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Summer School

To be honest, I accepted a summer school position at Cumberland Elementary because I thought the class would be an easy one to teach. I would have only five students and work half days, yet still get a full-time salary. But, as I soon discovered I was sadly mistaken in my belief that the position would be an effortless one. For one thing, teaching five students with special needs was far more difficult than teaching a classroom of 30 so-called normal students. In addition, I discovered that there is probably no such thing as working only half a day when you're a teacher: After teaching my class every morning, I spent the afternoon creating individualized lessons to meet each child's specific academic needs in reading, writing, and mathematics. By the end of the first week, it was clear that my "part-time" job would consume my entire summer.

I don't think that I could have had five more different students if I had tried Ben, who was nine, suffered from a progressive neurological condition that had left him blind and was slowly eroding his mental capabilities. Although usually a kind and gentle child, he would have unpredictable outbursts that disrupted whatever the rest of us might be doing. For example, several times a day, he would suddenly scream and start punching the air with his fists until he eventually found something solid—a desk, a wall, or perhaps another student. He would then continue punching that object or person until I physically restrained him. I didn't feel that I could reprimand Ben for such outbursts, as they were undoubtedly a symptom of his neurological impairment.

Eleven-year-old Hannah had been sexually molested by her mother's boyfriend on numerous occasions over the past two years, and she now displayed a variety of bizarre behaviors. For example, she would frequently reach out to touch or grab other students in inappropriate places. On several occasions, always when I was preoccupied with Ben, she would take off her clothes and rub her body against different objects around the room—her desk, her art box, pencils, you name it. When she was nervous about something, she would compulsively rock back and forth in her chair, or she would pull at her hair until she left a bald spot.

Meanwhile, nine-year-old Cameron had a distinctly sadistic streak. He would hit his classmates, often on the nose or in the eyes, then smile as they screamed out in pain. He spit on people just to see how they'd react. If they expressed disgust, he'd spit on them again; if they lashed out in anger, he'd hit them and run away. My other two students had been diagnosed as having mental retardation. One of them, Arnold, was a sweet-tempered eight-year-old who had Down's syndrome. The other, twelve-year-old Steven, had no genetic disorders but had been officially labeled as "mentally retarded" based on his low scores on a series of intelligence tests. Steven's prior schooling had been limited to just part of one year in a first-grade classroom in inner-city Chicago. His mother had pulled him out after a bullet grazed his leg while he was walking to school one morning; fearing for her son's

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safety, she would not let him outside the apartment after that, not even to play, and certainly not to walk the six blocks to school. When a truant officer finally appeared at the door one evening in May five years later, Steven and his mother quickly packed their bags and moved to a small town in northern Colorado. They found residence with Steven's aunt, who persuaded Steven to go back to school. After considering Steven's intelligence and achievement test scores, the school psychologist recommended that he attend my summer school class.

Perhaps my biggest challenge that summer was to keep my five students from physically harming one another. Numerous disputes occurred every day, often when I least expected them. For example, we might be in the middle of a lesson when, all of a sudden, one child or another would start yelling and screaming in a classic temper tantrum.

One day especially stands out in my mind. We had been studying nutrition, and so I had asked each of the children to bring in some fresh vegetables to make a large

salad for our morning snack. Steven arrived with a can of green beans.

“What the hell is that?” Cameron yelled from across the room. Cameron cursed frequently. Initially I had thought that he did it to gain attention, but I soon learned that cursing was the standard manner of speaking in his family. I usually ignored Cameron’s foul language, reasoning that I had more important behaviors of his to change.

“It’s green beans!” Steven stated proudly.

“What’s goin’ on?” asked Ben, who could not see what Steven had brought.

Hannah answered his question. “Steven brought a can of green beans.”

“If they’re in a can, then they’re not fresh,” Ben pointed out.

“The hell they ain’t!” was Steven’s angry reply. “Me and Momma got them off the shelf this morning!”

Oh my, I thought, what to do now? And then it suddenly hit me—Steven quite possibly wasn’t mentally retarded at all! It was his prior knowledge—or rather, his lack of it—that was interfering with his academic progress. After all, he didn’t even know what a “fresh” vegetable was. My mind was reeling, and mentally I was quickly revising my objectives for Steven. He needed to learn the basics—not only in reading, writing, and mathematics but also with regard to the many facts and concepts that most children his age had already acquired.

While I was pondering Steven’s situation, Cameron darted across the classroom and whacked Steven’s nose. “Stupid kid!” he yelled. “You don’t even know what’s fresh!”

Despite my best efforts to restrain Cameron, he continued to attack Steven all morning long. When Steven’s mother arrived at noon to pick up her son, I shared the day’s unfortunate events with her. Remembering why she had removed her son from first grade in Chicago, I fully expected her to remove him from my classroom as well. Instead, she told me, “Ms. Teacher, I think it’s time we did something about this aggression. Recess ain’t cuttin’ it for these kids. They’re all still too full of piss and vinegar to study.”

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“No kidding,” I silently agreed while tightly holding Cameron’s hands to keep him from inflicting further damage on Steven’s body. The bus driver was standing in the doorway wondering why the four children he usually took home—Cameron, Hannah, Ben, and Arnold—weren’t ready to leave. The bus driver’s assistant picked up Cameron and carried him onto the bus. Hannah left the room flapping her arms. Ben was holding Arnold’s left elbow and walking toward the bus when he suddenly grabbed Arnold’s hair and gave it a quick yank.

“No pulling hair, Ben!” yelled Arnold. Ben momentarily fingered the strands of hair that he had pulled from Arnold’s scalp. The strands drifted to the ground unnoticed, and Arnold continued to guide Ben towards the bus as though nothing had happened.

Maybe Steven’s mother was right—maybe my students needed an outlet for all their pent-up energy, because recess simply wasn’t “cuttin’ it.” I wondered if some vigorous physical activity first thing in the morning might relieve some of their energy. We tried everything, it seemed—kickball, basketball, tag, running races—yet I saw little improvement in their behavior when we finally settled down for academic work later in the morning. Then one day, I found plastic hockey sticks and a hollow plastic puck in the back of the gymnasium closet. I wasn’t sure that I could trust my students with such potentially dangerous equipment, yet I decided to take a chance and teach them the basics of field hockey, albeit an in-door version of the game.

I knew that I needed to adapt the game for Ben, who was blind. So I had players on the “blue team” wear high-pitched Christmas sleigh bells tied around their wrists; players on the “red team” wore similar bells tied to their shoe laces. I sliced open the handles of the hockey sticks and inserted lower-pitched bells, then glued the handles shut again, so that Ben would be able to tell where each player’s hockey stick was on the playing field. I put a loud buzzer inside the plastic puck. I attached electronic beepers to the tops and sides of the goals.

We went to the gym first thing each morning for a half hour of hockey. All five students really got into the game, and not one of them ever tried to hit a classmate

with a hockey stick. Except for Ben, whose neurological condition seemed to worsen as the summer wore on, the aggressive behavior in my classroom completely stopped once we began our daily hockey games. I honestly don't know why. Maybe hockey provided more of an outlet for their energy than our other activities had. Maybe the game forced them to depend on one another in a way that they had never had to before. Maybe my allowing them to play with potentially dangerous equipment communicated a sense of trust that they didn't want to abuse. Maybe their change in behavior was just a fluke and had nothing to do with the hockey games at all.

Oddly, it was Cameron who taught me how to predict Ben's temper tantrums. One day, he said to me, "Teacher, I don't think Ben should be playin' hockey right now."

"Why not, Cameron?"

"He's getting ready to be mean."

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"How do you know that?"

"Look at his ears. They get red whenever he's ready to hurt someone." I looked at Ben's ears and discovered that Cameron had described them accurately. I guided Ben over to the punching bag, where he proceeded to have a violent temper tantrum, taking much of his anger out on the bag. The other four children continued their hockey game as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening.

With their energy expended in the gym first every morning, we actually had time to focus on more academic tasks. Steven improved by leaps and bounds that summer; he was like a sponge that absorbed as much as he possibly could. The others made a little progress on their reading, writing, and mathematics, although probably not enough to brag about. On the other hand, all five of my students made dramatic gains in their social skills. By the end of the summer, each of them was able to express anger in an appropriate verbal fashion instead of striking out physically.

NOTE: By the time Steven reached high school, he was enrolled in regular classes and maintained a 3.5 average; the last time I spoke with his mother, she told me that he was planning to attend Indiana University the following September. Meanwhile, Hannah and Arnold remained in self-contained classrooms for several years to follow. Ben died a year after he left my classroom from complications due to his neurological condition. I have no idea what happened to Cameron.

Possible questions for "Summer School":

- 1. When *Cameron curses ("What the hell is that?"), his teacher ignores him. Is this an appropriate reaction to Cameron's inappropriate behavior?***
- 2. *At one point, the teacher concludes that Steven isn't mentally retarded at all. Is her conclusion an accurate one?***
- 3. *What benefits might the daily hockey games have had?***