CASE STUDY: Staying Inside the Lines
Frances Thurber

Setting
Hagerman Elementary housed an interesting and challenging mix of students from various ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds.

Case
As Pamela Schaefer left the principal’s office that day, Mrs. Asbury’s words still stung her ears: “Pamela, although you are very enthusiastic, and have a good grasp of discipline in your classroom, I am concerned about the curriculum and assessment plan you submitted to me last week. You seem to be relying heavily on an interdisciplinary arts component, and using portfolios as your grading method. Frankly, I worry that you are not paying enough attention to our core subjects in your planning.”

The district superintendent had asked for a comprehensive assessment and evaluation plan from each of the elementary school buildings, in preparation for adoption of local standards. Mrs. Asbury had asked each of her teachers to hand in a summary of how each teacher was organizing content and assessment in his or her curriculum. Pamela’s plan was the focus of this discussion.

Mrs. Asbury continued: “Just because students are enjoying group activities and lots of contact with arts ideas; it doesn’t mean that we’re educating them as we should. In fact, I noticed in my formal observation of you last week that you spent a lot of the teaching lesson on music, even though the lesson was supposed to be a review of fractions. In my one other observation last month, I noticed that you were displaying many art images from museums, as well as student art work, on your display boards. It bothers me that I didn’t see any dates or facts relating to American history or handwriting visuals on your walls like I see in Mr. Damsen’s fifth-grade room.”

Mrs. Asbury paused for a moment, then continued: “You know, he’s an experienced teacher. Perhaps you should go talk to him about how he consistently manages to get in the requirements each week. Remember, our school district has hired art and music specialists who are in charge of teaching those subjects in this school. I’m afraid you might be wasting your time and your students’ time, too.”

Pamela Schaefer had actually felt quite confident about her first semester of teaching fifth-grade at Hagerman Elementary School. It had not been easy for her to arrive at this secure place. Although she had earned high grades, Pamela had struggled through school by working several jobs, and depending on loans and a few scholarships. Now, as a first-year teacher she was improving her techniques and had even become more confident about teaching math to her students in a clear and productive way. She was most proud however, about how she had tried to integrate visual art and music into her classroom as a part of her students’ daily routine.

During her undergraduate teacher education program, she admired and wanted to follow the models for teaching that had been shared with her particularly by her reading professor, Dr. Turner, and the art education methods teacher, Professor Lynch. When she was a student in their classes prior to her student teaching last spring, both instructors had encouraged her to integrate literacy, visual art, and even music issues into her core content lessons. They helped her learn how to design lessons so that students could explore social issues and other big ideas about their culture and the cultures of others as well—at the same time they were learning about science or history.

Pamela hoped Mrs. Asbury was finished, but the lecture continued: “Furthermore, our building will be giving standardized tests next month in reading and math. With those important events approaching, I don’t mind if you teach an art or crafts project once in a while as a reward to your students for good behavior, but that’s enough. We will be held accountable for our students’ test scores compared to other buildings in the district. I want you to concentrate on those as your major goals for the rest of the year.”

A thought popped into Pamela’s mind, and before she thought about stifling it, she retorted: “But art and music have important content standards, too!”

The expression on Mrs. Asbury’s face did not hide the exasperation she felt. She stood up to indicate the session was over. “I’m not accountable for those standards to the superintendent, Pamela. I will be visiting your room again for a formal observation next week. I would like to visit you while you teach the children’s language arts session on Wednesday at 10 a.m. And I hope that we now understand each other.”

Pamela sought out the teachers’ lounge since she had a few minutes before class began again. Sue Henry, the art specialist, was finishing up a unit on color theory in Pamela’s classroom. Mr. Damsen was also in teachers’ lounge waiting for his students to return from PE. Her voice low, Pamela asked Damsen, a teacher with 15 years’ experience at Hagerman, about his curriculum and assessment plan that he had submitted to Mrs. Asbury.
"Oh, when I was a new graduate like you, I had big ideas, too. Educational theories just come and go—like now—when we are all being held accountable for our students being able to reach certain standards decided by someone else. If you’re smart, Pamela, you’ll teach skills and facts and your kids will do well on these upcoming tests that will measure those things!"

Just then the bell rang for them both to return to their classes, so the conversation was abruptly cut short. As Pamela entered her classroom, Sue Henry had the children seated and ready to return to their regular class work. A series of partially dried paintings of the color wheel were lying on the floor. Pamela thought briefly to herself whether her students had enjoyed this painting exercise. Then, as Pamela thanked Ms. Henry for coming, she added: "Sue, could we get together sometime soon and talk a bit? I’m available most days after school. And if you are, I would really appreciate it. I would really like to talk with you about how you and I might work more closely together on the art lessons you teach the children...You know, how I could help to connect your lessons to the rest of what we learn every week.”

Sue Henry looked a bit surprised at this request from Pamela, and said: "That would be fine. There are so many art techniques and elements of design I want them to know that I am always grateful for reinforcement!” They made plans to meet this Thursday. As Pamela finished out the afternoon in a somber mood, she thought, “Good thing the children are studying right now for tomorrow’s vocabulary quiz...”

She drove home that night after school with thoughts racing through her mind. She did not want to leave this school. Pamela had seen how her students worked enthusiastically and cooperatively together on lessons, especially in social studies, when they often explored the meaning of art images as part of their work. As she drove into her apartment parking lot she pondered:

If I don’t comply with her ideas, could Mrs. Asbury not recommend me for tenure down the road? And what about my financial situation? How can I refuse to re-evaluate my teaching approach and possibly allow myself to be let go when I still have several thousands of dollars of school loans to repay? Should I redo the new instructional display boards I was planning to hang?

Pamela thought how well the bulletin boards related the music and art of the Harlem Renaissance to next week’s unit about writing sentences. And one of these lessons was the one Mrs. Asbury would observe. Pamela thought that maybe she should just stick with the skills lesson about sentence writing that existed in the district text. She wondered what consequences would result if she did not do what Mrs. Asbury suggested. She wondered if perhaps she should look for another teaching job somewhere else. Pamela thought that maybe Professor Lynch or Dr. Turner were at home and would have some ideas for her. She decided to give them a call.

Discussion Questions
1. What are the main issues of this case? What do you think is the most important issue of this case?
2. What advice might Professor Lynch and Dr. Turner, Pamela’s mentors from undergraduate school, offer her when she contacts them?
3. What options does the main character, Pamela, have in attempting to solve her dilemma? If you were she, which option would you choose? What are her concerns?
4. How would you justify teaching with an integrated curriculum to your principal?
5. How would you deal with Pamela’s conflict of trying to teach with innovative ideas in a school/district culture that focused on standardized testing and the teaching of skills and facts?
6. What have you learned from this case?

Case Closure Questions
1. Which option do you think is best for the case dilemma and why?
2. What kinds of social, historical, moral, ethical and/or political forces impact the case dilemma, the case outcomes, and selecting options for the dilemma?
3. How has the case discussion changed your views about an art teaching issue?
4. What biases and/or assumptions do you hold about any of the case issues or topics?
5. In future practice, what would you do differently as a result of reading this case?

Suggested Readings