

CASE STUDY

Melissa Reid

Melissa Reid, a student teacher in the English Department at Littleton High School, sat in the empty classroom working over and over in her mind a story one of her students had just turned in to her. The story, full of vindictiveness and hatred toward a young man's "unfair, worthless, nobody of a student teacher," shook Melissa to her core. She had never read a student's story so mean-spirited. Her student teaching experience was turning into a nightmare.

Melissa was a 23-year-old senior at Metropolitan University majoring in English education. For as long as she could remember she had wanted to be a high school teacher, and during her last semester in college she was finally getting her chance in the classroom as a student teacher at Littleton High School. When she began, two months before, everything had gone well. Her cooperating teacher, Jane Maddox, had turned out to be someone to model—organized, creative, fair, intelligent, respected by her colleagues and students, and tolerant of and helpful to Melissa.

Melissa was responsible for student teaching in two tenth-grade American literature classes and three twelfth-grade composition courses taught by Jane Maddox. Jane had given Melissa her opening lesson plans to review at their first meeting saying, "I want you to become familiar with the course, the students, and the curriculum. I want you to begin to teach classes yourself as soon as you feel you are ready."

Jane seemed open to Melissa's ideas and regularly sought Melissa's input on her lesson plans and encouraged her to implement cooperative learning activities in the classes. By the end of the third week of school, Melissa had assumed classroom teaching responsibilities in two of the twelfth-grade composition classes.

The average-level section of composition intrigued Melissa the most. Of the twenty-six students, only two were girls and nineteen of the boys were Latino. The makeup of the class allowed Melissa to come to know the students more quickly. First, there were the two girls. Maria, a sweet, determined young woman, worked as hard as she could although she never earned more than a B in any work she turned in. Toni was her mirror-image. She constantly flirted, talked, and generally disrupted class. Melissa had met privately with Toni, suggesting to her that her behavior seemed to be most disruptive when Toni didn't understand the material and offering to work with her on the more confusing assignments. Rather than accepting her offer, Toni seemed to resent Melissa's suggestions and continued to disrupt the class.

The five Anglo boys also had their unique characteristics. Brandon and Ted proved frustrating to her. Ted was a capable student who put in minimal

effort. His friend, Brandon, frequently copied Ted's work and handed it in as his own. Michael, James, and Gregory were the class clowns. Michael was the most capable of the three, but didn't want his friends to know he could be an A student. James was reasonably bright as well, but put in only enough effort to pass. Gregory didn't even try to succeed academically. He entertained the class by trying to flirt with Melissa and sidetracking his friends with endless attempts at humor.

Many of the remaining nineteen Latino students were Melissa's favorites. The two informal leaders, Jose and Eddie, were always respectful of Melissa and often kept their classmates in line during class. Jane Maddox had failed Jose in her class last year, and she commented regularly on the change in his behavior since Melissa had taken over the class. Jane attributed this to a conference Melissa had with Jose after the first journal assignment. From the journal Melissa learned that Jose had been devastated the previous semester by his grandfather's death. She had a discussion with Jose the next day and shared with him her own experience and sense of loss at her grandfather's death the year before. After that, Jose began to volunteer in class discussions, complete every homework assignment, and hand in extra-credit assignments.

Other students followed Jose's lead and began to accept Melissa. While Melissa was stern and firm in the classroom, she seemed able to establish a comfortable rapport with the students. Several began to confide their personal problems to her and to seek her advice about career and college plans.

By the eighth week of the semester, things seemed to be going well. While students still challenged her and their behavior was not always close to what she would have liked, she felt more in control. Jane began to allow Melissa to teach entirely on her own. She started by leaving the room for ten-minute intervals, during which her absence was barely noticed. After a few days, she remained out of the room for the entire period. However, as Jane's regular absences became noticed, the second-period class would sometimes become disruptive.

For the last week of October, Melissa had planned a unit using horror and suspense stories, hoping the relation to Halloween would provide some interest. For the final project of the unit, each student was to write a suspense story. When Melissa introduced that particular requirement the day before the class was to begin writing, the students' reactions surprised her.

"Oh, man, I can't do this!" complained Brandon loudly.

"Yo, Miss Reid, you're making this way too hard," agreed Jose.

Other students chimed in with their responses, all of them negative.

Melissa waited for the grumbling to subside and responded. "Listen up. You people are always selling yourselves short and always being surprised when you do well. It's time you had some confidence in your writing. All of you are doing very well, and if you stop complaining and start working we can get this completed a lot faster!"

"Well, I can't think of a story, Miss R. I don't even like horror stories," Toni griped.

"This is such a dumb assignment," muttered Brandon.

Melissa gave them an exasperated look. "OK, that's enough! We have a lot to do still today. If you quiet down and finish today's work, we can start generating some ideas to help you get started tomorrow."

Later, during lunch, she met with Jane to discuss her morning troubles. "If it's not the lesson, it's got to be me. I really haven't figured out how to manage this class. All they do is gripe about the lessons when you're not in the room."

"They do that, regardless. You know these kids," Jane responded. "Maybe you need to assert yourself. Remind them that you're in charge. Use some of those behavior modification ideas you talked to me about."

Melissa agreed and asked Jane to sit in on the first few minutes of class the following day. "I'd like you to be there to make sure I handle this well."

Melissa came to the class earlier that day and used the time to write in large letters on the board:

GROUNDS FOR DETENTION

LEAVING YOUR SEAT WITHOUT PERMISSION

DISTRACTING YOUR NEIGHBORS

TALKING TO FRIENDS

CHEATING

USING INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

After the class was seated, Melissa began, "I've noticed that many of you have forgotten the class rules that Mrs. Maddox outlined on the first day of school. I've decided to refresh your memory of what they are, as well as what the punishment is for any infractions. If you do not understand what we are doing in class, that's OK. You can ask me. However, I will not hesitate to recommend you for detention if you cannot conduct yourselves properly. Does anyone have any questions?" Absolute quiet. No one responded. Mrs. Maddox gave a thumbs-up sign and a smile and quietly left the room.

For a half hour, Melissa enjoyed an attentive classroom. Everyone participated in the brainstorming activity, even Toni.

"OK, we've come up with some great ideas for plots. Now let's discuss where these can be set. Where could our horror story take place?"

"A haunted house?" Toni volunteered.

"Good," said Melissa. "Let's start with that. Who can think of some adjectives to describe the house?"

"Creepy," "dark," "mysterious," "looming," answered a chorus of voices.

"Cheesy!" It was Gregory's voice.

Melissa turned toward him. "How does that fit, Greg?"

"Actually, that describes that restaurant I saw you working at, Miss R."

"You work in a restaurant, Miss Reid?" Carlos asked. "Which one? I'll come visit."

"*Peppe's Italiano*," yelled James.

"That's enough, guys. We're discussing setting, not my night job."

"I thought this was your job, Miss Reid. How come you work in a restaurant?" asked Maria.

"Teaching will be my career after I graduate," Melissa tried to explain. "Student teaching isn't a full-fledged job. It's like an internship."

"Like my beautician classes at the Hair Palace?" asked Toni.

"Right. Now can we get back to the lesson?"

"You mean you're not a real teacher?" asked Michael, almost too innocently.

Melissa took a deep breath. "Yes and no. I'm not officially on staff, but I am responsible for teaching you, and I can determine your grades. So, let's get back to work."

"Why? You just said you're not a real teacher. You can't do anything to us!" Gregory taunted.

"Yo, Miss R., that's diss! I'd give him detention if I were you," exclaimed Luis.

"That's about enough! Do I have to go through that list again? I don't want to hear another word about waitressing or my status as a teacher. If you're really interested in how one becomes a teacher, I'll be happy to explain after school. For now, we're concentrating on writing a short story."

A paper airplane sailed across the room.

"You're testing my patience."

"What are you going to do to us?" yelled Michael. "You're only a dumb student teacher. You can't give us detention."

"Would you like to test me on that, Mr. O'Connell?" Melissa glared at him.

Michael responded by punching James in the arm and both laughed hysterically.

"This is your last chance. The two of you have been distracting this class all week. I advise you to knock it off right now!"

"What's the big deal? What's she getting so pissed off about?" Toni added.

"She's trying to be tough with us," sneered James.

"You don't know when to lay off, do you," Jose snarled at James. "I hope she gives your ass detention."

"Bullshit!" yelled James and Michael almost simultaneously.

"Well, two rules have been violated. I'm recommending both of you for detention tomorrow," Melissa announced just as the bell rang. She watched Michael and James saunter out the door, laughing.

During lunch, she described the class to Jane as best she could. "This

isn't working. The kids behave only if you are in the room. I appreciate your confidence in me, letting me fly solo, but I think it would be better if you sat in during second period from now on."

Jane was quick to respond. "I disagree. The students have to learn that you're the teacher. If I come back now, they'll think they were right and you don't deserve the respect you're trying to achieve. I'd be doing you a disservice by returning. Now, come on. Let's file these detention referral forms at the dean's office before next period."

The next morning Melissa called the mothers of the two boys. Jane was at her side. Michael's mother was apologetic and offered to help in any way she could. James's mother, however, began to cry as soon as she heard the story. "This is the second call I've gotten about him this week. I know something is wrong with him, but I'm just at my wit's end. My husband thinks we ought to call a psychologist. What do you think?"

The call upset Melissa. "Do you think I was too hasty with the detention?" she asked Jane.

"Not at all." Jane was emphatic. "If you didn't do it now, they'd never believe you would do it."

Later, Melissa screwed up her courage and walked into the second-period classroom. Michael and James were already playfully roughing each other up.

"Didn't you guys learn your lesson yesterday? I hope your meeting with Dean Weiss will help you remember the rules of conduct for this class."

"You didn't really give us detention, did you?" asked James.

Standing in the doorway, Jane interrupted. "Yes, boys, we did. And we also spoke to your mothers this morning. So I would advise you to cut the nonsense and get to work." She turned and walked from the room.

James's face reddened. "You called my mother?"

"Yes. She'll talk to you when you get home." Melissa turned from James to address the rest of the class. "Now, let's start on your stories. I'm distributing a blank outline to help you get started. We've wasted enough time."

Melissa watched James with concern and confusion. He sat rigid in his desk, staring angrily at his papers. His jaw was set, his neck and face red. "He's a good kid," Melissa thought, trying to reassure herself. "He's a joker, no question, but not malicious." She remembered having spoken to him several weeks before about his laziness, and he had expressed an insecurity about his intelligence to her. He always finished his assignments quickly, without much effort. She tried to encourage him to spend more time, but he resisted. She wondered then about him, but now she was really concerned at his overreaction to this situation.

Walking over to him, Melissa pulled a chair next to his desk. "What's the matter, James? Did you think I was going to let yesterday slide by?"

He didn't respond. He just looked at her with disgust and turned away.

"Don't you want to talk about it?"

He remained silent.

"OK, have it your way. But you still owe me a rough draft of your story by the end of the period."

As the bell rang, the students gathered their things and left quickly, stopping only to place their stories on the front desk. James was the last to approach. Handing Melissa his story, he said, "I hope you enjoy reading this."

After he left, Melissa began to read the story. It was about the detention incident of the day before. Her character was described as an "unfair, worthless, nobody of a student teacher." The story described his friend as not minding the punishment, but himself as unforgiving and vowing revenge. His last words were, "When I go home tonight, I'm going to get my father's shotgun. I know just where he hides it. Then, tomorrow, I'll come into school real early, hide, and blow the bitch away."

Melissa's body went tense as she read his words. She felt an adrenaline rush of fear. Should she treat James's threat seriously? Could she just ignore it? She wasn't sure how to respond, but her instinctive feeling was to be frightened, really frightened.