

## **This Sucks!**

“This sucks! I can’t do it!”

That was the usual comment I got from Nathan every time I gave the class work to do. I was used to it by now.

“Of course you can, Nathan. Here, let me show you.”

Grade six math isn’t that difficult. Most of the class was doing well, which pleased me, because this is my first year of teaching, and I wanted to do a good job.

Not all my students are passing. Bobby is having real difficulty with the work. He tries hard, but the testing we did indicates that he’s only functioning at a grade four level in math. And he tries so hard; I try to encourage him as much as I can, but he just can’t do the grade six work! I’ve modified the curriculum quite a bit so that he can experience some success and learn some skills, but it’s a challenge.

Nathan, on the other hand, is a different kind of challenge. He can do the work. He just doesn’t want to. He’s lazy. I learned pretty quickly at the start of the year that “This sucks... I can’t do it” really means “I don’t want to do all this work. I might have to think. Tell me what to do.”

I’ve been encouraging him as much as I can, but I always have to sit down with him when there’s an assignment and get him started. Once he’s convinced that he can do the work and it won’t take the entire rest of his life to finish, he’s usually pretty successful.

Teaching grade six was not my first choice, I can tell you that. I wanted my own grade one classroom. I’m an elementary teacher, and grade one kids are the kids I want to teach. But what can I say? There were no grade one jobs open this year in the small rural schools I was interested in applying to. So I decided to take this job for now.

“This sucks! I can’t do it!” Grade one kids would never say that!

What am I going to do with Nathan? How can I change his attitude?

I know all about ‘positive reinforcement’. It was talked about in just about every education course I took in college. And I’m good at it. I have this list of positive comments I use, like ‘Good Job, Peter’, or ‘Great work, Maggie’ ... and I never use the same comment twice in the same class.

But positive reinforcement doesn’t work with Nathan. Every day it’s the same thing. “This sucks! I can’t do it!”

Maybe I need some help. I'll ask the teacher across the hall. She's been giving me lots of help this year already ... passing me advice and suggestions, and even lending me a lot of her teaching resources. And she's a really good teacher.

So I did that, yesterday. And she did have a suggestion. A good one, I thought. I talked to the Principal about it too ...she thought it was definitely worth a try. She also said if it worked, she'd try it out in own her Social Studies class, where Nathan was behaving the same way.

What I like about this school is that the staff is so friendly and always willing to help. I know that all schools aren't like that ... my friend Jackie is teaching in a school where nobody ever talks to her, or offers help, or anything. How can a first-year teacher ever hope to get better if nobody will help?

So the next day I put my plan for Nathan into effect. During lunch I called him down to the office and borrowed the Office Manager's room so I could talk to Nathan alone.

I started by praising him for how hard he'd been working lately. I told him I really liked having him in my class. And I asked him if he could help me with a problem I was having.

He looked surprised at that.

Remember Bobby? *I asked Nathan if he would help Bobby with his work every day.*

And it was simple as that. Nathan liked the idea that he could help someone else and escape some of his own work. Of course, he didn't realize that he'd still have to figure out how to do the work first before he could show Bobby. But I knew he could do it ... this was giving him a reason to *want* to.

Nathan and I regularly have 'teacher conferences' to discuss how Bobby is doing and what he's learning. Nathan even suggests things he knows in math from last year that he could teach him. Bobby is getting lots of one-on-one help, and Nathan is happy to do all the work necessary to decide how best to help him.

"This sucks! I can't do it!" I haven't heard that in a *long* time!