

Case Study 2001

BEAM ME UP: A PRAC IN FIVE ACTS

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1: BACKGROUND

The School

The school I attended for prac was my first choice. It was a large, well-resourced government school with over 600 students. I selected the school for its location in the mid-Western suburbs of Sydney, and for its high NESB population (87%). I live on the Northern side of Sydney, but chose to travel because I wanted to go to a school that would be a little more challenging than those close to me, especially in terms of discipline. My main focus for the prac was classroom management, drawing on the old wisdom that the person who can control a class can teach them everything (s)he knows.

The Rest of Life

By the time prac arrived, it was clear it wasn't going to be easy. Life had been too busy and my body was showing the strain. Frankly, I had been doing too much. The M.Teach honours course had me excited, but the deadline for the thesis proposal was soon after prac. On my first pre-prac visit I woke at 3am and couldn't get back to sleep; I wasn't worried about the visit – I was thinking about the honours course! I had also undertaken an undergraduate course concurrent with the M.Teach to satisfy the departmental requirement that first degrees contain units in at least 3 KLAs. Added to this was the surprisingly intensive assignment workload for Study 2, a large number of extra-curricula activities (including giving a treasurer's report on the weekend before prac) and the pressures of being a husband and father to a two-year-old and a baby.

As a result, I spent three days of the week leading up to prac sick at home, largely in bed. I remained sick for the first two weeks of prac, and this very much limited the time I had to prepare. By the time I got home, had been a husband and Dad, and was ready to start work, it was about 7pm. That wouldn't have been so bad, except that I was concerned that if I stayed up too late I would collapse completely. This resultant prep time was much smaller than ideal.

The Class

The class I was to teach was 2C – second grade. Two other M.Teach prac students were also at the school – one on Kindergarten, and the other also on Year Two. I had wanted a reasonably challenging class, and that is what I got.

2C was quite a large class, with 30 students, and it had the reputation among casual teachers of being a handful. 2C's most widely-known student- let's call him Alex – had ADD, and also a rare congenital condition which will cause him increasing difficulty in his learning as he grows older and may result in a premature death. When I first saw my cooperating teacher interact with Alex, I felt she was emotionally abusive in her relationship with him. On reflection I came to see that she managed him quite well. Casual teachers who would take sport, on the other hand, would let him run wild, judging him too difficult to handle. He had, for example, been known to climb onto the equipment “shed”, an old international shipping container. During one of the RFF sport sessions I witnessed, Alex spent time climbing on the school fence (next to a road) and finally threw a glass bottle onto the road. The highly-competent casual responsible for sport that day opined that, “he shouldn't be in the school”, and whether that is true or not, he added spice to the class.

Alex was by no means alone in his disruptive behaviour, in fact, he was rarely the most difficult student to handle and he and I developed quite a good relationship. There were, however, up to half-a-dozen other students who could be fairly seen as troublesome. Some of them really struggled with the work, one being borderline IM, but two of these students were classified as “Gifted and Talented”. There was also small group of Turkish boys in the class who were going through a change in self-concept during prac, almost in front of my eyes. One generally nice but rather excitable boy refused to kiss his mum goodbye in the playground for the first time whilst I was there. This group process resulted in pinching of girls' bottoms, fights (“school is for fighting”, as one said) and a changed attitude to authority. Details aside, the net result was that if any one of the more difficult students was away, the difference was quite significant.

My Cooperating Teacher – Miss C

My cooperating teacher (who was also the school coordination) was surprisingly young (24). She had gone to a well-respected public girls high school in the north-west Sydney, done a three year primary degree, been

targeted, and began her teaching career at this school. The first year she taught RFF, the next two she had Kindergarten and this was her first year on 2nd Class. She was a competent teacher, ambitious for promotion and – if I understood correctly – she had taken her first prac student during her second year of teaching – her first with a class of her own.

I knew from the first five minutes that we weren't going to have a fantastic time together, largely from her lack of interest in me as a person. Nevertheless, she clearly ran her class efficiently and I set myself to being professional, seeking to learn as much as I could. The most difficult thing was that, at times, she really wasn't very friendly. This was no doubt partly due to her own personal situation. Miss C was getting married 8 days after I finished prac, and her de facto had just been "unfairly dismissed" from his job. She was also coordinating the junior choir and the art competition for the school Open Day in the last week of prac. She simply didn't have much space for supervising a prac student. When we first went on playground duty, Miss C didn't talk to me at all. Another time I asked her, "Jane¹, what do you think constitutes acceptable playground behaviour?" to which she responded (exact words) "You just use your common sense" and closed the conversation. Beyond its simplicity of thought, the comment wasn't very friendly.

There were times, however, when Miss C did give much more of herself, and she made a genuine effort throughout the prac to discharge her professional responsibilities. Miss C and I didn't clash and worked together reasonably effectively; at times, though, I would have benefited from more encouragement and support than was forthcoming.

The Season: Third Term Chaos

My prac took place in term three "silly season". The amount of disruption to school routine was eye-opening. During my four week block, there was: a special assembly, a practice for the special assembly, school photos, dental checks, two two-hour industrial stoppages, an Open Day, at least two full days (literally) of Year Two dance practice for the Open Day extensive art time for the Open Day art competition, and a full-day excursion.

The disruption was extremely unsettling for the students, and resulted in a huge loss of teaching time. The fixed schedule for the first hour of each day (usually involving mixed-ability-reading groups) was cancelled for almost half of the time I was there. In the words of several teachers, the kids became "wired" as a result. Miss C told 2C at the end of my prac that the class had accumulated more "orange slips" – formal warnings for misbehaviour – during that term than any class in her teaching career. The misbehaviour stemmed in no small part from the loss of routine.

Another consequence of the chaos was that Miss C did almost no teaching during the time I was on prac. She continued to do the class administration, of course, but taught very few formal lessons for me to observe. The situation was exacerbated by another prac student (from the Conservatorium) being in our class each Monday morning. It was good to see someone else teach, but added to the children's questioning, "When is Miss C going to teach us?"

¹ Not her real name.

2: The First Two Weeks

Beginning steps

I taught my first lesson on the second pre-prac visit, and it went well. I think this inspired some confidence, and as such I was given a large amount of leeway how I chose to go about teaching any particular lesson after the first few. Having said this, the general content area was fairly constrained with a typical direction being, “Teach a lesson on Graph 3”.

The early part of the prac was marked by a lack of time to prepare. Miss C had discussed with the other cooperating teachers, and they had collectively decided that it wasn't feasible to give us a lesson program for the entire prac. This meant that, for the first week, I found out what lessons I was to teach for any given day at the end of the previous day. This made things hard on a number of counts. First, there was a shortage of time to find resources, which resulted in often having to make them myself. It also didn't allow much space for meta-cognitive reflection on the planned lessons, and there was no possibility to develop momentum because each lesson was an isolated event. All this was compounded by the dual bind of family pressures and sickness.

At the end of the first week I had to be fairly firm to get the bulk of the following week programmed out. We settled into a routine of me starting each Monday with a fairly good idea of what I was going to teach for most (if not all) that week. Given the pressures of family life, even more advance notice would have been helpful.

The First Supervisor Visit: Monday, Week 2

Mr B was my uni supervisor, and he made his first visit early on the Monday of Week 2. Mr B had worked part-time for the university supervising students (all from the B.Ed) for about 15 years (if I heard him correctly), and I believe he used to be a school principal. He allowed until recess to visit the three prac students at our school, including an initial group chat, followed by comments on the half-hour lessons he observed of us teach.

Mr B managed to get all three of us off-side on the first visit, largely through being negative and not expressing any compassion for our difficulties. For example, when I mentioned family life was proving difficult to juggle, Mr B responded that my family needed to recognise that my prac is the highest priority, and with that he closed the subject. Interestingly, I can see now that this is true; I did prioritise family too highly during the prac. Having said that, however, the difficulties were real, and not the least of these was my wife's own struggle to adapt to the increased demands on her. The right decision may have been to let her feel more pain, rather than be as supportive as I was. However, this was never going to be a simple matter. As was so often the case, Mr B's comments were correct as far as they went – it's just they didn't go very far, and certainly not very deep. Similarly, my colleague teaching Year 2 (who had a difficult first week) also received no empathy when he indicated he was struggling to find time to write lesson reviews. Mr B was right in insisting they be done; the problem was the way he did it. Incidentally, I had been writing them, but was criticised for their brevity, rather than encouraged to delve deeper.

My lesson in front of Mr B was OK, albeit not particularly inspiring; it was, after all, on “Spelling and Phonemic Awareness” and my goal was to keep the class well-behaved. As I will discuss in a moment, some of my thinking about how best to achieve this was misguided, and by choosing to be intentionally subdued to keep a lid on misbehaviour I made things more dull than would have been ideal. Overall, however, the students were on-task with me able to nip some disruption in the bud quite effectively.

Mr B's feedback surprised me a little. He only had about 5 minutes before he needed to go, and so he set about critiquing the lesson. I stopped him after about 3 minutes, and said, “Excuse me, John², but so far you've said about 10 seconds of positive things and all the rest has been negative. Am I to take that there is a serious problem here?” He was somewhat taken aback, but assured me that there wasn't. Interestingly, his written comments were always much more positive than the verbal ones.

By way of perspective, it is worth mentioning that during that evening, I received a call from my Year 2 compatriot, asking how I was feeling about John. He had spoken to the M.Teach student doing Kindergarten who was quite annoyed. I was actually feeling fairly OK about it all. The consensus – echoed by the cooperating teachers early that day – was that there wasn't much point listening to John. For this reason, my two

² Also not his real name.

colleagues adopted the approach for the rest of prac of outwardly agreeing with John regardless of their inner conviction.

Week Two

The second week of prac was largely uneventful, except that the whole of Year Two were getting increasingly wired by the incredibly disrupted schedule. I had some decent lessons, and some that didn't go so well. Overall, my morale was lower than it probably needed to be because my expectations were too high and I was physically run-down. One of my goals was to be able to have the class entirely silent when I wanted them to be, and I struggled to achieve this until the very end of prac. It has been interesting to hear the stories of others on prac, because my discipline problems were actually very minor compared to some, despite the tough class; the real problem was my expectations, and the loss of teacher efficacy due to not meeting them.

One incident is worth noting from week two. On the Thursday, Alex was misbehaving in line after lunch and so I sent him out the front. He had hit one student and kicked another, from memory. He was also being rather cheeky, not doing the right thing out the front, and so I went and spoke to him. He was in a mischievous and defiant mood, trying to push my buttons, which he did successfully and he hooked me emotionally somewhat (the only time on prac).

For the previous few days there had been a set protocol about what happens to students who go out to the front: they got a half-hour lunch detention. I had sent him there intentionally, feeling that his behaviour warranted this. That lunchtime, however, the protocol was not implemented. Instead, the cooperating teacher of my other Year Two colleague elected to deal with the miscreants. I had a fair investment in the outcome, given the "sparring" between Alex and I. However, I also felt somewhat constrained about personally taking the matter further because the word in the staff room was that if Alex got in much more trouble, he wouldn't go on the excursion, and people didn't want that to happen.

When I spoke to the other Year Two teacher afterwards, she told me that Alex had said he hadn't done much and she had let him off with a warning. I was quite upset about this, feeling defied. I acquiesced to her decision – what else could I do – but I commented that I didn't think this was the "right outcome". This was diplomatically unwise, given the proven prickliness of the teacher, but it was not unprofessional. It was that afternoon – within the hour – that he threw the glass bottle onto the road whilst a casual teacher took the class.

3: The End of the Week Two: Time for Reflection

Things to Learn: Be Visual!

Despite a fairly good start to the prac, it was clear I had some things to learn – and not just to lower my expectations of myself! One was the need to cater to a variety of learning styles and the importance of a concrete stimulus at the start of the lesson. The necessity of visual cues for some students was not something that occurred naturally to me. I live in the world of ideas, the world of words, and in general I am not a very “visual” person. When I shut my eyes, I see black. As a consequence, for much of the prac I wouldn’t have enough concrete, visual, colourful stimuli to engage the students, instead opting for more traditional and cerebral introductions to lessons such as an idea, brainstorming or discussion.

Part of this was the product of a lack of preparation time. Ironically, the consistent feedback I got throughout the prac was that my preparation was fine; it was the delivery that was sometimes problematic. I had to work out for myself that this actually wasn’t the whole story. Miss C had suggested that given my stated goal was classroom management, I shouldn’t worry too much about content. Whilst this was well-intentioned, it led me down the garden path a little. My struggles during prac were in no small way due to the fact that my lessons were a bit dull. There was also a lack of momentum due to each lesson being an isolated unit. By the end of the prac, I had more posters, kinesthetic activities and concrete objects to inspire the students and to explain ideas, and I was often using pre-prepared sentence strips to attach to the board rather than writing on it directly. Learning more things you could do in the classroom – different activities or ways of going about things – also helped. Together these changes made an enormous difference – the kids liked the lessons more because they liked the content more. Lessons also flowed more smoothly; this was another area that had been suggested as one I could work on, but in a manner seemingly divorced from content issues.

More things to learn: explaining the task...

A second major area of growth was the need to explain things clearly and several times. Beyond being quite feisty, 2C had an enormous ability range. This may be true of many classes, but whilst I was familiar with some of the statistics on ability range, their practical implications were not apparent to me until prac. One cloze sheet that I prepared was completed by the most able student in less than one minute (literally), with most students taking about 20 minutes to complete it and some only doing one third of it in that time.

From the outset, I consistently created fast-finisher activities which stretched the most able, but catering to the least able took me awhile to get on top of. These students didn’t listen well to explanations (even if they were behaving), and wouldn’t read questions themselves. In some cases, they couldn’t read them. As a result, they invariably needed to have tasks explained to them individually before they got started. Miss C had arranged the class to have able students sitting next to those less able and whilst this was helpful to a degree, the “fussing” about copying undid a lot of the potential benefit. I learnt that the first task had to be incredibly simple and that I needed to explain the work to the whole class both when they were on the floor, and then step-by-step at their desks. The real breakthrough only came when I developed a “pens down, arms folded, eyes to me” routine in the last week which focused the class at their tables and prevented the more able students from racing ahead. This decreased the number of students who needed personal assistance before they could get underway.

Even More Things to Learn: Be Positive!!

The third major area of development was the need to be less negative, especially by being more intentionally positive. This need was reflected by both Mr B and Miss C at times throughout the prac, and proved to be the source of much anguish as well as genuine personal growth.

My initial tendency was to expect good behaviour rather than nurture it. It would not be unusual for me to start a lesson by saying “Misa, could you face this way, thanks” rather than the sanctioned, “Thank you, Juanita, you’re sitting beautifully” or, “I can see one-two-three people sitting beautifully”. I had started the prac with a slight “Don’t smile until Easter” approach, seeking to have my own authority rather than derivative authority based on Miss C’s standing, and I am glad to be able to say that throughout the prac Miss C didn’t need to step in on my behalf. However, whilst I was not emotionally abusive nor particularly harsh in my negativity, my rather authoritarian upbringing snuck through and presented a fairly “no-nonsense” expectation of obedience and attention, rather than adopting a more sing-song approach.

I was aware by the second week, however, that I wasn't happy with this slightly "distant" relationship with the kids. As a result, I eased off on this "somewhat stern" approach. Miss C suggested a variety of techniques that worked for her, such as whispering, counting students that were sitting "beautifully" and counting to task-completion; I endeavoured to employ these, although I don't think they will have as major role in my "mature" classroom managements as they do in hers.

The anguish about my "negativity", however, was not largely due to this personal growth curve, significant as it was. My confusion was the result of the conflict between the reality and the rhetoric that I was experiencing. On the one hand, Mr B said throughout the prac that I should be able to control the class solely by being positive, and never by raising my voice (not that I did at all frequently, but we'll get to that...). Miss C echoed this to some extent, moderating it by saying she is "not positive all the time", but nonetheless emphasising the positive.

My cognitive dissonance arose from the fact that I didn't see anyone manage 2C by being positive. For example, I witnessed one particularly student – who was by no means the most difficult – continue to write as the librarian stood over him and repeatedly asked him, by name, to put down his pen. The librarian had this student for a period a week, but she couldn't manage him by being positive. Another day, I saw a regular casual take the class for 30 minutes, during which he abused them, shamed them, labeled them and then had them stick a sheet in their homework book. This wasn't much work for 30 minutes and it wasn't very positive, but it did result in the students all being quiet. Miss C told me in my first week that her last prac student had set her back significantly in her discipline of the class. She also commented that two weeks with casual teachers during her illness at the end of term two had created a situation where she needed to reevaluate her own management strategy and implement some new procedures at the start of term three. And as has been mentioned, casual teachers regularly classified Alex as too difficult to manage during sport. Clearly each of these teachers struggled to keep perfect order.

Most illuminating, however, was the approach taken by Miss C herself. Miss C had an impressive range of positive management techniques, but during her times of face-to-face contact with the class she cracked the whip more strongly than I ever did on numerous occasions. Miss C would, at times, read the notices with such ferocity in her tone of voice, that it would inspire fear in the children despite the neutral verbal content. I tentatively suggested to Miss C that my struggles with achieving complete order might spring from being seen as a "toothless tiger" – that I had seen too many acts of misbehaviour without acting, lest I be "too negative" – and that her positive discipline leveraged off her more forceful disciplinary action. This drew a blank – I honestly don't think she could see it. My challenge was, therefore, to manage a difficult class with techniques that might work in Eastwood but that no-one seemed to adopt at this school with this class.

The other complication concerning negativity and discipline was the serious misgivings I had about the mode of manipulative discipline into which I was being inducted. During the prac period, the school presented its inaugural set of principal's medallions, the highest award for good behaviour. 18 students got the medallion: 15 were girls, and the three boys were all in Year 6 and included the male school captain. More significantly, most of the girls looked like they wouldn't say boo to a mouse. At the same time, I was reading Paulo Freire and pondering Foucault's disciplines. For a start, I dislike the extensive use of the word "beautiful". I tried to discuss this with both Mr B and Miss C, but both had nothing to say. I was alone in pondering these things, trying to adapt to a model of management that on the one hand seemed to me to be somewhat unself-aware, and on the other hand presented me with some ethical concerns.

The Second Supervisor Visit: Friday, Week 2

Mr B came for the second time on the Friday of week 2 – four days after his first visit. I was scheduled to start teaching at about 9:30am, and Mr B was again to observe me for half-an-hour. 2C had been fairly hyper for the past couple of days because of all the disruptions to regular class life and in light of this, Miss C had chosen to only speak in a barely-audible whisper for the first half-hour of the day. This practice requires the children to listen very carefully to what is being said, and as such is designed to settle the class and discourage talking; Miss C had recommended the strategy to me, and it was partly the reason that I adopted such a subdued mood during many of my lessons.

Mr B arrived shortly before I was to start teaching. Miss C had settled the class and I assumed the seat at the front, ready to begin. As she moved to the back of the room, Miss C introduced Mr B in the normal fashion: "We have a visitor in our classroom today. Say 'good morning to Mr B, 2C'". The class sang out the archetypal, "Good morn-ning, Mr B" and in turn, Mr B responded with a stentorian, "Well, GOOD morning, 2C. What a

lovely class you are (or similar)”. Because of the large jump in volume, the effect of Mr B’s greeting was that the focus shifted to the back of the classroom and the pressure built up after half-an-hour of near-silence was released. One of the most disruptive student at my feet said “Oh – I wish MR B could teach us”, such was the nature of his greeting. Overall, the class was unsettled as a result.

Despite this hiccup at the beginning, the lesson went OK, although once again it was quite dull. Ironically, I had planned an upbeat introduction by my last minute misgivings that it might overly excite the kids were echoed by Miss C, and so I ditched it. As a result, the revamped lesson had quite a staid beginning, with me still seeking to subdue my mood and speak quietly like Miss C had, in order to keep the class calm. The lesson was a modeled/joint construction of a procedure, followed by an independent construction. The whole-class portion of the lesson was solid enough but it lacked visuals and involved me writing extensively on the board – something which didn’t come easily. The individual work section was fine. Overall the lesson was not particularly inspirational, dogged by the things I was learning about, but not too bad either.

The discussion with Mr B following this lesson was, I believe, the turning point of the prac, although this wouldn’t become apparent until much later. It began with John commenting on my rather staid introduction. I tried to explain that I had changed it just prior to the lesson. I also outlined what had been going on with the class in recent times. I said that I understood it was hard for him “coming in cold” to the situation but, in light of Miss C’s intentional whispering for the first half-hour of the day, his jolly greeting “was not particularly helpful”.

Let me say at this point, I think it is true that I didn’t extend a great deal of grace to Mr B in making this comment. I was annoyed at his negativity, his apparent lack of interest in my struggles and those of my colleagues, and by what I perceived as insensitivity to the effects his greeting might have on the class and my teaching. However, I was measured and honest, and if Mr B wanted to know what that lesson was like for me, he needed to understand my perspective on what was a very significant factor to the start of the lesson. Incidentally, Mr B was visibly buoyed that one of the students wanted to be taught by him.

But, goodness me, what a response! He stiffened, he straightened. He assured me that he never came in cold to a school, that he knew all about the situation, and that I shouldn’t be put off by anything he did prior to the lesson. And if that was where it stopped, it would have been all right. Those comments, however, offended Mr B deeply; he clearly felt attacked in his professionalism. Down the track on a subsequent visit, I felt it necessary to assure Mr B that I was sure he was a very fine teacher, such was the apparent wound. I have reproduced the most offensive of these comments verbatim above.

The rest of the discussion was largely marked by Mr B making a comment and me trying to give some perspective on it, just as I had concerning the staid introduction. He commented on my use of crosses on the board for misbehaviour; I said I had sought to adopt Miss C’s system. He commented on me having my back to class when I wrote on the board; I agreed, and added that I was struggling with that during the lesson, but my board skills weren’t good enough to write legibly and also face the class. And so on. My comments weren’t combative; they were trying to help him understand my perspective so that we could discuss the real and not the perceived problems. They weren’t welcome, though. My previous life experience seemed to count for nothing with Mr B; I was expected to be a blank slate with no ideas or thoughts of my own.

This is not the first time someone has found my refusal to surrender independent judgement threatening. I don’t have a traditional “authority problem” – I am happy to do what I am told. I just won’t think what I’m told, and this can be mistaken for being “untouchable”. I can also appear very forceful at times, and this is something that I both blame myself for and constantly endeavour to work on. Having said that, my understanding of the role of a supervisor is that it involves going the extra mile to help those in your care to process difficult emotions should they arise.

Recognising that I had offended him, I ended our time by seeking to encourage him to not perceive my “debating the toss” as an indication that I wasn’t listening to what he said. I assured him that I listened very carefully to everything he said, and that I valued it. He responded with a story of student who had come up to him years later and said, “you thought I didn’t listen but I did”. It seemed to me this might be some kind of resolution.

The Weekend After Week Two: Ah-ha!

Despite the lack of support from Mr B, I was seriously engaged with the issues of negativity he raised. That weekend I realised that classroom management was not a satisfactory goal to have, and that it had unfortunate repercussions. I began to see that classroom management is intrinsically a negative goal. It is a goal to stop things, to not have things happen. I recognised that I needed a positive goal – such as teaching something!! This change in thinking was extremely significant, investing new meaning in familiar concepts. Tactical ignoring, for instance, became framed in an overall goal of teaching something (“I can ignore this and keep teaching”) and not just as a management technique (“I’ll ignore it and see if it stops”).

That weekend, I also realised that teaching Stage One is never going to be my strength. I had come into the course wanting to teach Stage Three, but reading the literature on male primary school teachers had encouraged me to broaden my thinking. It was actually quite a source of relief to recognise that in taking a Year Two class, I had been trying to do something that will probably never come particularly naturally to me. These realisations always give you a better sense of who you are.

4: Weeks Three and Four

The Third Week

The third week was marked by its silence. I literally got no feedback – not even a word – until the Wednesday, when Miss C said “I’ve got nothing to say – the lessons are fine.” The rest of the week went without incident. The lessons were all quite OK, but I wasn’t enjoying myself. I was exhausted and was just seeing the prac out, buoyed by the new perspective that Stage One falls into the “not really me” basket.

Week four: The Home Stretch

Week four was always going to be a less intensive week. Year Two had a full-day excursion planned for the Tuesday, and the school Open Day was going to wipe out the Thursday. I’d also been told that Friday, being the last day of prac, would not be a major teaching day. All in all, the week’s teaching load was looking extremely light, especially given Miss C had only scheduled two half-hour lessons for the Monday to allow more time to practice dancing for Open Day.

The Third Supervisory Visit: Monday, Week 4

Mr B was to visit for the first of my two lessons on the Monday. This was to be his final visit, and it was generally understood by cooperating teachers and the other students to be a mere formality, given the track record of the previous three weeks. I had never received a tick in the “Experiencing Difficulties” column; one or two had been on the border, but I had turned these around. I knew it hadn’t been a great prac and I was glad it was almost over, looking forward to greener pastures with older kids next time around. After all, it was only my first prac. I had also decided to make an especial effort to be gracious to Mr B after our previous encounter, in an attempt to end on a good note. I could tell as soon as I saw him, however, that his attitude to me was fairly contemptuous. I found out later from Miss C that he had conveyed to her on his arrival how offended he had been by me during the previous visit.

The lesson was on spelling and phonemic awareness once again, which was fairly dull material to work with. It involved some whole class work followed by students individually completing the second side of the sheet that had been done for the previous spelling lesson. The class in general were still fairly hyper, in light of the excursion and Open Day coming up that week, and Alex was even more so. Unbeknownst to anyone, Alex had not taken his ADD pill for about a week, wandering around the school instead of going to the office to get it each day. This was discovered on the following day’s excursion when he was caught washing his pill down the sink; Alex then confessed to what had been happening.

During the whole class portion of the spelling lesson, Alex was particularly disruptive. He wouldn’t sit still and he was mucking around with one student who was already on a behaviour contract, and another who was leaving the school on the Friday to go and live with his parents in NZ after not seeing them for 9 months. I ignored and nurtured Alex for about 10 minutes and then, as a calculated decision, I yelled, “No!” it was fairly loud, and a tactic not dissimilar to that used by Miss C at times. Beyond the one loud word, there was not much else unusual about the encounter. The individual work section of the lesson was fairly standard. I spent most of my time trying to help two of the slowest and least able students to make some progress. Overall, the pace of the lesson was a little slow, it wasn’t very inspiring, but it was passable under the circumstances.

Mr B’s opening gambit in the assessment was two pronged: “Do you feel comfortable in a classroom?” and “Do you really want to be a teacher?” I couldn’t believe it – he was almost trying to talk me out of it! He said that yelling “No!” was unprofessional, that I should be able to manage the class by being positive, that he was not happy to approve my progression in the course as things stood, and that I should have to improve to pass.

I was speechless. He was clearly on my case. I had made the mistake of taking my lesson plans out of my bag the previous Friday because they were quite bulky to carry. I had them on every day of prac until then, including both of his other visits, but he had run out of time to see them. That I had forgotten to put them back into my bag was indication of my utter lack of professionalism, and my repeated and sincere apologies made no difference. He interpreted the length of time I spent with a few students – especially the two slower boys – as indicative of a callous indifference to the others, extrapolated to students in general. When I gave him an

impassioned insight into what really going on, about where each of the students were up to in their learning, I could see the light reluctantly dawning on the fact that maybe I wasn't as demonic as he had come to believe.

Nevertheless, Mr B informed me that he had arranged things with Miss C. I was to teach on Wednesday. If she was happy to approve me, he would too. Otherwise he would come and see me on the Friday himself. He also stressed the great inconvenience of having to drop by the school on the Friday to see my lesson plans anyway; I suggested less inconvenient alternatives but he declined. There was not the slightest hint of compassion, and I felt ambushed.

Once again, it is interesting to recognise the partial validity of Mr B's comment. I wasn't particularly comfortable in that classroom, and definitely not with Mr B there. We could have talked extensively about this and it would have been incredibly helpful to do so. It's a shame, then, that Mr B's response was to try and talk me out of being a teacher. If nothing else, the fact that I have a family of three others dependent on me would suggest a gentler approach.

It was at this point that I got insomnia and it lasted until the end of prac.

Wednesday: The big test

After being a zombie on the excursion, and with rock-bottom self-efficacy, I fronted up on Wednesday to teach from the start of the day until recess. I gave it my best shot. I waited anxiously for Miss C's verdict at recess. She didn't say anything, so I asked. It was then I was told that she had spoken to Mr B the afternoon before. They had decided that two hours of teaching was not enough to "turn it around" and my prac had been extended for three days regardless of how I performed. Furthermore, Mr B would watch me teach on Friday to gauge whether I should pass.

I was devastated – like a 100 metre runner who runs the full course and wins, only to find that they had a false start. For one thing, it would have been nice if someone had thought to tell me. I was incensed by the injustice of the situation, and despairing due to the sense that I had been set an impossible task. How could I manage 2C by only being positive?

My initial response was to refuse to do it. I would take the "fail". I didn't think I could do any better, given the expectations and my exhaustion. This was a crucially good step for me to take psychologically. It put me back in control, so when I decided to do the extra three days, it was because I had decided to do so and not because someone was making me.

The Fourth Supervisory Visit

When Mr B first saw me on the Friday, he rolled his eyes. There isn't much point recounting the details. Mr B was happy enough with what he saw when I taught, and I was very acquiescent. When I tentatively mentioned I had insomnia and had been waking at 5am each morning, Mr B told me he always woke at 4am and that he also lost sleep over students. He was still a bit touchy – when I said something he had said was "helpful", Mr B seemed to interpret this to mean that I thought everything else wasn't – but overall things were better. Mr B told me that he was glad to see me being more reflective than I was earlier in the prac. Actually, what I was doing was agreeing with him more. It's ironic that my two colleagues were seen to be reflective in their thinking and I was not, given that they decided much earlier on than I that to suspend the verbalisation of independent thought was the best policy.

Week Five: A Good Ending

The last three days were probably my best teaching of the prac and actually I'm quite glad I did them, despite the circumstances. I had the chance to teach a mini-unit, I did some hands-on learning and I was more visual in my approach than previously. My wife and the kids went away for that time which also helped a lot. The amount of preparation I did was astronomical – enough to make me never to want to be a teacher – but lessons flowed much more as a result. A couple of the difficult kids were also away which made the class a comparative dream. Most significant was the outworking of a signal instigated in week four that I used to get kids to put their pens down and cross their arms. We had drilled this, and it was fantastic because I could praise those who did it (and their speed) rather than having to focus on those who didn't.

The Report & Departure

I passed, and so I was happy. There were a couple of sentences I could have done without, however. Not agreeing with everything that was said to me earned:

“While Mr Potten has been willing to evaluate and discuss each lesson, he has not always responded positively to the feedback provided”.

Offending my colleague’s cooperating teacher with my “wrong outcome” comment, the whole business with Mr B, and yelling “No!” was summarised as:

“He needs to develop a greater awareness of the professional role required in team teaching situations with other staff members. Some concern has been expressed in his dealing with behaviour management issues and the use of staff and school resources”.

The latter comment made me think I had used too much paper. Miss C assured me, however, that this wasn’t the case, and that teachers are appropriately referred to as “school resources”, I’m still a little dubious.

The most telling comment of all was from the cooperating teacher I offended with my “wrong outcome” comment. When I found out in week five that she had been so offended, I went and unequivocally apologised to her. Her comment, which sums it all up in my opinion, was that I “need to learn my place”.

5: Post Mortem

Returning to Uni

It was good to get back to uni and to reflect on my experiences. I had settled on the perspective that I had reaped what I had sown – that my lack of grace to Mr B had rebounded on me, albeit in intensified form.

I had been instructed by Mr B to ring the M.Teach primary coordinator at the conclusion of the prac. I was expecting more of the same, so it was nice to have her express the opinion that many of the part-time supervisors were on the “old-school” mindset that supervision involved telling students what they had done wrong, rather than teasing out and working with the prac teacher’s own subjective perspective. This was helpful. Being heard and validated in my Study 1 group was also therapeutic.

Most illuminating, however, was to hear of other students who had Mr B as a supervisor. Two students at other schools who passed their pracs were told by Mr B that he would have failed them if he was their cooperating teacher. One of these students had just become a father about a month before prac. The other student described Mr B as a “bully”, and weeks after prac she was still “rattled” by the experience. Another M.Teach student was reportedly encouraged to throw in her course by Mr B on prac.

Fortunately for them, their cooperating teachers were not as pliable as mine. In my case, I experienced a curious coalition of forces. I believe both Mr B and Miss C had elements of what British psychiatrist Jack Dominion calls the “authoritarian personality”, descriptive of someone who tends to be “more secure when he has his niche within a hierarchy, is submissive and respectful to those above him, and contemptuous and dictatorial to those below” (Dominion, J. 1976, p. 11). Mr B acted to quell my “subversion” of the institutional order, and Miss C bowed to his head. Miss C told me during my difficulties that she was happy to pass me, and that she would pass me if Mr B was happy too. The question mark over me came from Mr B, and Miss C deferred to him.

I also believe I experienced the phenomenon outlined by Jim Allan in his work on male primary teachers:

...men experienced conflict with veteran and nominally “successful” women teachers, who had accepted and internalised the institutional definition of teaching – in fact deskilled, rationalized, intensified – as “professional” behaviour. To such women, conservative of the institutional status quo, men’s resistance was “unprofessional” and open to censure. (Allan, 1997, p. 21).

This was the case with the other cooperating teacher who I offended with my “wrong outcome” comment. Allan also discusses the power relationship between male principals and male teachers, with senior males perceiving the independent judgement of junior males as a threat. I believe an analogous interaction occurred between Mr B and myself.

Even so, there is no doubt that I created my own problems on prac to some degree. I certainly should have held my tongue with the other cooperating teacher regarding her disciplining of Alex. That was clearly a mistake, although I think her processing of it made it a lot worse than it might have been. My efforts to engage with Mr B also proved a more hazardous option than just agreeing with him. There would have been a cost in blind agreement, of course – the supervisory sessions would have been a waste of time, never getting beyond the surface of things. At its most stark, the trade off was between honesty and bloodshed on one hand, and deference and meaninglessness on the other. I chose the former and reaped the consequences, but I believe that Mr B established the rules of the game and not me. My “mistake” with Mr B – and I was so broken by the end that I did acquiesce, telling him several times that I had been “foolish” – my “mistake” was to choose honesty in a system only set up for deference. I need to go away now and work out if it really was a mistake.

References

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Dominion, J. (1976). Authority. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, p. 11