



*Teaching Caselettes*

## Teaching Notes

# MCDUGALD TERRACE, DURHAM

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A student working in an academic and mentoring program in a Durham, North Carolina, housing project must decide how to respond to a disruptive 6-year-old student whose mother needs the childcare the program provides to stay in her own job.

This case draws out the conflict between the boy's need for individual attention and the class's need for safety and for the teacher's time, as well as the larger tension between the student's desire to "make a difference" and the community's need for childcare. These conflicts help students to understand the critical role of intelligent program design and preparation and they point to the importance of better understanding broader issues related to poverty and to personal behavior.

Please refer to the "Ethics of Engagement" overview at the end of these teaching notes to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework this case was created to illustrate.

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Issues: This case illustrates several ethical dilemmas students may face in the field. It also encourages students to think about how they will constructively address site-specific program design flaws within the context of ongoing service. Finally, it points toward the obligation that students have to critically reflect on the structural injustices that lead to the opportunities for service presented by civic engagement sites.

1. *What are the challenges to acting ethically in this case? (Think through personal, organizational, and systemic challenges.)*

Personal: Desire to help the boy without having a clear path of how to do so.

Organizational: Program design that led John to be the sole teacher in a class of twenty students; conflicting roles of teacher and friend.

Systemic: Urban poverty; cycles of violence. Students should recognize the importance of systemic causes that lead to Zack's behavior: lack of parental education and job opportunities leading to ongoing poverty; hourly jobs that prohibit parents from spending time with their children, leading them to be unduly influenced by older kids. It is important to emphasize the importance of *preparation*. What do students preparing for civic engagement work need to be doing beforehand to avoid the unrealistic expectations such as those that caused John's disappointment? For example, could John have read about urban poverty before his program began?

2. *What dilemmas does John face? What steps would you take to resolve this? What principles do you draw from? What are the consequences?*

Individual vs. Community:

- Zack's need for attention and the class's need for an education
- John's hope to make a difference and the community's need for child-care
- Utilitarian approach would suggest removing Zack from the class, but does that really solve anything, even in the short-term?

Short-term vs. Long-term:

- Pulling Zack out of the class would resolve the short-term disruption; even putting him in therapeutic foster care may help him deal with the trauma; but these aren't long-term solutions for the community
- Emphasize need for critical reflection about systemic injustice

Justice vs. Mercy:

- What is merciful in this situation? What does justice look like? Can it be applied on the individual level? on the systemic level?

Both the dilemmas of short-term vs. long-term and justice vs. mercy point to the importance of the systemic dimension of ethics.

## Overview of Ethics of Engagement Case Studies

These case studies were developed as part of a workshop series the Kenan Institute for Ethics provided for students preparing for intensive civic engagement experiences. The goals for the summer experience were three-fold: to gain self-knowledge, to deepen students' commitment to life-long civic engagement, and to help the communities in which they lived and worked for the summer. Student projects took place in local and global locations, ranging from working with African immigrants in Ireland, to documenting social change movements in South Africa, to managing environmental organizations in Portland, Oregon.

We have included two cases based on actual student experiences in the field--one domestic, set in Durham, North Carolina, and another abroad, set in Muhuru Bay, Kenya. These cases set forward the ethical dilemmas the students faced on personal, organizational, and systemic levels. They also present scenarios in which there is no clear right answer. Rather, the students in each case study are challenged by seemingly intractable problems for which there seem to be only wrong and perhaps less wrong solutions.

In constructing the teaching notes, we referred to the "Right-Right Dilemmas" paradigm drawn from Rush Kidder's book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. We modified this concept, suggesting that the students will likely face "Wrong-Wrong Dilemmas" in their summer placements, in which both the community and individual goods are compromised; neither loyalty nor truth can be fully achieved; long-term and short-term prospects are equally pessimistic; and neither justice nor mercy can be experienced by all those affected by the dilemma.

In the workshop, we also introduced the students to three "Resolution Principles," which we offered as frameworks to enable clear thinking about ethical dilemmas. These principles are the classical ethical principles of

*Utilitarianism* - providing the greatest good for the greatest number

*Deontology / Principle-Based (Kantianism)* - following the highest principle as absolutely as possible

*Care-Based* - emphasizing the importance of relationships and paying attention to the particular context and individuals involved

After reading the cases, students in the workshop were divided into small groups to discuss the questions listed in the teaching notes and then returned to the large group for a facilitator-led discussion. Given the significance and difficulty of the tensions faced by the characters in the cases, a good session often ended with significant debate, rather than consensus about a right course of action.

Our aim with these cases is to provide students preparing for civic engagement experiences with tools they will find helpful as they face morally serious dilemmas in real-world contexts radically different than those in a university setting.