

## Jordie

I've discovered that there's a lot they don't tell you in college about being a teacher. Some things you just have to find out on your own.

I'd been having difficulties with Jordie all month. As a first year grade two teacher, I'd been trying hard to handle my classroom behaviour problems myself. Everyone had told me that good teachers did that.

My class was small ... just seventeen students ... but so far I'd had just about every kind of student problem you can imagine. There had been fights, name-calling, bad language, plenty of tears, as well as the usual pushing and shoving. It had made my days interesting.

I thought I had been handling it pretty well, though. I hadn't had to send anyone to the office so far, but I'd had many one-on-one conversations with some of my students, and I'd had to phone a few parents. Overall, I think the kids were coming around. I hoped so. I liked them.

But Jordie was something else. Not a day went by that he didn't get into trouble of some sort.

Today he had come in from recess with a bloody nose. "Miss Hale, Danny hit me!"

I talked to Danny alone. Yes, he had hit Jordie. He gave the usual excuse: "Jordie called me fat!". Jordie denied it, of course.

Danny and I had a talk about how hitting people is not a good thing to do. I tried to give him some suggestions about what to do if people said things to him that weren't nice.

Then I sent both of them to the office.

I really didn't have a choice. Our school has a policy about violence, and both kids would probably be sent home. The Principal would decide that. But I still felt like I had let them down.

How could grade two kids be so mean to each other? As a Christian myself, I tried to model Christian behaviour for my students all the time. But Jordie always seemed to be able to find trouble. Or it found him.

Three days ago he had come back from the bathroom crying. When I'd asked him what the problem was, he told me that someone had pushed him and made him fall. He hadn't seen who had done it.

Jordie was always being tripped, or pushed, or called names by other students. I'd been trying to deal with the situation by talking to the students involved whenever something

happened, but it seemed that as soon as I dealt with one problem, something else cropped up. And it always seemed to involve Jordie.

It really looked like Jordie was being bullied. By everyone in my class.

This was the first time that a student had actually hit Jordie, so I knew I would have to get to the bottom of the problem somehow. I decided to talk to the grade one teacher across the hall. She had already given me lots of good advice ... maybe she could help with Jordie.

“Barb, I don’t know what to do! Jordie is always getting picked on. Today someone hit him.” Barb was listening attentively. “Do you have any ideas?”

Barb thought for a moment. “Well, Melanie, I don’t know anything about Jordie ... he’s new in the school this year. But sometimes students who are constantly being bullied tend to bring it on themselves. Do you know what I mean?”

I didn’t like what she was suggesting. “Barbara, I do know that students shouldn’t have to ...”

“Yes, Mel, I know. Students should be safe here. Jordie shouldn’t have to worry about being bullied. But these are just kids. Jordie must be doing something that makes the kids react the way they are. You should try to find out what’s really going on.”

That seemed to make sense. I really had no idea why the kids were picking on him. His behaviour in class was always good, and he was unfailingly polite to me, as well as to the other students. In class.

But ... the bullying wasn’t happening in class. It was happening in the hallways, and outside. Barb was right. I needed to find out what was going on.

Barb had been a big help in my first month on the job. It’s really true that you don’t learn how to be a teacher in college. Your college classes just show you how to do all the things you’ll have to do, as a teacher, and let you practice them. And you ask for help with that.

But you really learn to be a teacher by being one. The first two years are supposed to be the hardest; that’s where you learn to do the job. And you can learn to do it well if you have someone to help you. I was learning to rely on Barb for a lot of things.

I found Sandra in the staffroom. “Melanie, you want to take my supervision as well as your own? Every day?”

Sandra was the grade three teacher that I split the recess supervision with. I’d just volunteered to take on her shift as well as my own.

“Yeah, Sandra. I need to watch some students for a few weeks. I’ll eat my lunch out there. I hope you don’t mind.”

Sandra smiled. “And why should I mind that you’re taking my supervision? Just don’t tire yourself out, OK? I know how much work you have.”

I liked Sandra. I had been a substitute teacher for her once or twice last year, and she always left me little notes with her plans: ‘After recess, be sure to eat something yourself; it’s a long afternoon’. Things like that.

And I did have a lot of work. I was supposed to have unit plans made for all my academic subjects by the end of November, and I was only half done. I usually spent several hours in the evenings working on that, and marking.

Someone once told me that the teachers with the most work in a school are first-year elementary teachers. I was starting to believe it. Of course, that same person had also told me that the teachers who had the *least* amount of work were experienced high school math teachers. I wasn’t sure whether to believe *that* or not.

Anyway, for the next week, I did a full recess supervision at noon every day. With the small number of students at our school, it was easy to keep an eye on Jordie. I wanted him to get used to seeing me out there all the time, so he’d ignore me. Then I wanted to get close.

In the second week I followed Jordie around. I stuck to him like a shadow. And I was shocked at what I was hearing.

Whenever Jordie was with other kids, he became a different person. The polite, well-mannered student that I saw in my classroom every day was not nice at all on the playground.

I took a notebook outside with me and started writing down some of the things he was saying to other students. I couldn’t believe it.

To Danny: “You’re fat! That’s why nobody likes you!”

To Alicia: “You smell bad!”

To Bobby: “You’re stupid. I don’t like you.”

To Marcy: “Nobody plays with you because you’re ugly!”

It seemed that Jordie couldn’t interact with other kids without saying something negative. No wonder they were all picking on him!

What could I do to help him? I knew he had to learn to get along with other kids without saying nasty things. Maybe I should talk to his parents.

But I only got to talk to Jordie's father. And I immediately knew that it wouldn't do any good. His father was rude to me. He made it quite clear that he didn't want to discuss Jordie's behaviour, and he used inappropriate language to tell me that. He basically told me that if I was having problems with Jordie, I should solve them myself, since that was my job.

OK, I'd been warned about that in college. Some parents aren't going to be very supportive. I'd have to deal with this myself.

The next day I had Sandra take both supervisions and I had a long talk with Jordie. I asked him if he had any friends.

"Not really, Miss Hale. The other kids don't like me very much."

"Do you know why, Jordie?"

"No." He was close to tears.

So we played a game. I pretended to be a student out on the playground, and I asked him to walk up to me and say something.

He didn't say anything.

"Jordie, what would you say to me if I were Alicia?"

He still didn't say anything.

"Jordie, last week you walked up to Alicia and told her that she smells. Why did you do that?"

Jordie started to cry. "I don't know, Miss Hale. I just say things like that sometimes. I don't really mean it ..."

"Why do you say mean things?"

He sniffled. "I don't know what else to say. Kids used to say things like that to me all the time in the last school I was in. I didn't like it there."

So Jordie had been bullied before, and now he was trying to become a bully himself, here at his new school. Maybe he didn't know any other way to relate to kids. In fact, maybe I just had to show him how to talk to other kids.

So that's what I did. Over the next few lunch periods, Jordie and I worked together to practice his socializing skills. We used a lot of role playing, and I told him some things to say when he walked up to other kids.

"Hi, Kenny. Can I play with you for a while?"

"Hi, Danny. That's a cool truck. Can I watch you play with it?"

It had been a long time since I was in grade two, but I did my best.

We talked about what was good to say, and what wasn't. He seemed to catch on pretty quickly.

"Jordie, what are you going to do if somebody says something that's not nice, to *you*?" I knew it would take a while for the other kids to accept the 'new' Jordie. I wanted to make sure he wouldn't react badly.

"I'll just walk away, like you said, Miss Hale."

For a few days I walked around with him outside at recess. I let him practice his greetings on the other kids. They reacted pretty well, considering how mean he had been to them for the past month. But maybe that was just because I was out there with him.

On the following Monday, I arranged for the Assistant Principal to come for Jordie during one of my classes. He promised to talk to him in a very positive way about how good his behaviour had been lately. I wanted to give Jordie some positive reinforcement.

But what I really wanted to do was to talk to the rest of the class. We were getting along pretty well now, most of the time. They were good kids. I told them that Jordie had had a bad time in his last school, and asked them for ways we could make friends with him. I promised them that Jordie would try to be nicer when he talked to them. We all sort of agreed that if Jordie would stop saying mean things, they would try to be nice to him.

Was it a good idea to do that? I don't know. But it worked. Those were good kids!

All the next week they went out of their way to be polite to Jordie. They invited him to play at recess. They shared their toys.

And Jordie responded. It think that nobody had ever been nice to him before, and he was so amazed at how good it felt, he couldn't help himself. He had to be nice back!

Jordie isn't a problem student any more. Oh, he still has the usual grade two difficulties, but not more so than any of the other kids. He has a good time at recess. Danny is his best friend.

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