

Baiting the Hook

Key Content to Consider for Analyzing This Case:

1. Constructivism
2. Cognitive development (Piaget)
3. Information processing theory
4. Motivation (mastery versus performance goal-orientation, sense of efficacy, underachievement)
5. Self-concept
6. Social development
7. Home environment (including parenting styles)

Wilson Middle School is located in a large urban area in the southwestern part of the United States. Its attendance area serves a population that is approximately 55% white, 25% Hispanic, and 20% African-American.

Tony Green, a graduate of a teachers college in the Midwest, is in his second year of teaching experience at Wilson. It is three and a half months into the first semester, and it is almost the end of third period on a Thursday morning. Tony has just asked the 31 students in his Math 8 class to turn in their weekly tests on positive and negative numbers.

MR. GREEN: Okay, gang, pass 'em up to the front row and then down to Rae Ann. Rae Ann, will you collect them for me? [Rae Ann smiles and nods her head.] Wayne, I need to talk to you for just a minute when the bell rings.

WAYNE: OK. I have study hall next period anyhow.

MR. GREEN: And it's my planning period. I'll give you a note to take to your study hall teacher if you're late. (Bell rings.) See you all in math lab tomorrow, I hope! (Holds test papers up high as he speaks. Several students laugh.) Pull a chair up to my desk, Wayne, so we can talk. (All other students leave the room.)

WAYNE: (pulling a chair up to the teacher's desk) What did you want to talk to me about, Mr. Green?

MR. GREEN: Your grades, Wayne. (Pulls out Wayne's test paper and grades it as they talk) Wayne, I was talking to several of your teachers about you the other

day in the teachers' lounge. We were all in agreement that you're a very bright guy, but your grades don't seem to show it.

WAYNE: I do OK. I'm getting C's in most of my classes, and that's average. That suits me just fine.

MR. GREEN: You're right on target, Wayne. I just graded your test, and you got a C.

WAYNE: See! That's just fine. I get to go to math lab tomorrow just like the other guys.

MR. GREEN: That's true, Wayne. You would even have gotten to go if you had made a D, but why do you set such a low standard for yourself when you have such potential?

WAYNE: I'm not that good at math, Mr. Green.

MR. GREEN: Not that good, or is it that you just don't want to work that hard? I have no doubt that you could be making A's in here if you set your mind to it.

WAYNE: I study the stuff hard enough. Math isn't exactly easy for me.

MR. GREEN: That's what I wanted to find out from you. Is it that the material is hard for you, or you just put out enough effort to make C's?

WAYNE: No, math isn't exactly easy. Take negative numbers. I may have passed the test, but the idea of not only not having anything left but going into the hole by so much still confuses me. Like if I go fishing and catch five fish and the game warden comes along and says that the five fish that I caught are illegal and that I not only have to give those five fish back but also five others that I haven't caught yet—you know that example you gave in class—well, I guess it's OK and I understand that example OK. It's just when you start giving us numbers by themselves that I get confused. When you take the examples away and I have to work with the numbers by themselves, that not only confuses me but bores me, Mr. Green. I'm an action person, not an Einstein.

MR. GREEN: Is that why you've been turning in some of your assignments but not others? You like the concrete examples but not abstract numbers?

WAYNE: I don't know what you call it, but those assignments with just numbers bother me and I guess bore me too much to try to figure them out. Some of the earlier stuff I could think out how they apply to fishing, but it gets hard with some things like negative numbers.

MR. GREEN: Why fishing?

WAYNE: Just because I go fishing all the time. That's my favorite thing to do. Dad and I go out about every weekend to one of the four or five lakes we fish.

MR. GREEN: That's great, Wayne! I used to do a little fishing myself when I was a kid. But you say that you go with your dad? That's great!

WAYNE: Yeah. Dad works in an office all week, and we like to get out together as often as we can. He finally bought an eighteen-foot aluminum boat and put a fifty-horse Mercury engine on it so we can move right along! The boat's real stable, too. You can stand almost anywhere in it and cast a line without feeling like you're losing your balance!

MR. GREEN: It sounds like you're quite a fisherman, Wayne. What does your dad do?

WAYNE: He's an accountant. Has his own business downtown.

MR. GREEN: Is that what you want to do when you graduate?

WAYNE: I don't know. I haven't given it much thought. I don't think I want to go to college, though, not unless they'd let me major in fishing! (Both Wayne and Tony laugh.)

MR. GREEN: Well, I don't know. I'm sure there must be a lot of careers you could explore that involve fishing and the sea. Have you done any saltwater fishing?

WAYNE: (eagerly) No, but Dad and I have been planning to! Dad says we need to go down to the Florida Keys during his next vacation and rent a boat and go after those big marlins! Do you have any idea how big those marlins get, Mr. Green?

MR. GREEN: Yes, I've seen pictures on TV. But what else do you like to do besides fish, Wayne?

WAYNE: Oh, not much. I'm not interested in much of anything else.

MR. GREEN: What about sports?

WAYNE: Dad thought I should try out for the basketball team. I wasn't much good.

MR. GREEN: What do you like to do with your friends?

WAYNE: I don't hang with the guys much. Sometimes John Bailey and I go to the mall and mess around awhile, but I mostly just like to stay home and read.

MR. GREEN: Oh. What do you like to read?

WAYNE: Mostly just books and magazines about fishing. Dad's bought me subscriptions to practically all the good magazines, and that one bookstore in the mall gets a lot of good books on fishing. Dad lets me charge all the books I want. He says that books are one thing that you shouldn't be cheap about.

MR. GREEN: I couldn't agree with your dad more! (Pause) Well, Wayne, this has been very interesting getting to know you a little better and to find out that you're such a fisherman and all. But I'm still convinced that you can make better grades than you are making, and I want to work with you more on helping you understand abstract numbers better. Will you work with me?

WAYNE: Sure, Mr. Green. Anything you want. Just let me know what you want me to do.

MR. GREEN: OK, Wayne. Let me get a little more information and we'll set something up. Here, let me write you a study hall pass, since the bell has already rung.

As soon as Wayne left the room, Tony walked down the hall to the counselors' office and walked up to the open door of the office of Kimberly Crandall, who is looking at some forms she is filling out.

TONY: Hello, Kim.

KIM: (startled and looking up) What!? Oh, hello, Tony!

TONY: (smiling) Sorry to startle you. Do you have a minute?

KIM: (putting away the forms and her pen) Sure. Come on in. (Motions to a wooden chair) These forms will keep. What's up?

TONY: I wonder if you can tell me who's Wayne Conner's counselor. I'd like to look at his folder.

KIM: You've come to the right person. I was making some entries in some of the folders yesterday, and Wayne's was one of them. (Pulls a folder out of a large stack of folders and hands it to Tony) As a matter of fact, I talked to Wayne's mother on the phone last week about where Wayne ought to go to high school.

TONY: Oh, really?! What was her concern?

KIM: You'll see my note in the folder. Basically, I think that she's a bit concerned about Wayne and just wanted to talk to me about it. In a nutshell, I think she believes that Wayne is an underachiever, and both she and her husband feel that he's college material and are disappointed that his grades are so, well, average.

TONY: That's really interesting. I just came from a conference with Wayne where he and I discussed these same issues. I got the feeling that Wayne is perfectly

content to make C's and has no real ambitions to attend college. All he really seems to be interested in is fishing.

KIM: Yes, Marie—that's Wayne's mother—said that Wayne and his father go fishing together all the time. You'll note from the folder that Wayne is their only child, and they may be a bit overprotective. Marie was describing Wayne's room at home, and it sounds like he has everything money can buy.

TONY: He doesn't seem to have many friends his own age, though. Sounds like his dad is his best friend.

KIM: I hear that sometimes happens with only children.

TONY: His dad's an accountant or something? (Looks at the folder) Oh, yes, here it is. His dad's a CPA, and his mother is an elementary teacher. Now, this is interesting: He was tested last year, and his IQ is 128. I thought he was bright! And he's at the seventh stanine on the math portion of the Metropolitan Achievement Test. I compiled this information on all my third-period students over a month ago in order to assign them to groups and had forgotten about it! This just reinforces my belief that Wayne should be doing a whole lot better than he is in my class!

KIM: And not just in math, I might add. He's pretty much a C student in all his classes. Do you think it's a lack of motivation, Tony?

TONY: I'm not sure. Partly, I guess. But he also seems to have a problem with abstract material, at least in math. In my class he does only the assignments that interest him. But the only ones that interest him seem to be those dealing with concrete material or material he can relate to fishing examples. I don't know how his algebra teacher is going to get him interested in algebra when he takes it next year!

KIM: Let me know if I can help in any way, Tony.

TONY: Thanks, Kim. This helps a lot.

It is late on a Friday afternoon about two weeks later. School has ended, and most of the students have already left the building. Tony has arranged a conference with Wayne's parents, Wayland and Marie Conner. They sit in movable desks in Tony's classroom facing each another.

TONY: I really appreciate you two taking the time to come in and meet with me. I have been wanting to talk to you about Wayne.

MARIE: (with concern) And we have really wanted to talk to someone here, Mr. Green. Wayne has told us that you've tried to help him.

TONY: I think what it comes down to, Mr. and Mrs. Conner, is that Wayne isn't working up to his potential. I've talked to a number of his other teachers and to his counselor, Ms. Crandall, and I've gone over his cumulative record with his test scores and all. All the information seems to point to Wayne's being what we call an underachiever. He seems to be willing to settle for C's when he could be making A's in his classes, including mine.

WAYLAND: I think you've sized Wayne up rather accurately, Mr. Green. He does just enough work to get by with C's but just isn't interested enough in his schoolwork to put forth the effort to make A's. I go over this with him just about every time he brings home a report card. (Pause) You know, Mr. Green, I'm a CPA and have a rather well-established and profitable business. We just hired another young man yesterday who is fresh out of college who reminds me a lot of Wayne. Wayne could fit right in and take over my firm when I

retire if he wanted to. The opportunity is there for the taking. But when I talk to him about it, he just says that he isn't sure whether he'd like being a CPA or not. When I ask him what he'd like to do if he could do anything he wanted to, he just says that he isn't sure. It seems like fishing is the only thing that really interests him. (Smiling) He doesn't even seem to have really discovered girls yet.

MARIE: We have talked to him about his grades and his future a lot, Mr. Green. But he's our only child, and all we really want is for him to be happy. We don't want to put too much pressure on him. After all, he's only thirteen, and sometimes I think that's too young for anyone to be making decisions about what he wants to do with the rest of his life. We're disappointed that he isn't making better grades but hope he'll improve as he gets older and matures a bit. If he doesn't, maybe he can go to a community college later on and take some courses in things that interest him. (Pause) I know Wayland wants him to eventually step into his firm and take it over, but that may not be what Wayne wants to do or would be good at. Wayne has to find himself first before he makes big decisions about his life. He's still really just a little boy in many ways.

WAYLAND: (with annoyance) Yes, all that may be true, Marie. But when I was thirteen I at least had a desire to make something of myself and had a little ambition. Wayne doesn't seem to have any drive at all. And what worries me most is that he's such a loner. He doesn't seem to have people skills. You have to learn to relate to other people if you're going to be a success in life.

MARIE: (animatedly) Wayland, you have to learn to look at the good side of things more! Wayne has a wonderful relationship with you, and he is a good boy. I'm glad that he's not into that adolescent drug and party scene. I'm real glad that we don't have the kinds of problems with Wayne that the Masons have with their son.

TONY: One of my concerns as Wayne's math teacher is that he seems to have trouble learning abstract concepts. If he can't relate what he's learning back to concrete examples, he has real difficulties. The only way he could deal with negative numbers, for example, was to relate them to catching fish. This concerns me because he's going to have to grasp abstract concepts when he takes algebra next year.

WAYLAND: (frowning) See! That's what I mean, Marie! Wayne's not dumb! He just doesn't try to use his brain! (Smiling) No offense, Mr. Green, but I think that he has his teachers fooled into believing he can't think in abstract terms. He sure doesn't have any trouble figuring out abstract issues when it comes to fishing! (Eagerly) He's really quite an expert when it comes to fishing, you know. He can tell you all about the habits of various fish, the effects of lake temperatures on the eating habits of the fish, what lure to use under what circumstances. And you ought to see him cast! He can put it anywhere he wants it! It's amazing. (Pause) No, Mr. Green, I think he just doesn't want to think abstractly about certain subjects.

TONY: (frowning) You may be right, Mr. Conner. It may be more of a motivation problem than an abstract thinking problem. All I can say is, if it's true, he sure had me fooled!

WAYLAND: (smiling) Believe me, he's no dummy, Mr. Green! Well, Marie and I do appreciate all that you're trying to do for Wayne. If he could just get into his

schoolwork the way he's into fishing, he would end up as valedictorian when he graduates. But I guess he has to decide that his schoolwork is important to him. Well, thanks again, Mr. Green, and if there's anything we can do to help, please let us know.

MARIE: (smiling) Yes, thanks so much, Mr. Green. I want you to know that we do talk to him about his schoolwork at home, but Wayland is right. Wayne is evasive and doesn't want to talk about it. (Pause) But I don't know about the abstract thinking thing you were talking about. I've noticed that several times when I've sent him to the store for me, he has trouble with simple things like making change and figuring out in his head how much things cost. If he and I shop together at the supermarket, I always get one of those shopping carts with a calculator on it so Wayne won't get confused.

WAYLAND: (interrupting) He just doesn't pay attention, Marie! Believe me, if he wanted to, he'd become an expert in no time.

MARIE: But like the other day when you and Wayne were making that new lure.

WAYLAND: You mean the yellow jacket?

MARIE: Yes, the black and yellow one. Wayne couldn't follow what you were telling him until you drew it up on a piece of paper. Then he put it together without any problem.

WAYLAND: (reflecting) Yes, that's true. But didn't you have to take a picture of the hairdo that you wanted to your beautician the other day so she could get it the way you wanted it? It's the same thing.

MARIE: (puzzled) Maybe you're right. I don't know. (Pause) Well, thanks again, Mr. Green. We appreciate your helping Wayne.

TONY: And thank you both for taking the time to come in and talk. Let's keep in touch. I'm sure that the three of us can figure out ways to help a bright guy like Wayne do better in school.

It is the following Monday afternoon after school has ended. Tony sits in the classroom of Ramon Garcia, chair of the math department. Tony and Ramon sit in chairs facing each other.

TONY: Ramon, I need to ask your advice about one of the students in my Math 8 class.

RAMON: Your third-period class?

TONY: (smiling) Yes. How did you guess? I seem to have more trouble with that class than all my others, don't I?

RAMON: Who's the student?

TONY: Wayne Conner. He's a classic underachiever. He has an IQ of 128 and works just hard enough in his classes to make C's. His dad's a CPA, and his mom's an elementary teacher. We had a conference about Wayne last Friday. The picture that emerges is a thirteen-year-old kid who is a loner and spends all of his spare time with his father fishing. Wayne's a real expert on fishing. His mother seems a bit overprotective but cares a lot about Wayne. I think that Wayne's father thinks that Wayne's just unmotivated about schoolwork and could do better if he really tried.

RAMON: And what do you think, Tony?

TONY: I don't know, Ramon. Something tells me that it's more than just motivation. I think that Wayne may have some difficulty in the area of abstract thinking. He has to relate abstract concepts to concrete examples, usually fishing, before he can understand them. His dad thinks this is just a game that Wayne plays with his teachers to avoid working too hard. His mother isn't so

Figure 3-1 WILSON MIDDLE SCHOOL
Cumulative Record

Name: Conner, Wayne Lynne	Home Telephone: 555-318-1423
Address: 6023 Robin Lane Rd.	General Health: Good
Father: Wayland D. Conner	Occupation: CPA
Mother: Marie R. Conner	Occupation: Elementary Teacher
Siblings: None	Handicaps: None
Former Schools: Blaine Elementary	Date of Birth: 11/13/86
Date Entered Wilson: 8/30/92	Age: 13 years

TEST RECORD

Intelligence Tests	IQ	Date	Grade
Otis-Lennon Mental Ability Elementary I	121	9/1/94	3
Intermediate	128	9/5/98	7

Achievement Tests

Metropolitan Advanced (in stanines)	Math	Basics Total	Complete Total
	7	7	7

ACADEMIC RECORD

Grades 1-6 (year averages)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Language Arts	A	A	B	B	C	C
Reading	A	A	B	B	B	B
Writing	A	A	B	C	C	C
Spelling	A	A	B	C	C	C
Social Studies	A	A	B	C	C	B
Arithmetic	A	A	B	C	C	C
Science & Health		A	B	C	C	C
Music	A	A	A	A	A	A
Citizenship	A	A	A	A	A	A

Grade 7 (year average)

English	C
Geography	C
Arithmetic	C
Phys. Ed.	C
Science	C
Exploratory	C
Pers./Social Dev.	C

sure and says that she has noticed some abstract thinking problems at home. (Pause) I guess that my instincts tell me that Wayne's father is wrong and that Wayne's abstract thinking problem is real.

RAMON: This is a difficult and unusual situation, Tony. Did you look up his records or talk to his counselor to get additional information on this?

TONY: Yes, I did. And guess what! He's at the seventh stanine on the math subtest of the Metropolitan. I almost forgot that bit of information. Maybe his dad is right after all.

RAMON: Maybe. Maybe not. What's your next step, Tony? Or is that why you came to see me?

TONY: (smiling) That's why I came to see you, Ramon. We're starting square root this week. How would you go about teaching square root to a student who is an expert on fishing but who may have an abstract thinking problem? Are there some tests he can take that would help me figure out how to help him?

Questions

1. What is an underachiever? To what extent is an IQ score a good predictor of student ability or potential? Is Wayne an underachiever?
2. Is Wayne's problem motivational or cognitive, or both? What type of motivational or cognitive problem does Wayne have? What can be done about such problems?
3. Describe teacher expectancy theory. Is there a self-fulfilling prophecy at work in Wayne's case? What expectations or beliefs seem to be influencing Wayne's behavior?
4. How would you describe Wayne's home environment and his relationship with his parents and his peers? Are Wayne's parents overprotective? How would Erikson's theory of personality development explain the development and effects of parental overprotectiveness?
5. From Baumrind's perspective, what parenting style do Wayne's parents exhibit: authoritarian, authoritative, or permissive? How does such a parenting style relate to school achievement?
6. What are concrete and abstract learning? Given that Wayne is 13 years old, does he seem to exhibit problems in making the transition to formal operations (from the standpoint of Piaget's theory of cognitive development)?
7. From the standpoint of constructivism, does Wayne seem to be "in the zone" with regard to learning Math 8 concepts such as negative numbers? What type of learning scaffolds would be helpful to a student like Wayne?
8. From the motivational perspective of Ames's mastery learning versus performance learning, does Wayne seem to be more oriented to mastery or toward performance in his schoolwork? In the area of fishing? How can Tony take advantage of this information?
9. From a social development frame of reference, is Wayne's mother correct in her belief that society puts too much pressure on students to make early career choices? Should such choices be made at the middle school level? What pressure is being put on Wayne, and how is he responding to it? What can Tony do?
10. What advice should Ramon give Tony about teaching his unit on square root so as to involve Wayne? Can Wayne's interest in fishing be utilized in some way? How can Wayne's abstract thinking skills be developed?