

# Be Prepared: The Problem May Be Bigger Than You Think!

I am not yet a seasoned mentor, and Jane is not a young, new teacher. She is a second-year probationary teacher who came to our school from an unsuccessful year at a junior high. She is a tiny woman, quite shy and soft spoken, a recent immigrant from an Eastern European country. Her biggest problem seemed to be class management: how to keep the students in their seats and on task for a significant portion of class time. I was expected to help her solve the problem and show significant improvement.

My first observation began normally with a pre-observation conference in which she asked me to pay attention to behavior problems. The lesson would be concerned with basic math and seemed well planned. Jane seemed quite composed when she talked about the behavior problems she was experiencing and explained that the class I would visit was her worst problem.

I was a few minutes early in arriving for the observation. A short chat and the decision on where she wanted me to sit brought us close to the tardy bell. I was curious to note there were still only four students present. At the ringing of the bell none of the four were in their seats; there was confusion at both doors with students walking in, walking out, talking, and milling around. Jane was writing on the board. The confusion in the room seemingly went unnoticed. Two minutes after the bell she went to her desk and picked up the roll book. There were now about twenty students in the room but only three were in their seats. Jane began asking individuals to sit down. On two occasions students who had taken seats got up again, one to go to the pencil sharpener, the other to cross the room and speak to another student. Ten minutes into the period all the students were in their seats, but few were quiet or paying attention.

Over the noise of conversation Jane announced what the lesson was and proceeded to work a sample problem on the board. Very few students were even facing the board, let alone paying attention to what was written on it. After five minutes of explaining sample problems, she passed out a ditto problem sheet without explanation and proceeded to help individuals at their desks. Fewer than ten percent of the class was on task at a single time, and they were always the students in the immediate proximity of the teacher.

The class continued the remaining time in much the same pattern. The anecdotal record was difficult to write as there were so many things going on at the same time. Students came and went from the room many times. Rude remarks were constant. I had written seven pages when the bell rang and the

class charged the door. Since lunch was next, and the situation seemed so out of control, I decided to attempt some debriefing right then.

We sat down together, and the only thing to come to my mind was to ask her about the class period. She replied that she wasn't very happy with it; she exclaimed, "What am I to do?" and burst into tears. I mentally tossed out the seven pages of anecdotal records and attempted to be personally supportive. Even though we got through the tears, and I helped her understand that she could overcome many of the problems she was having, I was not happy with the outcome. We set a date for the next day to go over my notes and went to lunch.

The next meeting was not emotionally charged but was strained. She seemed uncomfortable, and I struggled to identify one single thing which needed to be done to settle things down in class. We agreed that the beginning of the class must be more orderly, and she vowed to begin working on the tardy problem.

I am having many problems juggling personal empathy, collegiality and professional help in this case. I am prone to think I became too emotionally involved from the beginning. I certainly am concerned for my ego if I am unsuccessful and Jane loses her job.

## Reaction

*My immediate reaction to "Be Prepared" is "Yes, some problems may be bigger than you are." Jane has many management problems, some can be corrected, some probably cannot be changed. Recognizing our own limitations as mentors is just as important as recognizing Jane's. The need to help, the desire to do well, affects mentors strongly. However, realizing that mentors cannot solve all problems and cannot create teachers from raw clay is mandatory for mentor teachers.*

*The job of mentor must be one of helping, advising, being supportive, and guiding when we can. The role must not become, even in the mentor's deepest thoughts, one of solving all problems for all people. Some teachers will fail no matter what the mentor does, and they must be allowed to do so. Fear for one's ego if a teacher does not improve places a huge emotional burden on the mentor. Let Jane take the "baby steps." Guide her, but don't accept her emotional load as well. Her failure is not necessarily yours.*

## Reaction

*My initial reaction to "Be Prepared" is that Jane is academically prepared but needs much guidance in working effectively with this particular group. The mentor has to help her; she has to put her personal feelings aside and get to the root of the problem. Jane needs strict guidelines to follow. A suggestion would be to provide those guidelines written in the form of "Techniques to Try." Jane might not find this threatening, and this could alleviate some of the mentor's feeling of betrayal. The following suggestions may be appropriate:*

- The tardy problem: The class should be made aware of the fact that the door will be locked immediately after the late bell. It would then be necessary for students to go to the office for an admittance slip.*
- Disruptive behavior: Some of the problems might be eliminated if Jane has the work on the chalkboard prior to the students' arrival. She should never turn her back on that class to write on the blackboard.*

- Resolving conflicts: The mentor has experience in resolving conflicts and reducing discipline problems. She should talk to the class regarding school and class rules. (She has a responsibility to all students in the school, not just the students in her class.) The mentor should make herself visible in that room as often as she can.*

*There is nothing wrong in being emotionally or personally involved. Jane needs that kind of support as much as she needs professional expertise. However, if she fails, it is not the mentor's fault.*

*The problem is bigger than Jane. It takes an assertive person with a variety of experiences with students of different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds to effectively manage a situation like the one in Jane's room. Doing all she can do to help, her ego should stay intact. She has not failed.*