

A Practice Teacher's Nightmare

"OK, they're all yours. Good luck! You'll need it!"

With that parting comment, the aide left the room. She slammed the door on the way out.

'What did she mean by that?' I wondered to myself. *'And not very friendly, either ...'*

I was in my fourth year of college, training to be an elementary teacher. This was my second practicum, a nine-week stint at a city school where I was to teach grade three.

This was my first day, and it hadn't started out the way I'd expected. I hadn't met the students yet, but I'd talked with my supervising teacher yesterday after school for the first time, and she'd explained that she wanted me to start teaching right away. I was to do lessons in Social Studies and Science this afternoon.

I'd spent last evening in the school library preparing both lessons. It had been a lot of work, but I think I had done a good job. It seemed like I had. I was so tired, I was having trouble remembering. It was all a little hazy.

But college had been like that. Lots of late nights, and a never-ending series of assignments. But I'd done well so far. My first practicum last year had gone beautifully. But I was worried about this one. I needed to do well if I hoped to get a job.

When I'd arrived at the school this morning, I was informed by the school secretary that my supervisor was going to be late, and could I please teach the lessons this morning?

So here I was, in front of a class of about thirty grade three students, about to teach them the Social Studies lesson I'd so carefully prepared the evening before.

I'd never met them. I didn't know their names. I didn't know any of the routines.

The classroom aide, who'd taken attendance during O Canada and announcements, had just gone, leaving me with her somewhat unsettling words of encouragement.

I looked around at the students in front of me. They were oblivious to my presence; once the announcements had ended, they'd burst into conversations all around the room. Quite loud conversations.

I knew I had to get quiet from everyone before beginning. I used my teacher voice.

"Good morning. Please be quiet now, it's time to start."

They ignored me.

A little louder this time. “Good morning. Are we ready to start?”

They kept talking. It was like I was invisible.

If I were a PhysEd teacher, I could just pull out my whistle. I’m sure the regular teacher had some sort of routine for getting the class started. But I didn’t know what it was. And I didn’t have a whistle.

So I broke the number one rule of good teaching. I yelled.

“Hey! Be Quiet! It’s time to start!”

I’d never yelled at a class before. Good teachers should never have to yell. But I didn’t know what else to do.

Anyway, it worked. They settled down, and all talking stopped. But they looked a little sullen as they waited for me to say something else.

“That’s better”. I introduced myself. “Now, we’re going to start with Social Studies this morning ...”

Thirty hands shot up. I pointed to a girl near the front. “Yes?”

“Mrs. Saunders always starts with English.”

“I know, but Mrs. Saunders isn’t here. I’ll be teaching you for part of the day, and we’re going to start with ...”

“Social Studies sucks!” That from a boy lounging disrespectfully in a desk at the back of the room. I walked to the back and stood next to him.

“Hello. I’d like you to sit up straight please. What’s your name?”

“Harry Potter”.

“Well, Mr. Potter, you’d better sit up straight. Perhaps you’d like me to turn you into a toadstool?”

I hadn’t actually read the Harry Potter books. But I’d learned in my college classes that some students will try to disrupt classes just to get the attention, and if you make a big deal out of it, the situation will just escalate. So I was playing along. I was just about to ask him his name again when I heard a commotion behind me.

Several girls were fighting over a notebook. One of them had grabbed it, and the others were trying to take it away.

“Give it back. It’s mine!”

“I don’t care! You can’t write things about me ...”

I quickly moved between them and told them to sit down. They did, grudgingly. As I returned to the front of the classroom, I realized I’d have to start all over again. Everyone was talking.

“Please be quiet now, it’s time to start”.

This time I started with a yell. No sense wasting any more time.

When I had silence from everyone, I continued where I’d left off.

“Our lesson today is about communities. Have a look at this map”.

While the announcements were being read earlier, I had loaded the Smartboard presentation I had prepared. It should be all ready to go.

I went to the board. The first map was up. Good.

“Here are some communities in Alberta”. I went over the names of some towns and cities they were familiar with. They’d learned about this last week. “Now let’s look at your own community”

I hit the arrow. Nothing happened. I poked at it again. Nothing. The screen was frozen.

“Just a moment”. I went over to the computer to try to get it to work from there. Meanwhile the class had started to talk again.

“Settle down, please”. I used the mouse and tried to advance the screen. It worked.

The class was still talking.

But wait a minute ... the next slide wasn’t part of the lesson. It was a picture from my summer vacation. It was my sister! I advanced to the next screen. Another picture of my sister. And then one of my father.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what ...” I was starting to panic. Where had my lesson gone?

But it didn’t matter. They weren’t listening. And they weren’t watching the screen either. They were still busy talking. A few were out of their desks wandering around.

I marched to the front of the room and turned off the Smartboard. We’d do it the old-fashioned way.

I was about to call them to attention yet again when I was distracted by a girl in the middle of the room with her hand up.

“Yes, Annie?”

“Miss, I don’t feel so well. I think I’m going to be sick!”

“Well, let’s ...”

But it was too late. She threw up explosively onto her desk.

I went to help her. Strangely, no-one in the class seemed to notice. Everyone was still talking. Except the boy in front of Annie, who’d apparently been splattered when Annie threw up. “Gross! My shirt is all wet!”

I was helping Annie clean up, and trying hard not to lose my own breakfast, when the fight broke out.

It wasn’t a real fight. Two boys were wrestling on the floor at the back of the room. But they were going at it pretty hard.

“Hey, you two! Stop that!”

But they ignored me. Of course.

At this point I decided that things were getting a little out of hand. My supervising teacher still hadn’t shown up. No one would listen to me. So I decided to buzz the office to call for reinforcements.

I found the call button on the front wall and pressed it. Nothing happened. I pressed it again. Still nothing. Apparently it was broken.

Meanwhile the students were completely out of control. The two boys were still wrestling at the back, and now a group of girls was standing around them, cheering them on. Most of the other students were talking. A few were tossing paper airplanes back and forth. One student was intently carving his name into his desk with a large jackknife.

I went to the door to summon help from the teacher next door.

The door wouldn’t open. It was jammed shut.

I had to get things settled down. Seeing no other way to get their attention, I climbed up onto a desk and waved my arms around. I yelled. “Stop this right now! Be quiet!”

That was when the supervising teacher walked into the room.

I climbed down off the desk and sat down in it. I buried my head in my arms.

“What on earth is going on here?” She was talking to me. “What do you think you’re doing? Is this any way to run a class? You need to wake up and take responsibility for your actions! Wake up!”

“Wake up! Wake up!”

I wanted her to go away and leave me in my misery.

“Miss Hale! Melanie! Wake up!”

Someone poked me in the shoulder.

“Uh ... what?”

“It’s almost eleven o’clock! You’ve been working here in the library since three-thirty. You need to go home and get some sleep!”

I lifted my head groggily off the table I’d fallen asleep at. There were papers, textbooks and folders spread all around the table. The Principal was standing next to me. She was looking concerned.

“You need to go home, Melanie. You have lessons to teach tomorrow afternoon, don’t you? Mrs. Saunders said you were a hard worker. And she says you’ll love her kids ... I’ve taught them myself, and they’re really well behaved. You’ll do fine. Now go home”.

Apparently I’d fallen asleep in the library after finishing my plans.

“Uh, ...OK. Thanks.”

So I went home. And the next day I discovered she was right.

And there was no Annie in the class. Or no Harry Potter either, for that matter.