Case Narrative: Wilson Bennett Wilkes, age 11

Wilson Bennet Wilkes, an African American 11-year-old, known as Wil, waited quietly outside the principal’s office. His mother, Adele Fuller, sits in a chair next to him almost imperceptibly wringing her hands. Principal Decary has called a meeting to discuss an incident that took place on the playground that ended in Wil punching a Caucasian classmate, Sean, in the stomach. Wil acknowledges that he hit the boy but says that it was because he was “tired of all the name-calling.” “I reached my limit”, he says. “And I’m sorry for it”.

According to Wil, since moving to this suburban school district he has been the target of unrelenting racial bullying. He is one of five students of color in the middle school; the other four are girls, two of whom are adopted by white families. He says that a day doesn’t go by without some form of verbal aggression and/or subtle physical assault. Wil contends that the teachers are aware of these occurrences but do nothing to intervene or reprimand the offenders. “Sometimes they say it’s my fault because I’m not friendly enough,” he says. Wil is also targeted because he identifies as gay. “If it’s not about my race then they’re calling me a ‘fag’” he reflects. “I really don’t belong here.”

The incident on the playground did not go unnoticed by Sean’s mother, Mrs. Stevens. She reported it to both Wil’s teacher and the principal insisting that he be ‘severely punished’. As it happens, Mrs. Stevens is chair of the PTO and Sean is the youngest of five children who have gone through the school system.

Principal Decary tells Mrs. Fuller that Wil will be suspended for 3 days. When he returns he must submit a one-page apology for his actions. Ms. Fuller is not having this. “You’re punishing my child but not holding the others accountable for their actions” she charges. “My son is a smart, kind, and thoughtful boy. He never had these problems in his previous school. You can’t deny that racism plays a role here and my son is taking the blame.”

After some heated deliberation, Principal Decary agrees to reduce the suspension to 1 day but Wil is expected to attend a boys’ group dealing with anger management. Wil looks at his mother and then the principal. “Sorry Mama,” he says respectfully. “I’ll take the 3 days but I’m not writing any apology” and he walks out of the room.

1. Wil’s situation raises social, racial, and relational issues commonly seen in school systems. Courageous conversations about race, sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, and other diversity factors are frequently left unaddressed and often educators are not sufficiently trained in how to manage micro and macro aggression. What recommendations would you offer to the Principal? What do you think about her decision regarding Wil’s reprimand?
2. Discuss concepts of cultural sensitivity and humility. How would you apply them in this scenario and in similar circumstances? Feel free to share your own experiences.
3. Pay attention to incidents of micro-aggression\* in your daily life. As an exercise, draw or write about a time when you were the target or witnessed a micro-aggression due to race, faith, beliefs, gender, class, or combined factors.

\*Microaggression is a term used for verbal, behavioral, or other forms of prejudice and harassment that typically go unnoticed and unaddressed. Whether intentional or unintentional, these forms of aggression are hurtful and constitute significant and sometimes daily discrimination against people.