BOBBY

What do you do about a child who . . . ?" is the most frequently heard question from teachers anxiously seeking more effective methods of working with individual children. Children's classroom behavior is often puzzling, exasperating, and exhausting, and acting-out behavior may drive teachers to the very limits of their endurance. Yet behavior is the way that most children send messages to others about how they feel.

If we adults could, perhaps, learn to read and interpret these behaviors more knowledgeably and with greater insight, we might have a better chance of understanding what the child is "telling" us behaviorally and, consequently, choose better and more effective ways of helping. Although not all children's problems are fixable—that is, within the sphere of influence of teachers and schools—there are many more children who might be helped if we could learn to free ourselves from facile judgments and apply greater wisdom in reading and interpreting behavior.

The cases in this chapter deal with aspects of pupil behavior that range across a wide variety of contemporary classroom "problems." The cases should challenge thinking about behavior, promote understanding about data gathering and hypothesis generating, and, in general, provide for deeper awareness of classroom behavior and effective treatment.

Each case is followed by a list of questions, with additional questions for those with classroom teaching experience denoted by a dagger.

"I NEED YOU TO TELL ME WHAT TO DO!"

When I saw his name on the class list, I felt a cold hand reach into my solar plexus and squeeze. "No," I cried to nobody. "Not Bobby Miller. Not Bobby Miller."

It wasn't that he was the worst kid in the school. There were probably others that I hadn't heard about who were his match in at least some ways. But I had been hearing about Bobby since he was a first grader. Even at the tender age of 6, he was already head and shoulders taller than the other kids. Taller and stronger did not necessarily lead to bullying, but in Bobby's case, he managed to use his physical attributes most effectively to intimidate and push other kids around. He wore physical aggressiveness like a badge of honor. If he was going to be bigger than all the other kids, then why not make the most of it? That was not quite the end of the story about Bobby Miller, either. I had heard all of it in the staff room over the years:

"His work habits are poor."
"He's got an attitude!"
"He doesn't apply himself."
"I have to be after him constantly to get to his work."
"He wanders around the room and disturbs the rest of the class."
"He likes to push other children around."
"His work isn't as good as it should be."
"He just isn't trying!"
Coming into the sixth grade, Bobby was reaching for 5' 8," and he had me by a good two inches. "Lucky I'm tall," I grimaced. What if I had been short, like my friend Lee Roberts who taught the sixth grade class across the hall? A grim-reaper laugh came from the back of my throat, and I wondered if I pulled Bobby just because I was a tall teacher? Lots of luck, Maggie.

But why wouldn't I find Bobby Miller on my class list? I was a senior teacher on the Winslow School staff, with 11 good years of teaching behind me. I was considered a good teacher—no, that's being too modest. I was a very good teacher, and I knew that about myself, too. I was self confident, tough-minded, and had a graduate degree. Surely, I'd be able to handle Bobby Miller. Maybe I could even do something good for him! So why the knot in the pit of my stomach? Oh well, nobody's perfect.

I used the last days of the summer holiday to do some housecleaning in my classroom, putting up the plants, hanging a few of my favorite posters—Picasso's Gertrude Stein, Kathy Kollwitz's Mother and Child, Van Gogh's Sunflowers, Monet's Water Lilies to bring a little life and color to the dull beige walls. In my interminable war with the custodian, I reshaped his neatly arranged rows of desks and chairs into groups of four, set up the library corner with about 150 titles borrowed from an enthusiastic school librarian, and installed a scrap of tattered carpet for the floor, a few floor cushions, and one ratty easy chair, a remnant from a Salvation Army excavation sale. I was grimy, hot, and tired when I finished moving furniture around, and I thought twice about going down to the office to check Bobby's cumulative records before I left for home. Yeah, I know, this could cause me to prejudge him and maybe it wasn't such a hot idea. But from all that I already knew, hadn't I already prejudged him? Wasn't the verdict already in on Bobby Miller? Maybe I could find a trace of something positive? Now that would be something!

The general office was quiet, with that ghostly silence that precedes the Sturm und Drang of the first days of school. Alice, the school secretary, and I exchanged pleasantries about the summer holidays, and then I asked her for Bobby Miller's file. She looked at me, her eyes kind and knowing. "So it's your turn," she said affectionately. I shrugged and bit the bottom of my lip. Alice pulled a slim red folder from the filing cabinet and handed it to me over the counter. I lifted my distance glasses to the top of my head so that I could read the fine print. Not much there for six years of cumulative work. I was particularly anxious to see his most recent records and shuffled the papers until I came to the fifth-grade report:

"He's a behavioral disturbance in class. He is very aggressive, wanders around the room, does not come to class prepared. He is capable of doing his work, but procrastinates and then is last to finish. He doesn't seem to be able to stay put for long."

I compared the fifth-grade teacher's account with that of the first-grade teacher. It didn't take a graduate degree to see that nothing of consequence had changed in five years of school. Bobby's behavior had been the same in fifth grade as it was in first grade. So much for school learning. I left the office and headed out to the parking lot, determined to put all thoughts of school behind me and finish off the summer holiday with a restful Labor Day weekend. Come Tuesday, I'd be ready for Bobby.

With 11 years of teaching in my pocket, you'd think I'd no longer have any butterflies the night before the beginning of a new school year. Wrong! Visions of children danced in my head, with Bobby dead center, all night long. At 5 A.M., I decided to call it quits and make some coffee. I was already beginning to formulate a game plan for Bobby but would need to gather more observational data of my own before I could safely identify teaching strategies that might work
with him. As competent as his previous teachers were to make those behavioral assessments that appeared on his records, I preferred to make my own observations and evaluations.

He shuffled into the room, all 5'8" of him, sweaty and puffing from playing in the schoolyard—kids making the most of those last few moments of totally free time, the very last bits of the summer rapidly passing into history. He looked me right in the eye, and I saw a sweet, shy smile come to his lips. I returned his smile and his eyes brightened. I thought of Joey, in my last year's class, who had written in his journal, "A good teacher must have love for all the children, even he bad ones." The chill in my heart melted. I promised myself that I'd find a way to work with Bobby, to appreciate him, perhaps even to love him. This, after all, was teaching.

Four weeks into the term, I was finding it hard to keep that promise. I kept a close watch as well as careful anecdotal records that I hoped would allow me to develop a thoughtful, informed, working hypothesis of his behavior that would, in turn, lead to informed, effective teaching interventions. What were his special needs? Why had his behavior continued in such an aggressive pattern? Why all the roaming around, and the inability to stay with a task? I knew I could find the answer to these questions in his behavior, if I only knew how to look. I kept watching and keeping notes, while his behavior continued to drive me crazy.

He seemed to be unable to function without close supervision and structuring, unable to stick to a job and finish it on his own, unable to make choices or think things out for himself. I saw, too, his racially prejudiced outbursts and his extreme dogmatism in presenting his opinions as truths. Routine physical tests revealed good physical health, with no evidence of visual, auditory, or motor impairment. Checking back on his cumulative record, I found that in the third grade, he had scored 114 on a group IQ test. Whew!

By the first week of October, I felt I had enough evidence to generate a working hypothesis. I sat on the floor of my study, sipping coffee and sorting out scraps of anecdotal comments that I tried to put together, like pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle, into a picture of Bobby. If I could see the picture clearly, I would know what to do, how to help him.

The anecdotal data fell into two categories. In one group, the data pointed overwhelmingly to Bobby's inability to think things through, to his need for constant and close supervision and structuring. In the second group, the data revealed consistent and repeated acts of aggression. The pieces began to form a picture. Was Bobby showing signs of dependency behaviors—a child unable to think for himself? Was he operating out of an extreme "thinking deficit"? Was his frustration with his deficits in thinking causing him to act aggressively? Frustration = Aggression? I sat back on the pillow, chewed my thumbnail, and looked at the puzzle pieces again. They seemed to fit. There was no indication of physical causation, so that was out. There was no impaired intelligence, if you could believe the group IQ test score. So that was out, too. If he could be given a program that helped him think for himself, would his need to act out diminish? Would he be able to function more effectively on his own? Would he lose some of that extreme dogmatism that made him always certain, in circumstances where he needed to be thoughtful, reflective, and circumspect? The hypothesis pointed to a teaching plan: Bobby needed to learn to think for himself.

I hit the books that I thought would give me some good ideas and set about devising a program to provide Bobby with activities that would challenge thinking. I would see to it that his school work included more comparing, classifying, summarizing, hypothesizing, interpreting, observing—the higher-order tasks. I would also ensure that he had many more opportunities to choose, to make purposeful decisions and reflect on them. Smug and satisfied, like a
pedagogical Sherlock Holmes who had cracked the case, I smiled and took a long drink from the now-cold coffee.

It was not hard to follow through with the plan. The program I created for Bobby was similar to what I was attempting to do with the rest of the class: a plan for children to learn to think for themselves. But Bobby would get more concentrated doses. He, like the others in class, would make his own decisions about curriculum tasks. Like the others, he would have his own planbook, in which he would reflect on choices for certain subject areas. What choices would he make? How much time would he allow for reading? for writing? for word study? Worksheets and assignments emphasized higher-order operations and avoided activities that called for single, correct answers. How are the Navajos and the Pueblos alike? How are they different? What hypotheses can you come up with that might explain the racial tensions in South Africa? How can these data be classified? Like the others in class, Bobby was caught up in a well organized, rigorous program of increasingly challenging tasks that demanded his self-sufficient functioning.

And each time he came to me to ask "What should I do now, Miss Allen?" or "What am I supposed to do here?" I bit my tongue to keep from telling him what to do, instead turning the question back to him: "What do you think, Bobby?" I watched him turn from me, shrug his shoulders, walk back to his table, pick up his pencil, and study the wall. I knew my plan needed time to work, that Bobby would not learn to think for himself in one day or in one week. But in my heart, I wished I could, somehow, speed up the process.

It was getting close to Halloween, and the lovely autumn days were showing the early frost signals of cold weather to come. I came into class that morning, cheeks red and nose cold from the walk to school, feeling invigorated, ready to take on the world. The kids came in from the playground at 8:45, and I reminded them to get out their planbooks and think about how they would spend their language arts time, from 9:00 to 10:30. I reminded them, too, to schedule art for 10:45 to 12:00 that morning, since the art teacher was coming in to work with them on making Halloween masks. For language arts, the children could choose to read, or to write, or to design a project to share a book, or any combination of those or other language-related activities. The choice was theirs to make, but they had to have a thought-out reason for making that choice.

No sooner did the words leave my lips when Bobby rose to his feet, arms waving in the air, shouting: "I can't do this stuff! I need you to tell me what to do! I need you to tell me what book to read and how many pages to read. I need you to tell me what to write. I need you to do that for me. You're the teacher! It's your job to tell me what to do."

Shocked from the verbal assault, I took two steps backward and muttered to myself, "Boyoboyoboyoboy! What do I do now?"

Study Questions

1. What do you consider to be the significant issues in this case? Consider each, then decide which, in your view, is the key issue.

2. In this case, Maggie, the teacher, has gathered data about Bobby that suggest a relationship between his behavior and his inability to think for himself. What is your view of this hypothesis? What data inform your position?

3. Maggie used a student-centered, open-classroom approach to her teaching, in which many choices of consequence are left to students. Where do you stand on such a teaching
philosophy? How do you see such strategies as appropriate for Bobby? What data support your ideas?

4. Should Maggie have chosen an approach to instruction that is more traditional than the one she used? What, in your view, is a more traditional plan? What are the benefits of a more traditional plan? What are some weaknesses?

5. How, in your view, does a teacher assess individual students' learning needs? What skills do you suppose a teacher needs to do this?

6. How does a teacher determine which teaching methods and materials are most appropriate for an individual learner? How does the teacher assess the effectiveness of the selected strategies? Why, in your opinion, would this be important?

7. Based on the data in this case, what diagnosis would you make of Bobby Miller's behavior? What kind of teaching plan would you see as appropriate How does your diagnosis and teaching plan concur with/differ from Maggie’s?

8. What, in your view, explains Bobby's outburst? How should Maggie respond? How do your suggestions reflect the data in the case?

9. To what incident in your own teaching does this case relate? Discuss the incident with members of your group, describing what happened, what actions you took, and your reasons for choosing those actions. Discuss, too how the incident shaped your view of teaching and learning.