

Learning from Jennifer

“DEAR MS. MOORE!!!

COULD YOU **PLEASE** REMOVE JENNIFER FROM AUSTRALIA!!
THIS IS **NOT WORKING OUT!!!**

I found that note in the plastic in-box on my desk at the end of a day when I was teaching a “looped” 4th / 5th grade class. My students sat in table groups of four. Each table was marked with a continent-shaped sign that announced it as Antarctica, North or South America, Africa, Europe, Asia, or Australia. The note in my box that day indicated that the continent “down under” was having problems.

The practice of class meetings was central to the functioning of our class, and the students had all experienced the power of group problem solving.¹ Each meeting started with five minutes of compliments – and the culture of the class had become one of mutual respect and cooperation. It was typical for students to leave notes in my box about problems with which they needed help. But this note was unusual – and so was Jennifer. She’s one of the students I will always remember because I learned so much from her.

Looking back at that year I realize that Jennifer’s presence in that class taught us all important lessons about life and relationships. She seemed to be the focus of far more than her share of class meeting time. Each time, however, I believe each one of us came out learning more than if the time had been spent in other ways. Jennifer could be terribly mean – and she was a child who had great difficulty working with other children. The solutions that we came up with in class meetings were always temporary – and soon another problem would erupt with her at the center.

¹ Nelson, Jane. *Positive Discipline in the Classroom*. New York: Random House, 1987.

CLASS MEETINGS

I remember two meetings that were pivotal in terms of how Jennifer related to others in the class. In one she took the first step toward being honest about her feelings. In the second she learned that the positive consequences of letting others have their way now and then might outweigh the negative consequences of always needing to prove herself to be right.

On the day that Jennifer opened herself, the class had bonded to a degree that I had never thought possible with 32 4th and 5th graders. They gave compliments freely both during class meetings and throughout the day. They were *nice* to each other. They had formed a community and were able to express their frustrations with one another and work through them. In this particular class meeting, when it was Jennifer's turn to give her side of the story, we all got an earful. This pretty little girl, with blond curls that she could never seem to keep under control, broke into tears and could not speak.

I wasn't quite sure what to do at first. But before I could do a thing, one of the boys sitting across the circle turned around and picked up the Kleenex box on my desk and took it to her. No one said a thing. It took just a moment for her to pull herself together. Then she told her story.

She had come to our school half way through Kindergarten. She said she had always liked her hair because it was so fluffy and blond and fun. But the "popular" girls in her class had straight heavy black hair – and immediately noticed how "strange" hers looked to them. The children in that class knew very few facts about AIDS at that time – but enough of them had heard just enough to use that as a weapon against Jennifer. They spread the rumor that the reason her hair was that way was because she had AIDS. None of the children bothered to check it out, of course, and I doubt that any adults were aware of what was going on or why the children were shunning Jennifer. But the shunning didn't stop in Kindergarten – and Jennifer's perception of the situation was that kids at the school had always hated her because of that rumor.

By the time her story was out – several other kids in the class were passing the Kleenex box to each other. The outpouring of love and concern – and genuine sorrow for what Jessica had been through was one of those moments a teacher will never forget.

I would like to say that day was a miracle and that there were never any more complaints about Jennifer. But life just doesn't work that way, does it?

The next pivotal meeting, however, might never have happened if the emotional clearing had not taken place when Jennifer told her story. The complaint about Jennifer came from a member of her “project team.”

PROJECT TEAMS

Earlier that year I had begun to use the term “Project Teams” – borrowed from the corporate world – rather than “cooperative groups” when the class divided into small groups for specific projects. Since a project team in the real world might work together for many years, the term provided an authentic focus for working out problems that seem to surface when students work in groups. I could explain that companies expect people to be able to work effectively in groups, regardless of how they might personally feel about an individual. Students learn that developing their Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Intelligences ² - and thereby raising their own EQ ³ may be even more important than high IQ and academic skills in life-long career satisfaction.

One of Jennifer's teammates asked to be on the agenda for a Class Meeting because she did not feel she could work with Jennifer on the same “Project Team” for our geometry simulation called “Polyhedraville.” As both girls explained their positions, it was obvious to all that they were both *very* strong, talented, and creative. Both had wonderful ideas. And *both* needed to learn to compromise and work with others. This was not just Jennifer's problem.

² Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books: A Division of Harper Collins. 1983.

³ Goleman, Daniel. *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Dell. 1998

Since I had explained to the class how some project teams are working on goals set 20 to 30 years in the future, I was able to “pretend” that it was the year 2025 and each of the girls were in their 30’s. I told them that they were each a department head and each made a “six-figure salary.” They each had a family to support and loved their job. I was the CEO of the corporation and had hired them to complete a project within a given timeframe. I liked them both and believed they could each do the work. However, I didn’t know anything about the personal problem they were having – *and I didn’t care*. I knew of another person who I could easily slip into one of their jobs if they couldn’t work out their own problem. I would not tell them which would be replaced. Having changed the context of their problem, I told them that I would like them to continue working on building their team’s “Polyhedrville” – and report back to me at the next class meeting.

I gave them only one day to decide if they could finish their Polyhedrville City. I don’t honestly know what I would have done if they decided they couldn’t work together! However, after having been a member of this group for almost eight months – and knowing half of them for almost two school years – I felt sure that both girls would both remain on my imaginary “payroll.”

I was gratified, but not surprised, when they came back the next day with a creative solution to their problem. We all celebrated their success. While they did not become “best friends” that year, and Jennifer moved to another state at the end of the year, I know that we all learned important lessons about how to relate to others. The students in that class came to appreciate Jennifer’s unique talents and to respect her as an individual. They learned something about *why* she could be so mean at times – and some of them were able to help her develop better impulse control. As a teacher I came to a deeper understanding of the potential in children to creatively solve interpersonal problems. I learned the importance of structuring contexts that encourage and promote active listening and creative problem solving. I often think of Jennifer when a “teachable moment” comes along and I’m able to help a child reflect upon and learn from an otherwise “negative” experience.

“We do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience.”

John Dewey