



Puzzle Kids: Observing and Analyzing Challenging Students

Puzzle Kids

When we regard our students as unique and fascinating, when they become case-study subjects even while they are students, then the children become our teachers, showing us how to learn.

Lucy Calkins

Puzzle kids. Students on the bubble. Children in danger of falling through the cracks. Every teacher can instantly think of students who fit these terms, and can just as quickly identify one or two or three in his or her classroom. They are the students we worry and wonder about, and never seem to have enough time to ponder.

This e-Guide is designed to help teachers collaborate around the issue of puzzle kids by taking one child and doing a series of focused observations, discussions and writing about the needs of that student. Teachers who have completed this series of exercises all say the knowledge is useful far beyond helping the one student they've selected for focused analysis. By taking the time to look, listen, and talk with one child in-depth, new understanding about all students in the class emerges. The exercises also build rapport among colleagues and teaching staffs.

Each of these activities is designed to be completed with a partner, and can easily be adapted for use in workshop settings. There isn't a set order for the workshops, though some are best completed early or late in the process and are identified accordingly.

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Workshop 1: Fresh Eyes

For this activity, you will do a focused observation of your partner's puzzle student. Make arrangements to go to the classroom and observe during any instructional period. Ideally, it will be a stretch that includes some time during a whole class lesson, some time when the student is interacting with peers in class, and some time when the student is interacting outside the classroom. Of course, you'll want to be discrete so the student isn't aware of your observations.

This is a good activity to complete early in the process of looking at puzzle students, before you have much more information about the child that might influence what you see.

Things you might note:

1. Who does the student choose to sit near?
2. When and why does the student respond to others?
3. What is the student's nonverbal behavior? You might note posture, eye-contact, hand and body movement.
4. What is the difference in the student's behavior in and out of the classroom?
5. What contact does the student have with adults beyond the teacher?
6. What surprises you about the student's actions?

After completing your observations, spend 30–60 minutes writing up your notes into a narrative. Describe the scene in detail, the events involving the student, and what insights you have into the learning style, needs, and strengths of the case study. If you have trouble getting started with or sustaining the writing, try beginning sentences with “I felt” or “I saw” or “I heard” to take you back into what was most striking from your notes.

After the observations and narratives are complete, partners should exchange the writing. Read through the narrative about your puzzle student, highlighting:

- Any information that surprises you;
- Any connections to previous behaviors from the student; and
- Any thoughts on how you can use this information to help this student learn.

Discuss with your colleague what you learned from the activity (both as an observer and teacher), and how you will apply the learning in your teaching.

(Study group facilitators might hire a roving sub for one or two days, to free up partners for these brief observations.)

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Workshop 2: “I Wonder” Writing

This activity is a focused free-write, where you give yourself permission to write down any and all questions you have about your puzzle student, no matter how random, broad, or quirky they might be. Sit down with your partner, and set a 15 minute limit for the writing. Your goal is to keep your pen moving across the page. If you get stuck, try one of these stems to start writing again:

- I wonder why this student....
- I wonder how this student...
- I wonder if this student...
- I wonder when this student...

When the time is up, exchange your notes and talk about what you learned about your puzzle student by generating your list of questions. Looking at your list, consider the following:

- Which questions can be answered this week, this month, or this year?
- Which questions worry you the most?
- Which questions do you have about other students in your class?
- Which questions connect with your partner’s questions about his or her puzzle student?
- Which questions might your partner help you answer?

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Workshop 3: Mining for Understanding

Bring every bit of work, data, or information you have available on your puzzle child to a meeting with your partner or study group. This material might include:

- Student reading (in all subject areas): journals, book lists, projects, responses to peers
- Student writing (in all subject areas): journals, drafts, published pieces
- Anecdotal notes on the student
- Student projects and displays
- Correspondence from principal about the student
- Correspondence from central office
- Notes from colleagues
- Notes from parents
- Notes from specialists

Place all these materials at the center of the table, and sort through them with your partner. Questions you might consider as you sort:

- What are common themes in the student's reading and writing?
- What are common themes in correspondence about the student?
- What strengths does the student exhibit as a learner?
- What are his or her areas of need?
- What do you wish you had more data on? Is there a way for your partner or other colleagues to help you get this data?

After you've completed the data dig for one student, repeat the process with your partner's puzzle child. Are there any common themes or concerns that emerge with both children?

Take a few minutes after you've completed looking at the artifacts from both students to write down what you've learned, and how you will take it back into your classroom.

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Workshop 4: Interviews

"The job of the interviewer," according to Ken Macrorie, "is to launch the speaker and then sit back and wait for surprises."

Interview your colleague's puzzle child. If time permits, you might also interview some other students in the class, to get a sense of the range of responses to the questions (and to ensure the student doesn't feel singled out).

Here are some interviewing tips that will help you help you get the most out of the interview:

- *Listen actively with nods and as much eye contact as possible.* Pay attention to what the student says, but also how he or she says it—the word choice, syntax, and context of the comments. Try as much as possible to jot down the student's responses in exactly the language he or she uses.
- *Be flexible in your questioning.* If the child looks puzzled by your question, rephrase it or ask another. Don't be restricted by questions you may have planned to ask; let the student's answers lead you into new territory for discussion.
- *Allow the interview to continue long enough that the important points are able to surface.* This may not occur until you have talked with a child long enough to get him or her involved and interested in the conversation.
- *Write down key information.* You'll be able to jog your memory later if you note descriptive words for the voice, actions, and expressions of the child you are interviewing. This will be helpful even if you are using a tape recorder.

Here are some interview questions you might ask. You and your partner will likely want to develop some questions of your own, based upon your specific concerns about the student:

- Is there a story that is shared in your family about you growing up? Can you share it with me?
- Do you have any books or magazines at home that are yours? What do you like to read?
- Who do you know who is a good writer or reader? What does that person like to read or write? What makes them a good writer or reader?
- What do you want to learn about this year?
- Do you think you will learn about it this year? Why or why not?
- Describe a time a classmate helped you learn something, from any time since you started going to school. What did that classmate do to help you?
- Describe a time a teacher helped you learn something. What did you learn? How did he or she help you?

- What do you like to do in your free time outside of school?
- What adjectives would you use to describe yourself?
- What is the most important thing any teacher needs to know about you in order to help you learn?
- (For younger students) Who do you like to play with on the playground?
- (For older students) What do you want to do after you are finished with school?

After you've completed the interviews, write up your notes and share them with your partner. You might discuss these topics:

- What have you learned about this student from the interview that doesn't fit with everything else you know about the child?
- What response is the most puzzling?
- What response is the most encouraging?
- How can you use this new information to help the child learn?

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Workshop 5: “It’s Not a Bug, It’s a Feature!”: New Labels for Old Behaviors

“It’s not a bug, it’s a feature!” is a cliché used by computer programmers to discuss attributes of software that users distrust or misinterpret as bugs in the program, when they are actually new tools not recognized by the user. It’s also a joke among programmers, since many bugs in computer software and hardware ARE bugs, whether the manufacturer will admit it or not.

Your challenge with this workshop is to try to see your puzzle student’s most challenging behaviors in a positive light. Almost any negative label for a behavior has a parallel, positive twin. By converting negatives to positives, you may gain some insights into different ways of reaching out to the student.

For example, a student who always seems to be “whining” could also be viewed as “expressive”—you never have to wonder what he or she is thinking. A child who is “shy” can also be seen as “contemplative.” The most “anal-retentive” among us are also the most “organized.” There is a fine line between “stubborn” and “confident.” And so on.

You and your partner will each need a copy of the attached “Bug/Feature” Worksheet. Quickly jot down adjectives you might use to describe all the negative behaviors you’ve seen in your puzzle child, not censoring your thoughts. Then list all the parallel positive words that might be used to describe the same behaviors. Finally, consider how those behaviors viewed in a positive light might translate into skills that a teacher can build upon in the classroom. After you’ve completed the task, compare notes. It’s interesting to see how different teachers will find different parallel positives, sometimes with very different connotations. This can lead into a discussion of behaviors that are most challenging for you as a teacher, and behaviors that may bother your colleagues but aren’t troublesome to you.

Remember the wisdom of the programmers—sometimes a bug is just a bug. There may be no way to re-imagine some behaviors as strengths to build upon. But if the activity shifts the perception you have of your puzzle student even a bit, it might lead to a breakthrough in helping the child learn.

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It's a Bug

It's a Feature

Positive Possibilities

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Workshop 6: Snapshot of a Moment

Take a photo of your puzzle student in class or on the playground and bring it to your next meeting with your partner. Write quickly about what you see in the photo for about 15 minutes, recording as many details as possible:

- What is the expression on the student's face?
- What is his or her posture?
- How is he or she dressed?
- What is around the child?

Writing off a photograph brings to the foreground many of the nonverbal cues a child gives off in any moment in time. Exchange the narrative with your partner, and talk about what you learned by focusing closely on your glimpse of the student.

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Workshop 7: The Monkey's Hand

This is an excellent final exercise to help you and your partner move from observation and analysis to changes in instruction.

Writer Ralph Fletcher uses a wonderful metaphor to describe how we get trapped in certain ways of thinking. In South America, monkeys are caught by an ingenious method. The trap used to capture them is filled with rice. In order to get the rice, the monkey places his hand through a small opening in the box. Once he grasps the rice, his hand can no longer fit through the opening. He is trapped, because he doesn't think to let go of some of the rice so that he can free his hand.

Bring all of the notes, observations, interviews, and writing you have completed on your puzzle student to a meeting with your partner. Sift through the materials together, noting every instance you learned something new or surprising about the student. Write down a list of the surprises as you look at the artifacts, and noting why the information was surprising or new.

Every surprise is a challenge to an assumption you had about the student. After you and your partner have completed your lists of surprises, talk about what assumptions about the puzzle student, teaching, and learning you will need to let go of in order to help him or her learn:

- What traps have you discovered in your thinking?
- Why are they traps?
- What will keep you from letting go of the assumption or assumptions? How might you begin?

You and your partner might decide next steps based upon what you've learned.