

The Supervisor

ANNE MEEK

Are Teachers Risk Takers?

I should have suspected something when I met the custodian leaving Miss X's room with his mop and bucket. It was 8:30; kindergartners were swirling around the room like leaves stirred by a breeze. Earlier, at 7:45, Miss X had filled me in on what to expect: a cooking activity was planned, and Abel, who might have been sexually abused and was certainly neglected, had been behaving unpredictably. She incidentally thanked me for my help in purchasing a new rug for her classroom from capital outlay funds.

Now, ignoring the ominous mop and bucket, I settled down at a low table with my NCR forms. Miss X came over to explain that David had rushed into the room, then into the coatroom, as usual. Then, quite suddenly, he had wet all over himself, his clothes, and the floor. But Mr. Mac had come right away, and all was now in order. Over the children's heads we nodded knowingly—what a way to begin the day you are being evaluated.

She gathered the children around her on the rug, sat down in the rocking chair, and began the lesson on rhyming words. With all sparkling eyes turned to her, she held up pictures and asked each child to give a rhyming word for the picture: house-mouse, goat-boat, and so on.

Everything was proceeding according to plan until Alicia's turn. Miss X held up a picture of a duck. Alicia responded with a world-famous Anglo-Saxon term. Miss X did not blink. She said, "That is not a word we use in school. I'm going to let you try again." She held up the duck again. Alicia, not understanding her teacher's objection, responded in exactly the same way. Calmly, Miss X said, "I'm going to put that picture away and let you try another." This tactic got her and Alicia both over the difficulty. I chuckled to myself about how often this very word comes out in this very situation, even if it is not a school word.

The lesson went on. Miss X came to an activity where the students were to illustrate a pair of rhyming words. She

handed out sheets of art paper, each designed individually. She directed the group to take their places at the tables.

Abel sat down at the table with me. I smiled at him. He would not smile. He looked at his paper. He looked at Miss X. He looked at his paper again. Then he burst into tears.

Miss X promptly squatted down, put her arm around him, and asked, "What's the matter, Abel?" She reminded him of the directions, speaking in a calm voice, smiling gently. He sniffed and set to work. Everyone else was coloring busily; Miss X moved from child to child, commenting on their work in her low, musical voice.

Later, back on the rug, with everyone in a circle again, Miss X held up *Green Eggs and Ham*. She told the students to listen for the rhyming words. The children's faces were bright and eager. I sat back to savor SamIAm's stubbornness.

When she concluded the story, she ceremoniously closed the book and laid it aside. Putting her palms together carefully, she rocked a moment in the chair, looking slowly from one pair of eyes to another. "And now, boys and girls," she said in a measured cadence, "we ... are ... going ... to ... make ... green eggs!"

Their faces beamed. She explained that each child would break an egg into the bowl, and then they would make the eggs green, cook them, and eat them. They wiggled and squealed with delight. "But ... first ...," she said in the measured cadence, looking intently into their eyes, "you must be able to tell me two rhyming words and then you may break your egg." No problem! Each child rotated up to the big bowl, gave a pair of rhyming words, and broke an egg. Only one egg missed the bowl, and it landed on the cardboard spread for that purpose under the bowl. Quickly, it was all done. Miss X asked Brandy to set the bowl on the table.

Were her fingers still wet from the egg? Was the bowl heavier than she thought? All we know is that when she

got the bowl of eggs about 12 inches off the floor, Brandy lost her grip. Fifteen eggs, more or less, went onto the rug. I wished the earth would swallow me.

No doubt Miss X was wishing for a similar salvation. But on the surface, she was perfect. She did not berate Brandy. She dispatched helpers to get paper towels and Mr. Mac. The paper towels proved unequal to the task, and Mr. Mac was gone on an errand.

As the eggs seeped into the rough nap of the carpet, the children were immobilized in confusion. Miss X, knowing their paralysis would not last long, gave directions about what to do next, immediately reassigning them to activities at centers and tables, with the utmost calm.

Then she came over to me and explained that she could not chastise Brandy because as a child she had once been unjustly chastised for an accident. I assured her that I did not expect her to fuss at Brandy but would have forgiven her if she had. I went on to assure her that she had conducted herself in an exemplary manner. All this time, I was easing toward the door, smiling at her.

Wondering how to get out of this gracefully, I counted up the positives for the report. I marveled at this teacher's deft communication with her students, her sensitivity to their needs, and, most of all, at her aplomb. Is there a single education reformer anywhere who would attempt to direct 22 students in a cooking exercise, let alone use the activity to teach anything? And in front of a supervisor? Are teachers risk-takers?

On my next visit to that school, the other teachers told me that as soon as I had left the building on that risk-taking day, Miss X had permitted herself to have a nervous breakdown. But on the next Tuesday, she conducted a cooking exercise, as usual. □

Anne Meek is elementary supervisor, Knox County Schools, P.O. Box 2188, Knoxville, TN 37901.

Copyright © 1986 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.