. I have my theories about who's a good teacher, but I'm basing that on criteria that are more personal than professional. How much does it matter what the other teachers are like?"

"I've come to believe it's really important—critical, in fact. The reason people want to staff my students for special education instead of coming into the room to help me is because that's the norm of behavior around here. There are so many support services, so many ways to have children out of your room, that it's assumed that's what all teachers want. Some of my colleagues are wonderful, and we work together and help each other whenever we can steal time. But that's just it—we have to *steal* time. It hasn't occurred to anyone that teachers planning together can provide stronger instruction. That would be one way to improve some of the weaker teachers. But they're allowed to continue doing what they have always done, and then I get fourth-graders who can't read or who don't understand place value. They've been taught to memorize rules or algorithms, but not enough people have helped them to understand or think for themselves."

"So what do you think are some answers?"

"Answers?" Megan laughed. "I'm not sure I understand the problems so I'm light years away from answers. But I do have one more complaint that's really important, but it's different from what we've been talking about."

"You lost me again."

"The things like scheduling specials or pullout programs cause my teaching day to be crazier than necessary, and not having enough thoughtful colleagues is a dilemma I have to work through. But those are the kinds of issues you find on any job. They annoy and disappoint me more because I thought the organizing principle in schools would be the kids' best interest, not the bureaucracy. There's a bigger issue, one that affects the kids in a more pervasive way. This belongs in a different conversation, I think."

"Oh no you don't. You've piqued my interest. What's the bigger issue?"

"I think the system has to stop giving students inappropriate standardized tests. Do you know what my kids have been doing this week? They've been taking the New Standards Math Test."

"Math Standards? I don't think I remember that one? Is that like the Iowa Tests?"

"No, the kids *also* take the Iowas. This is a new math test, given in fourth grade, to determine how much math the students understand. It's not calculation so much as problem solving and being able to show your thinking. Kids can use calculators, rulers, things like that."

"Meg, I can't believe you wouldn't like a test that does that. That's the kind of math teaching you do. This sounds like the perfect test for your students."

"I would agree, Terri, if the items were different. Actually, this would be a good *diagnostic* test if we could give it in September and see how the students reason through some of these items. But we're giving it the end of April, and the problems they're being asked to reason through aren't appropriate. Look at this one: It's a perfect example of content invalidity."

Terri looked surprised. "Of what?"

"I'm showing off. I learned that in my graduate program. It's probably the only thing I remember from a tests and measurements course. That means the item isn't really measuring what it sets out to measure."

Megan showed Terri the test booklet from the New Standards exam and pointed to an item that read:

What's the Rule?

Look at the T table below. Write a rule that describes the relationship between each number in the In column and the number next to it in the Out column.

Add one set of numbers to the T tables that fits the rule you wrote.

In	Out
2	5
3	7
6	13
8	17

Terri looked at the problem for a minute. "I don't think I can figure this out."

Megan nodded. "Neither could the kids. And we've been doing T tables a lot this year. You see why I think it's invalid? This is not how we teach patterns or T charts. It doesn't match our curriculum. My students had no idea how to figure it out. Yet, they're terrific with patterns."

"Well, you have to show me this one. . . . I don't see the relationships. The In column goes up by 1, then 3, then 2, and the Out column goes up by 2, 6, and 4. The differences between the rows are 3, 4, 7, and 9. What's the pattern? Oh, wait. I do see it. The Out is the In doubled, plus 1. Is that right?"

“I see the same pattern you do, but then what set of numbers should come next? Should it be 9 and 19, or 10 and 21, or what? And if you think this one is bad, let me show you the one about building houses of cards.”

Terri held her hands up in front of her. “No, no more. At least not today. You’ve given me more to think about than I had bargained for. I was pretty sure you’d be really encouraging.”

“Actually, I think you’d be a great teacher, and I do want to encourage you. But no one in your teacher preparation program will tell you about all these things. Maybe if I had known some of these things in advance I wouldn’t feel so frustrated now.”

Terri asked, “Are you actually saying you are sorry you became a teacher?”

Megan looked startled. “You really cut to the chase, don’t you? The truth is, I can’t imagine doing any other job. I love teaching. My frustration comes because I feel I was unprepared for the realities of the job. Maybe if I’d known more, and still decided to pursue teaching, I’d feel as if I had made an informed decision. So, it looks like I’m trying to *inform* you in one sitting.”

With that, both women started to laugh, and Megan walked Terri to the door. Terri said, “I guess I’ll keep stopping in for an occasional reality check. Will that be OK?”

Megan hugged Terri and assured her that she could visit any time. As she walked back to the table where she had been working, she wondered whether it would have been possible to be prepared for the daily frustrations of teaching. As she picked up a student’s writing folder, she realized she didn’t have an answer.