

Chapter 29

Overinvested?

CASE 3: SUPPORTING NEW TEACHERS

Crosscutting Themes: Relationships/Trust, Agency/Efficacy.

Leadership Competencies: Advocacy, Collaboration, Policies and Procedures, Legal Requirements, Lived Experience of Students, Values Inclusion, Professional Learning.

Amir Wasem's Perspective

I was hired as a new History and Social Studies teacher at Redwood Secondary School last month. It's my first real teaching job. I graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree three years ago and have been in supply teaching since. I applied for this position without much hope of being successful, but when I was offered the job, I was ecstatic! It's difficult to land a teaching job in the area I live. I was excited to start teaching.

Many of Redwood's students have special education needs—from extreme behavior issues to significant learning challenges. To help support these students, the school has four resource teachers who provide individualized support to students and also to their teachers. I took a special education class in the university, but don't have too much experience working with students with special education needs, so I am particularly appreciative of the help the resource teachers can provide.

This past Monday I was getting ready to head home for the day when I heard a knock on my door. I was surprised to see Garrett, one of the students in my grade ten history class. Garrett has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

"Hi Mr. Wasem," Garrett started quietly.

“Garrett, hi,” I said. “What are you still doing here? It’s 3:45. School ended over an hour ago.”

“I don’t want to go home,” Garrett sighed.

“Why not?” I asked him. For the next hour, Garrett opened up to me about how he is in foster care.

He told me how difficult it is to focus on his schoolwork when he’s with his foster family because there are seven other kids who live there. He complained that the other kids always run around the house and yell making it difficult for Garrett to get any homework done. He admitted that it usually takes him a long time to concentrate on homework because he has ADHD and if he is able to concentrate, the other kids in the house interrupt him.

“My other teachers get mad at me when I fall asleep in class—especially Mrs. Callaghan. I really try not to, but I can’t help it because I try to do my work at night when it’s quiet in the house.”

I didn’t know what to say. My six years of the university certainly didn’t prepare me for a situation like this.

Over the next couple of days, I couldn’t get Garrett off of my mind. I felt sorry for him and wanted to help. His visits to my office became more frequent, and I began letting him use my classroom as a study space when he wanted. At the end of the week, I stopped by the principal’s office to see if she knew about Garrett’s home life.

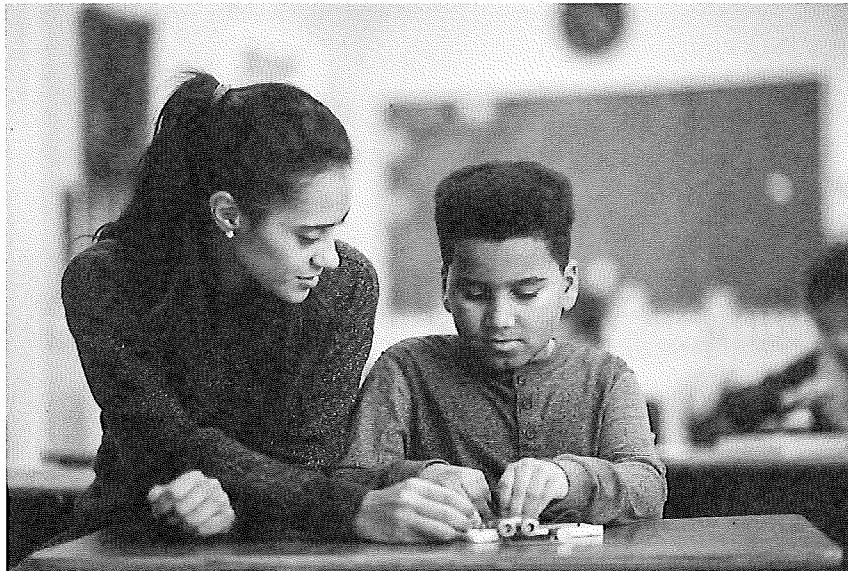


Figure 29.1 Student and Teacher Having a Serious Conversation. *Source:* <https://www.istockphoto.com>, FatCamera.

"Yes, I'm aware of Garrett's situation at home," Kathleen Nichols, the principal, told me. "He was taken from his mom when he was two years old and has been in foster care ever since."

"It's so sad," I commented.

He is really struggling with completing his homework. And, as you know, he has ADHD, which I think has just intensified his struggles at home and at school. We *have* to do something. I was thinking of calling his case worker and requesting that he be moved to a quieter, calmer home.

Kathleen stopped me.

"Amir, I understand that you care for Garrett. But the reality of it is, we can't do anything. Technically, we're not responsible for what happens outside of the school. He's not being mistreated with his foster family."

I was shocked by Kathleen's lack of concern. How could she say that?

The next few days were difficult for me because I had become personally invested in helping Garrett. Thinking about Garrett's situation consumed my days and my nights. I had shared Garrett's situation with my partner, Siba, who is a social worker. The two of us would often talk about ways to support Garrett. I was losing hours of sleep and began showing up late for work.

Two weeks after my initial conversation with Kathleen, she called me into her office to talk again. "You look terrible," she said frankly. I was too tired to care. She continued, "You should take a personal day to stay at home and get a bit of a break."

"What?" I cried. "No! I'm only losing sleep because I'm so worried about Garrett."

Kathleen sighed. "I know. But we've already been over this. We really can't get involved unless something serious occurs that threatens Garrett's safety or well-being."

I turned to walk away. "I'll take tomorrow off. But I'll have to do some thinking. If I'm not able to help my students, I shouldn't be teaching here."

Kathleen Nichols' Perspective

I hired Amir at the beginning of the school year because of how impressive he was in the interview. He seemed to have excellent interpersonal skills, patience, and passion for teaching. I hired him right away because I've found that committed and enthusiastic teachers who want to be in the classroom and make a real difference in students' lives are key to effective schools. I've been trying to support him as best I can, and I do understand his concern with Garrett's situation. But I think Amir has become overinvested.

When I first started teaching, it took me a long time to learn the boundaries between professional life and personal life. I think it's good for him to



Figure 29.2 Burnt Out Teacher. *Source:* <https://www.istockphoto.com>. Fizkes.

learn this now rather than further down the road. I admire his commitment to helping Garrett, but part of the reason that I've encouraged him to step back from the situation is because he is going to burn out if he takes every child's difficult situation on as his own personal mission. Yes, we need to support students with all of their complexities, whether those be special education needs or family situations or otherwise. But I can tell that he doesn't appreciate the lesson that I'm trying to help him understand. What else can I do to help him?

Questions To Consider

1. What are some strategies that Kathleen can use to support Amir?
2. Students with complex, intersecting needs including special education needs and familial needs, provide challenging cases for new teachers, experienced teachers, and principals alike. Given Amir's new role as a teacher in the school, what supports could be provided to best support him when confronted with complex student needs.
3. Do you agree with how Kathleen handled the situation? What would you have done differently or the same?
4. In what ways could the learning resource teachers have been involved in supporting Garrett and Amir? What supports or resources could they provide?