



Ontario  
College of  
Teachers  
Cases From  
Daily Practice

# Table of Contents

1	<b>Introduction</b>
2	<b>Cases from Daily Practice</b>
3	<b>Case Discussion Process</b>
4	<b>Case 1: Challenging Behaviour</b>
7	<b>Case 2: Disturbing Thoughts</b>
11	<b>Case 3: Changing Attitudes</b>
15	<b>Conclusion</b>
16	<b>Additional Readings</b>

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# Introduction

Over the past years, the Ontario College of Teachers has used cases such as those in this booklet to deepen understanding and application of the ethical standards and standards of practice. College members who have written and discussed cases have confirmed that the standards are illuminated in the lived narratives of educators.

As they began to list the facts of a case, identify issues, view dilemmas from multiple perspectives, consider alternative actions for incidents in narratives, and ponder the question “What is this a case of?”, Ontario teachers realized that every case is a case of many things – teacher identity, student needs, programming, communication, relationships, moral behaviour and more.

They understood that the ethical standards and standards of practice are each observable in the actions, thoughts and values of their colleagues described in every story. They understood that the standards not only support practice, but are aspirational goals that can serve as a direction for growth.

They found cases to be sites for professional conversations and forums to review their own issues, challenges and celebrations in practice. They found that everyone has a story to tell and a desire to improve the profession. They selflessly shared their stories because of their desire to teach and impact positively on student learning and students’ lives. These commitments reflect the reasons they serve students in classrooms and schools across the province.



# Cases from Daily Practice

*Cases from Daily Practice* are stories based on the everyday practice of educators in Ontario. These cases concern the challenges and dilemmas experienced by two teachers and a consultant.

This booklet contains three sample cases – **Challenging Behaviour**, **Disturbing Thoughts** and **Changing Attitudes**. These narratives reflect various dimensions of professional practice.

**Case 1: Challenging Behaviour** chronicles the dilemmas of a teacher new to a school and the community. The teacher’s struggles may mirror your own. This teacher endeavours to work productively with a student experiencing challenges and creates a supportive classroom experience.

**Case 2: Disturbing Thoughts** takes you into a classroom where a teacher attempts to understand the disengagement of a student. In both *Disturbing Thoughts* and *Challenging Behaviour*, parents play critical roles in the issues to be addressed.

**Case 3: Changing Attitudes** is written by a consultant. This case portrays the tensions that accompany Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) score results. The writer wonders where responsibility lies and what role a curriculum consultant should play in implementing the provincial assessment process at his school board.

Each case presents you with multiple issues in which the standards can be used to guide professional inquiry. The standards serve as a resource and source for meaningful action and reflection.



# Case Discussion Process

We invite you to read and explore these cases through collaboratively discussing the case with colleagues using the following case discussion process:

1. List the facts of the case.
2. Identify the issues in the case.
3. Consider the case from the perspective of the writer, the teachers, the parents, the students and the community.
4. Speculate on alternative actions to the dilemmas in the case.
5. Consider “What is this a case of...?” A case should be a case of many things. For example, **Disturbing Thoughts** is a case of relationships, communication, programming, the needs of the gifted student, necessary interventions, pedagogy, parent-teacher collaboration and perhaps other issues.
6. Identify how the ethical standards and standards of practice are reflected in this case, or how they might be used to help respond to the dilemmas.

## Professional Inquiry

A series of reflective questions are provided following each case. These can be used to compliment the case discussion process or for self-study. Additional readings are also provided to extend professional knowledge and skill related to the issues and dilemmas addressed in each case.



# Case 1: Challenging Behaviour

“Miss? Miss? I’m just letting you know Miss that I hate math. I’m never going to like it. I’ll just sit at the back. If you leave me alone then I’ll leave you alone.”

Hearing this, the girl’s friends snickered. This morning was my first day teaching at a new school and marked the start of my third year in the classroom. It sure looked like we were not off to a great start.

At this point, I launched into my new speech about how everyone can understand math and that I understood math anxiety. I assured the students that I would support them and help them be successful in math. For the last two years, the speech had brought students to my room feeling as if they could tell me which parts of math confused them and explain to me where they needed help. In today’s class, however, there were very few signs of engagement. Instead, I was met by almost an entire class of angry eyes. This was just a hint of the kind of year I was beginning.

I had decided to leave the security of my former comfortable neighbourhood school to extend my knowledge and ability to teach in diverse communities. This high school population consisted of students representing many different cultures and was made up of a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds. The school community also included a low-income area with many of the families existing on meagre single-parent wages or government assistance.

On my way out of class, I stopped the girl who had made the comment about hating math. “Kia, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, so what?” she grunted an affirmation.

“Listen, I really do understand your feelings

about math. I’m here to help in the mornings and after school if you start to feel lost. Please don’t hesitate to come in.” I smiled encouragingly.

“Ha, yeah whatever,” she retorted. She barely glanced up at me as she swung her bag over her shoulder and marched out.

Kia, with her large hazel eyes, long black hair and bronze skin, was one of the most striking young women in the school. I learned very quickly, however, that the one thing that was not beautiful about Kia was her attitude. We continued to have run-ins on a daily basis. On the one hand, I genuinely wanted to find a way to engage her. On the other hand, I wanted her to stop poisoning the entire class experience.

Kia had an enormous amount of social power and when she decided to be rude or belligerent, several students would always follow her lead. When Kia was away, the class ran smoothly. Students worked and answered questions. They volunteered to go to the board to display their homework. On these days, the students appeared to like what was happening in my class. I had a wonderful time. I could even make jokes while teaching the class.

But with one glare from Kia on the days she was present, the volunteers disappeared. The class sat mutely during my attempts to joke or play the math-trivia game that they loved on Kia-free days. Inevitably, she would disrupt the lesson with her verbal comments and challenges, and I would end up feeling frustrated and incompetent.

I spent several evenings trying to figure out how I had gone so wrong with this girl. I tried to think of innovative ways to work with her. When I spoke to colleagues, more often than not, they would just roll their eyes when they heard her name.

I pulled Kia aside one day after a particularly difficult class and told her how frustrated I was. "Listen Kia, I know that for some reason you're really unhappy in this class. And I know I feel pretty unhappy some days too. Is there something that I can do for you that will make this better for both of us? If you can't meet me after or before school, maybe we could meet at lunch and I can give you a hand?"

"Yeah, there is something you can do," she snarled.

I ignored the snarl in her voice and with a glimmer of hope in my heart asked, "Great, what?"

"You can go back to where you came from," she blurted out.

In desperation, I decided that she would not be permitted to stay in my class whenever she was rude. She would have to come back and do the work after school. However, I quickly discovered detentions were useless because she would not show up. I could hardly believe it was only the end of October!

Finally, I took what I felt was the next logical step. I called her mother. She seemed to be a happy and co-operative woman and expressed shock that Kia was regularly late and disrespectful. She assured me that she would talk to her daughter and that I could expect a "new" girl the next day.

I woke up the next morning feeling hopeful. When I saw Kia walking down the hall, I noticed that her usual swagger seemed less obvious. I hoped that was a good sign. However, as she got closer to me, I noticed that she was limping. When I saw her face, my heart dropped into my stomach. I had to catch my breath. She had a large black eye, abrasions on her cheek and a swollen lip. She averted her eyes, went to her seat and arranged herself gingerly.

Throughout my lesson Kia sat silent. She appeared to be attempting her work. I stopped her on the way out.

"Kia, what happened to you?"

"Nothing," she mumbled with her eyes downcast. "I fell," she said. "Sorry for my rudeness. I'll try harder in your class," she added in a low tone with her eyes refusing to meet mine.

I rushed to the principal's office and blurted out the story. He seemed unsurprised. "At this school, if the teacher calls home, the kid gets a beating." Seeming untroubled, he added, "Don't worry about it. Your student will be good now for about a term."

The word "suicide" sends chills up and down

## Professional Inquiry

### Reflecting on Case 1

1. What are the facts in this case?
2. Describe the teacher's attitude, knowledge and skills as they are illustrated through this case.
3. What are the dilemmas in this case?
4. Consider the dilemma from the perspectives of
  - the teacher
  - her colleagues
  - the principal
  - Kia
  - the class
  - Kia's mother
  - the community.
5. What strategies would you propose to address the problems as presented?
6. Consider the benefits and risks of each strategy for the teacher, Kia and the class.
7. What are the roles and responsibilities of a teacher and a school with regard to students like Kia?
8. What leadership role might the principal play in this scenario?
9. What is this a case of?

### Further Inquiry

1. Review the ethical standards. What aspects of the ethical standards are reflected in this case?
2. What information about a school community needs to be shared with teachers?
3. What role could staff play in preparing colleagues for situations such as Kia's?
4. Which standards might guide and support the teacher in this case?
5. Reflect on how issues about the concepts of equity, social justice and democracy are integrated into this case.
6. How can new teachers prepare themselves for dealing with the challenges of diverse school communities?

**See page 16 for additional readings.**

## Case 2: Disturbing Thoughts

my spine. One of my own students had written the word on paper. The sight of it made me sink to an all-time low. How could one of my little girls, one of my 10-year-old students, believe that life is so terrible that she would think of ending it?

I teach a Grade 4/5 class of students identified as gifted. The students are with me for the entire day. I believe that they are well cared for at home. Their parents have very high educational standards and expectations for their children. Other parents sometimes envy gifted classrooms and having a child in a gifted class in some cultural groups is seen to be prestigious.

The Kindergarten to Grade 6 school where I work is dual-track with three classes of gifted students and 10 classes of regular students. For 15 years of my 30-year career, I have taught gifted students. Teaching these exceptional students has been so rewarding.

At the beginning of each school year, I realize that some students placed in this class will be high achievers but not what I have learned to identify as gifted. I find myself questioning who really is gifted in my class. This year, one student I wondered about was Lisa. Lisa has several younger siblings. Both of her parents had indicated last year that they had had her tested privately and they wanted her in the gifted program.

When Lisa arrived in my class in September, she appeared to make friends and seemed comfortable with her social contacts. At recess, she interacted well with her peers and seemed happy and playful. I saw her jumping rope and talking animatedly to other children.

However, in the classroom she seemed unhappy and at times overwhelmed by the work and the demands of the program.

Assignments were often rushed and not as thoughtful or thoroughly completed as her peers. Her work was not what I'd grown to expect from gifted students. Last week when I gave an assignment based on an open-ended question Lisa just wrote, "I don't know." Lisa, when she did respond orally, provided very basic answers and never explored the complexities or nuances of the topic. Her most frequent response lately had seemed to be, "I don't know."

None of these issues seriously concerned me at the start of the year because I knew that gifted students don't always demonstrate qualities that some people associate with giftedness. I'd known gifted kids who sit underneath desks and rarely reply to even simple questions. However, more than two months later, it seems to me that Lisa has been just coping in my class rather than learning or excelling from the classroom experience.

In November, I presented a workshop to our parent community. After the workshop, I noticed that Mrs. Cooper, Lisa's mother, was waiting. I could tell by the expression on her face that she wanted to speak to me.

She held out a piece of paper and said, "Mrs. Wills, I have something for you to read. Lisa wrote this note yesterday. I think you better see it."

I read the note once and then blinked to see if I was reading the note correctly. The word "suicide" stared back at me.

As I looked into Mrs. Cooper's face, I could tell by her anxious demeanor that the note and this terrible word had shocked her. We both broke into tears.

For the next few seconds I was speechless.

Then my words jumbled as I tried to find the right thing to say. My principal, standing just down the hall, observed our interchange and discomfort. Not understanding what had happened, he first tried to get Mrs. Cooper to leave.

I said somewhat abruptly, "I am fine. The issue we were discussing is important, but I can take care of it at this time unassisted." It was 9:00 o'clock and both Mrs. Cooper and I realized that there would be no resolution to this problem tonight.

I chose my words carefully. I did not want to escalate an already serious situation. Finally I made a suggestion. I said, "Mrs. Cooper, reports are coming out in two weeks. Why don't you bring Lisa in for an early conference and we can talk about the note and her feelings?" I was grasping at things to say. I couldn't get the word "suicide" out of my mind and I certainly couldn't bring myself to utter the word out loud. I was really just buying time and I wondered at what cost this might be to Lisa.

Mrs. Cooper and I left the building together and hugged each other. All the way home I kept thinking about the note. It didn't mention that Lisa thought that she was having trouble in school. She had written that she wished that her mother would let up on all the pressure she was feeling at home. I still wondered, however, if I should counsel her out of the gifted program.

It was a restless and sleepless night. The next morning I spoke with my principal about what had happened last night. I retold the entire situation and promised that I would keep him informed. He assured me that he had confidence in my judgment and would only step in if needed.

Lisa's mother and I decided to meet with

Lisa on the pretense that our meeting was an early report card interview. Lisa did not know that I knew about her suicide note. As the three of us talked, I tried to encourage Lisa to confide in us about her feelings. Even her mother prompted Lisa to explain what had occurred the week before that resulted in the writing of the note. Lisa chose not to reveal anything about the note.

We spoke about Lisa's fears and anxieties. Finally, Lisa whispered that she wished her mother would ease up. Lisa went on to explain that she felt that she didn't have time for herself because of piano school, special math school, religious school, art school, sibling demands and homework. She listed activity after activity.

This sudden revelation of listing her overwhelming number of activities seemed to indicate to me that Lisa's problems had likely been precipitated by events outside of my classroom. For the moment, I was relieved.

At one point I interjected, "Lisa, are you happy?" I paused and then continued "Don't tell me right now. Think about your answer. Go to the library while I speak to your Mom and when you come back, I'll ask you that same question again."

Lisa left the room. I wondered why this family had not already asked for help? I turned to her mother and recommended that she and her husband speak to their family doctor about the suicide note. I added, "Your doctor may recommend counseling for Lisa and perhaps the whole family." I also suggested that we should meet again mid-January.

I didn't want to leave the conversation with-

out revisiting the idea that perhaps Lisa should return to a regular classroom program. I asked, “Mrs. Cooper, have you and your husband ever considered moving Lisa back to the regular program? It might prove less stressful for her.”

Lisa's mother listened, but I realized from her blank expression that she did not intend on considering my suggestions.

I called Lisa back to the interview and asked again, “Lisa, are you happy?” She shrugged her shoulders and replied with her simple, standard response, “I don't know.”

Mrs. Cooper and Lisa left my classroom. I just sat looking at the walls of a classroom that most days vibrated with student interest, pride and achievement. I noticed that none of Lisa's contributions were displayed on the classroom walls.

I reflected that Lisa could easily join a regular

class in the same school, but I speculated that her present classmates, her family, or even Lisa herself would see this move as a failure. I wondered if I would be acting with honesty and fairness to the other students in my class if I supported Lisa with a modified gifted program. Would I be acting with honesty and fairness to Lisa? What should I write on Lisa's report card? How should I deal with her suicide note? How should I deal with Lisa's family in the future? What should my role be in this situation?

We left the meeting with a child who didn't know if she was happy, a mother grasping a suicide note (which had not been spoken about), and a teacher questioning how to accommodate this young girl tomorrow and beyond.



## Professional Inquiry

1. What are the facts in the case?
2. What dilemma does the teacher face with:
  - Lisa
  - Lisa's mother
  - herself
  - the gifted program
  - other staff
  - the principal
  - Lisa's peers.
3. What are the perspectives of the participants in this case?
4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the teacher's actions?
5. In a situation like this, what are the duties and responsibilities of the teacher and the school?
6. What advice would you give to this teacher?

## Further Inquiry

1. Examine the ethical standards of Care, Trust, Respect and Integrity. Consider the teacher's actions in light of these four standards. Which aspects of each standard does the teacher demonstrate? To what extent do the ethical statements provide guidance for a teacher dealing with a student in crisis? What other supports might be necessary?
2. Which standards of practice are illustrated through this case?
3. To what extent do the roles and the responsibilities of teachers of exceptional students differ from the roles and responsibilities of other teachers?
4. Review the purposes of the ethical standards and the standards of practice. Which purposes apply to this case?
5. What strategies might educators use when dealing with parents/guardians who hold different opinions than they do about the appropriate educational program for students?

**See page 16 for additional readings.**

# Case 3: Changing Attitudes

*“Local school board failing to meet the grade as students score near the bottom on the provincial Grade 3 and Grade 6 tests.”*

– The Daily Reporter

*“Coming up on the Channel 20 News at 6: Local students score poorly on provincial testing.”*

*“Next year our board will meet or exceed the provincial averages in reading, writing and mathematics in Grade 3 and Grade 6,” the director of education assures the board of trustees in response to this year’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) provincial assessment results.*

The EQAO results have never received the type of attention that was generated this year. The EQAO results had, in previous years, barely raised an eyebrow in this community. The media, parents and most educators had paid little attention to the scores. The general feeling seemed to be that these provincial initiatives will pass – as have many of the others.

This year, an instant pressure to improve those scores permeated the entire school district. Higher expectations from the general public, combined with a need on the part of the newly amalgamated school district trustees to make an impression, created a sense of immediacy. Promises to deliver on those high expectations from our director meant that our once apparently safe world of education was about to be rocked. Superintendents felt the pressure and they turned up the heat on the principals. EQAO results was the first item on the agenda for their next meeting with principals.

School district expectations for improvement in the EQAO scores were made clear to principals. After the meeting, principals went back

to their schools and sought advice from their teachers about how to reach the new EQAO targets.

Everyone began asking, “Where will we go from here?”

At the board level, Joanne Tremblay, the Superintendent of Curriculum, brought the team of curriculum consultants together for a brainstorming session. She began the discussion by asking, “Does anyone here think that our students are below average?”

We all replied, “No, of course not.”

She asked a second question. “Are our teachers less knowledgeable or less capable than the average teacher in the province?”

We replied in unison, “No.”

“I don’t think so either,” she responded.

“Well, what are we going to do about these scores?” Joanne asked.

Then Joanne looked directly at me. Everyone looked at me. I was the consultant responsible in our district school board for assessment and evaluation.

Only a few months ago, I had been a secondary school classroom teacher. Now I was responsible for student assessment and evaluation services from Kindergarten to Grade 12 in over 50 schools. My portfolio also included experiential learning, tutors, EQAO assessments, educational research, literacy, numeracy, safety patrols, parent advisory council support, curriculum for non-compulsory secondary school subjects and e-learning.

Soon after Joanne's meeting with consultants, the director called me into his office to share some test scores from other district school boards. This information only confirmed that we did not compare favourably with results in the other districts. I could feel the disappointment and the frustration that permeated the executive offices.

In preparation for this meeting with the director, I had spent much of the previous day crunching numbers from this year and the previous year's EQAO assessments. The director was impressed by my analysis. He was not, however, impressed with the added revelation that not only were this year's results poor, but also, in many areas of the tests, our students were performing poorly over the past three years.

The director asked me, "What are your suggestions for how we are going to improve these scores?"

I explained that I intended to show our school district data to the elementary principals and to the Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers during three separate meetings. I planned to use these meetings as brainstorming sessions to gather ideas about why our scores were so low and how we could improve. The director agreed with this plan. He also suggested that I make arrangements to visit the top performing district boards and find out what they had done in the past to prepare their students and teachers for these tests.

The director's final comment before I left his office was "We need to apply some pressure on everyone to improve." He emphasized, "Let's also be sure though that we provide the support necessary for our staff and our students to improve these scores."

As I left his office, I felt a huge weight had been added to my consultant responsibilities. It seemed that the success or failure of my new position was all riding on this monumental task. I also realized that I had just received my first leadership directive about "pressure and support." The pressure was obvious. The appropriate support was not.

Over the next few weeks, I arranged the three information and input sessions for the elementary principals and the teachers. The first meeting involved the principals. My presentation data illustrated that our students were not achieving the results that we expected. Joanne invited the principals to think of possible reasons why our students might have scored so low.

The principals, at first, just sat and looked at each other. Finally, one of the veteran administrators shouted out, "Our parents are not interested in these test results." Another principal added, "The teachers don't care about these tests either." I began to list their responses on chart paper.

Another principal exclaimed, "These results do not accurately reflect the work of our students." Another principal complained, "My school is located in a low socio-economic area. My scores will never be high." Another added, "Comparisons can not be from year to year because it is a different group of kids." Betty, a former consultant added, "We need more professional development for our teachers." One frustrated principal lamented, "Teacher turnover in those grades is so high because no one wants to administer the tests." John, a well respected principal, suggested, "These tests have not been a priority in our system and, as a result, little attention has been given to them." Many of the principals in the room agreed with John.

The following week the teachers of Grades 3 and Grade 6 met for another two sessions.

Once again my presentations illustrated that our students were not scoring at the levels that we all believed they should. Once again the participants were invited to share ideas about why they thought our students were not doing well and what we could do to help them improve.

Joanne and I received a barrage of responses. An experienced teacher of Grade 6 started it off. "The government cut back our professional development days that previously were used for assessment in-service. What do you expect?" Another teacher exclaimed, "This government initiative will be gone as soon as we have the next election." Another teacher pointed out to the superintendent that, "Our administration does not provide adequate professional learning in the area of assessment and evaluation." Another educator lamented, "There are no longer enough consultants left in our board to do the in-service, and the ones that we have are not qualified in the areas that we need."

During the third and final session a frustrated teacher yelled out, "The principals are not able to purchase the resources for my classroom." A young teacher commented, "We can't teach the curriculum because there's a shortage of texts and teacher resources to do our job." An exasperated teacher added, "The parents are not supportive of our efforts to help their children learn. They don't even check to make sure that homework is completed."

The lists went on and on. Although there

were some differences among the responses based on the mix of teachers in the room, I noticed that most of the reasons for the poor results were focused towards senior administration, principals, parents and the government. Teachers didn't seem to see themselves as holding any responsibility for poor student performance.

At the end of the session Joanne suggested, "Let's eliminate from the list the reasons that are common to educators across the province." The reasons began to disappear, one by one, until we were left with a few concrete reasons why our scores might be lower.

The following week, I poured over the pages of qualitative data gathered during the three sessions with our principals and teachers. I combined it with the quantitative data received from the EQAO. I also had analyzed some parent and student surveys and added those results to the data collection.

I began to understand that my greatest challenge was not going to be the analysis of the data or even the development of an action plan for improvement. It seemed to be something much bigger and more important. "How can we change the current teacher, principal, parent and student attitudes about the relevance of the EQAO testing?" How could I develop an action plan that would provide support for efforts to change attitudes?

## Professional Inquiry

### Reflecting on Case 3

1. What are the facts of the case?
2. What is the past experience and knowledge of the consultant? To what extent is the person prepared for their new position as consultant?
3. Why does the consultant feel such great pressure?
4. How might this kind of emphasis on EQAO results have an impact on a school community?
5. To what extent do you agree with the consultant's identification of the most important challenge in this case?
6. What advice would you give this consultant?

### Further Inquiry

1. Which standards of practice are demonstrated through this case?
2. How might the ethical standards and the standards of practice guide the work of the writer?
3. To what extent do you agree with the belief that provincial testing should be a priority in Ontario classrooms?
4. What other strategies and processes could be used to assess student learning and achievement?
5. What do you think might change the attitudes of teachers, principals, parents and students about the EQAO process?

**See page 17 for additional readings.**

# Conclusion

We offer these cases to you to begin your dialogue about the standards. Whether you reflect individually, engage with a colleague or decide to discuss one of these cases in a group, please know that these cases written by your colleagues possess the potential to bring the standards to life.

The College is pleased to provide you with other written and visual resources in *Living the Standards* on the College web site at [www.oct.ca](http://www.oct.ca). These inquiry-based resources are teaching tools for you to share with colleagues or for your own professional learning and reflection.



# Additional Readings

## Case 1

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The ethical standards and standards of practice provide members of the teaching profession with a resource for meaningful action and reflection.



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