IN MY VIEW

Hey, Ms. A!

One Student Teacher's Success Story

by Jean C. Murphy

"Hey, Ms. A," call out several third-grade students as they smile and wave at their former student teacher. As they reconnect with her, they greet her cheerfully and enthusiastically, eager to report progress they've made in subject areas she had taught them.

This is not the same group of students Ms. A met eight weeks earlier at the start of her student teaching assignment. They were disrespectful, uncooperative, and often suspended from school for unruly behaviors. This success story is about how Ms. A's commitment to working with an undisciplined class of third graders enabled her to establish effective management strategies amidst challenging circumstances.

Ready to **Student Teach**

During the first few weeks of student teaching, anxiety and stress often arise. They usually do so as a result of the student teacher's fear of the unknown and his or her desire to demonstrate high levels of teacher professionalism and effectiveness from the outset. For many, suggested Machado and Meyer-Botnarescue (2001), fear and anxiety can cause the student teacher to feel uncomfortable about implementing methodologies and strategies already learned and practiced prior to the beginning of student teaching.

While this theory applies to many student teachers, it did not to Ms. A. After much course instruction, numerous classroom observations, many opportunities to demonstrate competency in lesson planning, and passing all state examinations, as well as prior work experiences in early childhood classrooms, she felt relaxed, comfortable, competent, sure about her professional skills and knowledge base, and ready to get started.

The time had come to student teach. She did not begin this challenge with any known fears or anxieties. The young Ms. A met it head on, with a high degree of excitement and enthusiasm. She was confident about her abilities and looked forward to completing this final benchmark of the university's teacher education program.

Eager to Make a **Difference**

For her student teaching, she eagerly accepted placement in an elementary school in a low-income community located on the southeast side of Chicago. She took the assignment with full knowledge that it was fraught with challenges: 94 percent of the students were from low-income families; and only 23 percent of third-graders read at grade level.

This demographic information signaled a warning that these students were likely to experience school readiness problems in the primary grades. Research by Allen and Sethi (2004) indicated that children from low-income families are less prepared for formal school and that school readiness is compromised; they are at great risk of school failure and eventually dropping out of school. Torgesen's (2004) research yielded similar findings: children from lower socioeconomic status enter school with significant phonological weaknesses (i.e., weaker vocabularies, less experience with complicated syntax, and less general background and knowledge).

Ms. A was undaunted by these odds. This school is where she wanted to be. She had made a conscious decision to be placed in this community. These students,

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like herself, were African American. She wanted to teach them, to make a difference. She was like the teachers in Foster's (1997, xi) research—teachers who were "committed to African-American children . . . to believing in their unlimited potential, to working hard to provide quality education despite difficult circumstances." She looked forward to the challenge.

> "She was assigned to one of the school's most difficult classes. A high percentage of the students were repeating third grade, and many had multiple suspensions for unruly and uncooperative behaviors."

Room 224

On her very first day, Ms. A was greeted by the school principal and immediately warned that Room 224 was a tough assignment. As she was being led to her classroom, the principal shared that she was assigned to one of the school's most difficult classes. A high percentage of the students were repeating third grade, and many had multiple suspensions for unruly and uncooperative behaviors. Initially taken aback by the principal's frankness, she made the quick decision to accept the placement in spite of what she was being told; she would see for herself.

The veteran teacher assigned to Room 224 confirmed the principal's description of this classroom. Yes, students were unruly. Yes, students had frequent suspensions. And, yes, a significant number of students were repeating the third grade. Nonetheless, she continued to try to teach. Frustrated from years of working with a population of disorderly and low-achieving children, the veteran admitted to Ms. A that she had no particular classroom management plan, no techniques to share with her, no words of wisdom. In fact, she hoped to learn from her. She hoped that Ms. A would bring new and fresh ideas. While she had attempted a number of strategies over the years, none had truly worked. She had concluded that children were truly undisciplined and that she could do little about it. There was no point, she felt. She warned Ms. A, further, that the students did not respect authority, so instruction was going to be difficult at best. However, she was welcome to give it a try.

In this psychologically negative and unsupportive environment, the dedicated Ms. A began her student teaching experiences. In this compromised learning environment, she launched her teaching career. Only then did the anxieties and fears common to student teachers arise. If the principal and teacher were giving her clear messages and warnings about the challenges of this classroom, what was she to do? What could she do? Apprehension and fear were creeping in where none had been before.

Ms. A quickly discovered that the students in Room 224 were, in fact, incorrigible! They had no respect for their teacher, their peers, rules, or her. As Ms. A spent her first week observing pedagogical practices, classroom routines, and procedures, she was able to confirm all that she had been told by the principal and teacher. The students were noisy, disrespectful, and off-task 85 percent of the time. She found the students relentless in their disrespect of authority, oftentimes fighting off and on throughout instructional periods. They ignored repeated reminders to cooperate, listen, and pay attention. The few students with cooperative behaviors, who were interested in learning, had their instruction repeatedly interrupted by the majority whose behaviors negatively influenced the learning atmosphere.

The Decision **to Remain**

She was discouraged, but not intimidated nor threatened. Ms. A assessed the situation and determined that this experience was going to be difficult and challenging, but not insurmountable. Though she was aware that she had the right to request a change of assignment during the start of her student teaching, she decided to stay the course. Several key factors influenced her decision to remain: peer support gained through sharing her dilemma during a weekly seminar at the university; personal connections made with the students during the first week—she liked the children; and a sense of higher calling—a deep commitment to African-American children, to their learning, and to their eventual school success.

This commitment was rooted in her personal values—the importance of education and a sense of com-

munity—values deeply entrenched within the African-American community (Hill 1972). These same values are consistent with remarks made by veteran teacher Mabel Bettie Moss (in Foster 1997, 168):

> *I had the sense that I was a part of a long tradition with a definite mission of teaching black children. The professors preached the message that we had a responsibility to black children. . . . They really stressed the fact that somebody had helped us get where we were . . . that we had a responsibility to give something back to the community, to make a contribution to the black community. . . . They also taught us that black people should support each other and that for the sake of the community we were bound to be the best at whatever we chose to do.*

Ms. A felt that to change her placement assignment would be giving up on the children—which she considered would be a form of desertion. She couldn't do that. Instead, though the odds were against her, she was motivated to keep the needs of the children in focus, to stick with the children, and to have a successful student teaching experience. And so she did!

Starting with **a Plan**

Wong and Wong (2005) advocated that the first days are critical. Ms. A had been exposed to this philosophy during a student teaching seminar. With her cooperating teacher's permission, she decided to incorporate some of the Wongs' key principles: begin with a classroom management plan and procedures that create consistency; design lessons for student mastery; and have positive expectations for student success.

These principles guided and influenced Ms. A's instructional and management techniques. For example, with the urgings of her peer student teachers and the support of her campus-based supervisor, she introduced a set of simple rules with consequences that she taught and reinforced. For cooperative behaviors, students received a variety of rewards, such as smiles, stickers, a popcorn party, verbal recognition, and assorted prizes (purchased with her own limited funds) from a treasure chest.

Several other interventions also contributed to her success. She introduced a management chart with behavioral expectations. While several revisions had to be made, ultimately the chart worked and students began to settle down and become increasingly attentive to instruction. Moreover, she was as relentless in her expectations that the students would cooperate as the students had been with their disruptive behaviors. Arriving each day with a positive attitude, starting right in with the work, keeping the flow of instruction going, notwithstanding attempts by some students to disrupt, sent a clear and definitive message that she expected all students to remain focused on work, to behave, and to cooperate.

Students also were able to relate easily to her. Her youthful, stylish dress and hairstyles were helpful for bridging communication with students. Her ability to speak their language, laugh, and relate to their day-to-day circumstances also helped to endear her to them.

Differentiating **Instruction**

To support various learning levels and individual needs, Ms. A introduced forms of differentiated instruction. Small groups and individualized instruction were incorporated into the lesson design to promote student achievement. Helping her with this initiative were students from a local college, who were assigned to the school as literacy volunteers. Previously, the cooperating teacher delegated these volunteers only routine tasks, such as escorting students to the bathroom and cutting out letters and numbers. Ms. A took advantage of their professional and pedagogical skills, and assigned them instead to small group and individual instruction.

"Did you go over silent letters with them?" she asked one of the male volunteers as he returned a small group of three, previously unruly, boys to the classroom. She even assigned responsibilities to the classroom teacher. This technique of creating small learning communities had the net effect of creating a more manageable classroom, reducing acting out behaviors, and improving learning outcomes. These positive outcomes did not happen magically or overnight; rather, they were achieved through her persistence, trial and error, and a commitment to making a difference.

Lesson **Mastery**

Lesson mastery is another element of effective teaching defined by Wong and Wong (2005). Ms. A performed this well. Every one of her lesson plans was conceived, written, and delivered well. She followed benchmarks established by Illinois State Standards and the school's adopted curriculum. As much as possible, she kept students on task with every subject area, knowing that staying on task often results in higher achievement outcomes.

Machado and Meyer-Botnarescue's research (2001) demonstrated that time spent on task, focusing on

learning activities, improves learning outcomes. Time on task was Ms. A's central focus: get the students to attend to the lesson; communicate clear expectations; incorporate consistent management strategies; and be prepared daily with lesson plans designed for mastery.

The Payoff

At the end of her eight-week session, Ms. A had made a significant impact on the learning behaviors of the students in Room 224. She was able to teach with fewer interruptions, and time on task rose to approximately 90 percent of class time. Most of the unruly, disrespectful students were increasingly focused, following through on tasks and completing their assignments.

Time spent on management-related issues paid off, and the students liked the management plan, the games they played, and the prizes won. During her final day of student teaching in Room 224, students made cards wishing her well, with sentiments such as, "You are a great teacher. We learned a lot. We had fun. We're sorry to see you go . . . will you come see us again? We'll miss you!" Ms. A explained to the students that she would be moving to another classroom, but that she would remain in the building. When she gave them the number of the new room, the students were happy that Ms. A would not be leaving their school.

The second half of Ms. A's student teaching took place in the same school, in Room 112 with preschool-age children. Yet, third-grade students from Room 224 often checked to be sure that she was still there. On their way to the lunchroom, office, or gym, her former students stopped by to greet her with a "Hey, Ms. A."

Keys to Success

Several key factors facilitated Ms. A's ability to bring the class into a more manageable state within her eight-week assignment. These included upholding her own heritage in committing to working with African-American students, establishing a clear set of rules with consequences, using a reward system for cooperative behaviors, maintaining time on task, connecting with individual students, and incorporating student interests into instruction. The interplay of these factors appears to have contributed to a successful student teaching experience in Room 224.

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