

# *Should I Take Juanita Pope?*

Isabelle Dworkin

During the beginning weeks of school, several sixth grade teachers who worked as a team came to me with a complaint.

*"We have a little girl on our unit who definitely belongs in your class."*

Later, the principal came to me.

*"We may have another little girl for you."*

Then the head of the child study team came by.

*"Don't get too settled with your numbers [of students], because we may be adding one to your class roll. She's already been referred for child study, and I'll let you know when we have her child study meeting."*

Well, with all of these people insinuating that a new body would eventually be placed in my classroom, it was definitely time to find out exactly who Juanita Pope was.

During her early school years, Juanita lived with her mother, Mrs. Pope. She never attended preschool. Mrs. Pope claimed that she was not aware that Juanita could come to school when she was six years old. Therefore, Juanita was not sent to kindergarten until she was 6 years, 9 months old. This confused start in school reflects the state of Juanita's educational history.

Her kindergarten teacher felt that Juanita's strengths were in the areas of fine motor development, self-help, and eagerness to try new things. She was weak in the areas of math and language skills. At the time of her initial evaluation, her adaptive behavior scale scores reflected adequately developed socialization, self-help, and receptive language skills. Juanita was weak in expressive and written language skills. The teacher stated that the scores were influenced by "lack of opportunity in the home environment." The eligibility committee decided she was developmentally delayed—25% delayed in communication, daily living skills, and cognition. IQ: 68. Intellectual and developmental disabilities was not suspected due to the "inconsistency of the scores." She was placed in a special "multicategorical" class with some mainstreaming.

However, during the next school year, Juanita was beyond the age limit for the multicategorical class, so another child study meeting was held to assess her progress and find another placement. The regular classroom teacher who had her indicated that Juanita was shy and did not ask for help, did well with the "concrete and connecting levels" in math, did not do well with concepts that required making inferences, was successful in a "carefully controlled time period with extra attention," and was not functioning well in the mainstream because her primary deficit was in reading. Eligibility for special education was continued, and she was placed in a self-contained class for students with learning disabilities. IQ: 85.

Juanita was re-evaluated three years later. The fifth-grade mainstream teacher observed that mainstreaming had gone really well. Juanita had made progress in working on her own, interpreting what she read, and asking questions about the teacher's expectations. She was still shy and hesitant to form new relationships, relied on familiar friendships, and needed a great deal of structure and repetition. Juanita's special education teacher taught her math and commented that "Juanita is not a risk-taker." She went on to describe Juanita as interacting in socially appropriate ways with others but having trouble sharing and contributing to a small peer group, having difficulty with problem-solving and higher level thinking, needing extra time to formulate responses, and having trouble with newly introduced concepts. The psychologist found her strongest skills to be in rote numerical reasoning and rote auditory memory. Her weaknesses were in the areas of visual-motor and spatial orientation. IQ: 71. The psychologist's recommendation: "Work must be at her ability level and should probably be presented in small doses." He went on to recommend using concrete instructional materials, giving Juanita rationales for learning new information, and providing assertiveness training to improve her personal and academic skills. The evaluating committee determined that Juanita was ineligible for any special services because her aptitude and achievement scores indicated significant improvement.

Juanita had an academic history of being shifted from program to program. She had been shifted around a lot in her personal life, too. Mrs. Britt, her grandmother, was constantly called by the school when Juanita lived with her mother. Mrs. Pope did not respond to or comply with the school's notes or calls. When Mrs. Pope's marriage to Juanita's father ended, the oldest daughter, Sheila (Juanita's half-sister), was "given" to her father's relatives in a nearby town. Before Mrs. Pope left town, Juanita and her older brother were "given" to Mrs. Britt. (Mrs. Britt's home seemed to be the place where all of Juanita's siblings were taken when Mrs. Pope either changed boyfriends or became pregnant again.) Mrs. Pope could not be found for several years; when she was found, she had given birth to another child. By this time, Juanita had already started relying heavily on adults at school for support.

After discovering all of this information about Juanita's dysfunctional family history and ever-changing classroom settings, I was convinced that someone had to stop this chaos. If the sixth grade team had their way, Juanita was about to go through yet another eligibility merry-go-round. We had not reached the halfway point of the first nine weeks, and the sixth grade teachers were already pleading fervently to have Juanita referred to the child study committee. The sixth grade team had solicited my input, so I felt comfortable asking these teachers this question, which had been going through my mind: "How in the world did they know this child's abilities if she had only been in school for such a short time?"

The sixth grade teachers assured me that they had had a very frustrating time trying to instruct Juanita.

"If you'd read her file, you'd understand why we're doing this so early."

I told them that I'd read Juanita's file, but they needed to consider that she had been placed directly into all her regular classes without any type of transition. Regardless of my comment, they continued to push to have a child study meeting. But the meeting did not come about. Because Juanita had been found ineligible for special education services only at the end of the previous school year, the special education coordinator wanted the team to give Juanita some time to make the transition to regular classes. Needless to say, perhaps, they were extremely disappointed in how the "transition" turned out.

The sixth grade teachers who were supposed to be helping Juanita make the transition started visiting me regularly to ask my opinion or complain about any problems they were having with Juanita. Many of these teachers and their students had always acted as if I had a scarlet "R" on my door (for Retarded Classroom); this was indeed a novelty. Most of the time, regular education teachers never asked my opinion about anything academic. Just because I taught retarded students, did that make me retarded, too?

The teachers' complaints were usually about Juanita's poor comprehension and basic skills, her inability to spell, and her disinterest or inability to respond to the challenges of their classrooms. They often reminded me that they had many more kids than I did, so I might not understand the magnitude of the problem. I commiserated with them, but continued patiently to remind them that this was a transitional year for Juanita and that her work needed to be monitored and adjusted according to her abilities. Inevitably, I either looked at their assignments and suggested ways to modify them or went directly to my shelves or file cabinet to substitute high interest-low vocabulary work for the higher level materials they were constantly giving her. Sometimes the teachers resisted modifying the materials because they thought the modifications would take away from the quality of the project.

Several teachers also complained about Juanita's poor coping skills. Her shyness had always been a controlling factor in her academic and social

development. They complained that she was usually nonresponsive during guided practice time. If they waited quietly after asking a question, she would eventually respond. However, waiting for the response sometimes slowed down the pace of the class so severely that the other students started getting off task. If they attempted to stimulate an answer, Juanita became nonresponsive. If they gave her constructive criticism, suggestions, or reprimands, Juanita also "shut down" and cried soundlessly. While in this mode, she refused to give any eye contact whatsoever. The teachers said that they attempted to ignore the "shut downs" but reacted to the crying by allowing her to go to the bathroom to dry her tears and get composed. This was not working, because Juanita would then take two periods to come back; she not only failed to complete the assignment but missed hearing other assignments as well. I suggested that they were giving Juanita this message: "Crying gets you time off task and attention from others." To this suggestion they responded, "But I don't have time to deal with it."

Furthermore, Juanita was conveniently leaving her homework at home, bringing it in incomplete or not done at all (her excuse: "My grandmother doesn't know how to do this," or "I had to help take care of my little brother, so I didn't have time to do it"), not writing down assignments, losing study guides for tests, not studying for tests, misplacing books, and missing days of school.

At the beginning of the school year, I had decided to do free tutoring for students who were on free or reduced-price lunches. I told the guidance counselors to assign two to four children to me, and I would tutor them as long as they needed my help. The end of the first nine weeks had come and gone, and no students had been referred to me. The sixth grade team had already told me that Juanita was struggling to keep up with her classmates. So I approached Mrs. Walker, the sixth grade guidance counselor, about getting Mrs. Britt's permission to tutor Juanita. It seemed like the most logical thing to do. The guidance counselor agreed that it was a good idea. Mrs. Britt gave her permission, but was concerned that Juanita would not agree to the decision. Mrs. Walker and I arranged to have Juanita sent to her office to ask Juanita's permission to include her in the tutoring sessions.

Our priority in the meeting was that Juanita feel comfortable staying after school and riding home with me. I had already attempted to establish a relationship with Juanita by talking to her in the hallways and at lunchtime. Many times, Juanita did not acknowledge my presence. She was very cautious about talking in my presence, but I was persistent because Juanita looked so unhappy going down the hallways. This meeting would be an indicator of whether I had earned her trust.

When she came into the office, Juanita looked at me suspiciously. I decided to take my cue from Mrs. Walker. She showed Juanita her grades on the computer and explained that she was doing okay in her exploratory class

and math (she had made a C), but was making D's and F's in all of her other classes. Mrs. Walker explained that I had a way of helping her improve her grades. Having been given my cue, I told Juanita about my proposed tutoring session and asked her if she wanted to participate. She said very quietly, "I have to ask my grandmother." Mrs. Walker then chimed in, "Why don't we call her now?" (Neither of us wanted to alienate Juanita by telling her we had already contacted Mrs. Britt.) Juanita listened while Mrs. Walker and I talked to her grandmother. I explained that the tutoring sessions would probably be two or three times a week, 3:30 to 5:00, never on Fridays; some days we might have to make special arrangements if I had a class or meeting, and I would give Juanita a ride home after every session. Juanita talked to her grandmother on the phone, and when she hung up she agreed to comply with Mrs. Britt's wishes.

"But," I emphasized to her, "this is your decision, too. If you make the decision, you'll more than likely stick with it." She nodded her assent, and we decided to start the tutoring that next day!

Juanita's teachers were happy with this arrangement and agreed to give me copies of future study guides, assignments, and the teacher's manual for the textbooks if necessary.

First tutoring session; no Juanita. After a long search, I finally found her dragging her feet down a distant hallway. I encouraged her to speed up, and when she would not I reminded her that the later she came to the tutoring session the longer we would have to stay to make up the lost time. She immediately quickened her pace, but the minute she came into the room she had to get a drink of water and go to the bathroom. I agreed to let her go to the bathroom after we established the rules for the tutoring session. I also clarified that the tutoring sessions started exactly at 3:30, so from 3:15 to 3:30 she should get her drink of water and go to the bathroom. Once inside the classroom, I would have a snack for her. If she came late to the session, we would stay longer to make up the missed time. She mumbled her "Okay" and began taking unorganized materials from her notebook.

The biggest challenge during our subsequent tutoring sessions was getting Juanita to bring in necessary materials to complete her assignments. I met her "I have no homework" with, "Well, practice makes perfect. Let's go over the assignment from the other day."

Usually, a bad day in class was followed by a horrible tutoring session. The first time Juanita did her crying routine with me it was because she wanted me to give her the answers for her assignment. When I told her that her work was being graded, not mine, the tears began. I continued explaining the assignment to her—ignoring the tears—and she interrupted by saying, "My other teachers let me go get water and go to the bathroom when I get upset." My response: "Well, that's inappropriate behavior. You can't solve any problem by crying and drinking water. We have work to do. I have to

sues in my classroom, and if you're thirsty, I'll fill a cup with water while you do your assignment."

Well, the quiet tears were replaced with loud wailing and Juanita's demand that she be allowed to leave the room to wipe her face and nose. After I ignored her demands, Juanita tried her "shut-down" routine, and I told her that I was willing to out wait her. She informed me that she was not going to do any more work, and I replied, "Take your time, because your time is my time." After a long pause, she said she wanted to call her grandmother. "The office is locked up now, and so are the telephones," I reminded her. She then "shut down" again, so I simply "shut down" too. I started grading papers and cleaning up my room, and after 20 minutes of silence, she got up and wiped her nose. "What else do I have to do?"

I would love to say that we always ended our sessions on a positive note, but we didn't. Several times she conveniently forgot our session and went home on the bus or refused to continue studying for tests at home. Also, having used "inventive" spellings for most of her elementary school career, she was having a hard time correcting the spelling in her written work, even when she could use a spellchecker. She continued to lose many points on her papers due to misspelled words. I was very frustrated when some of her graded projects were returned to her. I believed that her sixth grade teachers did not consider her "transitional" status when they graded her assignments. When I approached them about this, they asked, "What would the other kids think if they saw Juanita's grade and the poor quality of her assignment?" No amount of explaining how hard she had worked could get them to change the grade. The language arts teacher came by my classroom to report that Juanita had not completed her daily journal pertaining to a book she was reading silently. I tried to explain that there were limitations to my involvement in Juanita's participation. It seemed to me that they had stopped holding her accountable. They were not expressing their expectations to Juanita. I was supposed to take care of that, too!

Several times Juanita commented, "Why should I stay after school with you if I'm still getting C's and D's?" She had a very valid point, I thought, but I could only encourage her to continue coming to our sessions. Without my intervention, those C's and D's would become F's.

Juanita had failed science in two consecutive semesters. Mrs. Walker came to my classroom and asked to place Juanita in my class for science. The science teacher felt that there was no way that Juanita would ever grasp the subject matter. So, the team suggested either placing her in another study hall or my classroom (because I already had a trusting relationship with Juanita). I told the guidance counselor that this was just another excuse for the regular education teachers not to do their job; but, yes, I would take Juanita for science. At least she would be actively involved in a structured learning environment, not just reading another library book.

Looking somewhat relieved, Juanita came into my classroom. Her skills were quite comparable to my students with mild intellectual and developmental disabilities. In the beginning, she did not like being separated from her friends and would not participate. But when I made her the leader of a cooperative learning group, she became more involved, answered questions, and made friends.

We continued the tutoring sessions, and she ended the school year barely passing to the seventh grade. She had managed to get through the school year without another child study meeting being called, but I knew that we would have that to deal with the next school year. True to form, the sixth grade teachers had already warned the seventh grade teams about Juanita Pope.

Three weeks of the first nine were allowed to pass before the child study referral was made. Within these three weeks, the seventh grade teachers had come to some definite conclusions. They had already lowered their expectations and placed her in collaborative classes, but she still had very poor basic skills in all areas, and could not comprehend directions and concepts. Juanita had poor organizational skills, poor peer interactions, a delayed response time, and poor academic and social coping skills. One teacher wrote that she was afraid that Juanita would become "a classic example of a student falling through the cracks" at our school if special services were not reinstated. Juanita was placed in an extra "core" class as an alternative to an "exploratory," a common practice in our school when a student has difficulty in most academic classes. The teacher of the extra core classes did not believe that Juanita was making significant progress because most of her work was of poor quality. Juanita was, as she put it, "spending her time in classes with material that is essentially meaningless to her."

The child study team met and decided to recommend a referral for a special education re-evaluation, have a complete neurological to determine the origin of Juanita's delayed responses, and reduce her academic classes by one.

After the child study team's meeting, I received a visit from the leader of the team. They were searching for some place to put Juanita for that one class. There was no way to reschedule her classes with the other seventh grade team, so they thought of my classroom. Once again, my established, "trusting relationship" was lauded by the regular education teachers. In addition, Juanita was complaining to the seventh grade guidance counselor about having all Caucasian teachers, and they felt that I could provide the African-American influence that Juanita desired. Would I please help them solve this problem?

Were they just feeding my ego, or was it a genuine belief that I could make a difference? Would I once again "save the day" for these regular education teachers, who considered my opinion only when it was time to remove

bodies from their classes? Shouldn't these teachers be held accountable for nurturing Juanita's academic development? Couldn't they utilize some of the energy being used to get Juanita out of their classroom to modify her classroom assignments? Or, should I just put these personal feelings aside and put Juanita first?

### Questions for Reflection

In what ways does Juanita fit the definition of children "at risk"? Do you think she had a disability (or disabilities)? (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen Chapter 1)

To what extent do you see evidence that the requirements of IDEA were being met by Juanita's school system? (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen Chapter 1)

Who do you think should have been responsible for teaching Juanita? To what extent were general and special educators collaborating? What do you see as the central issues in role definitions and expectations of the regular classroom teachers and Isabelle? (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen Chapters 1 and 2)

Ideally, special and general educators work together to include the student with mild intellectual and developmental disabilities (retardation not requiring intensive support services) as much as possible in regular classes. What might Isabelle have done to try to work out such a collaborative arrangement to help Juanita make a successful transition into regular classes? What special problems might she have encountered (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen Chapters 1, 2, and 5)?

What aspects of this case involve multicultural issues? (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen Chapter 3)

Whose attitudes and behavior do you find most troubling in this case—Juanita's, the regular classroom teachers', or Isabelle's? Why?

## *What Do We Do with Jim?*

Frieda Bailey

It's been at least 10 years since I have had to deal with a case as difficult as Jim. And, believe me, that's saying a lot. Maybe the fact that I've been in the same school system for so long has something to do with it, but I have had some success with some of the most difficult kids to come through Johnson Middle School. With Jim, though, this is a whole new ballgame.

I didn't go into this profession for the recognition or to brag, but some do say that my classroom is a "well-oiled machine." I try to follow all of the best-practice suggestions that I learned through my graduate program in special education. My students learn (some a little later than others, but most come around to it at their own pace) that there are fundamental rules and guidelines for behavior that we all have to follow to make this class what it is—a place where students eligible for MiMH (Mild Mental Handicaps, perhaps known as EMR or by some other designation in other systems) can be safe and learn. Sure, I individualize for learning and behavior, but there really is a sense of community within this individualization: I've even been asked to give a talk at the local university about how this works in my class.

So, maybe this is one reason (along with having been in the system so long that I sometimes end up teaching the children of my former students!) that other teachers in the school use my classroom as an intermediate step in their time-out discipline procedures. Often, a student will come to my class with a pass from his or her teacher, asking if they can sit in my room for a while to "cooldown." Although I know some of these kids from former years or through their families, when they come to my room with such a pass it's all business. They can come at other times to chat, maybe as a reward for good behavior, but as a time-out I make sure that this is not rewarding or reinforcing for them, for otherwise I'd have the whole school in here, and it would certainly not help the other teachers with their behavior management!

Enter: Jim. This was one of the few times that a teacher sent me a student whom I had not met but was already notorious in the school. OK, I thought, I can handle this. But no matter how much you know or how good you think your system is, there are always a few who fall through the sieve. That day, there must have been particularly large holes in the sieve, because I was not sure I could get this kid to calm down! He came strutting in, slammed the door, and then walked on tiptoes—as slowly as possible—to my desk to hand me the pass, smirking the entire time. I was in the middle