

It's Been a Bad Day!

by Jan Richards

It is one of those days when it seems no student is with you. Their eyes seem to glaze or drift to unseen objects, to the fly buzzing on the window or little smudges on their desks. They are unresponsive—just not “there.” Worse yet, they are pestering others and talking out of turn. Complaints and disagreements fill the air. It seems a pencil needs sharpening every two minutes. Your students appear bored and irritable, and you think in dismay, “It is going to be a long day!” What do you do to regain your sense of balance and perspective?

As my husband tells me when the car is acting peculiar, “Look for simple solutions first.” Every complaint from your car isn’t a dire prediction of transmission failure. So it has been a bad day—don’t turn it into a bad *week!* Before you sit up all night rereading that entire educational psychology book from your teacher training days, try reflecting on some simple things that might be “off.” Here are some factors you might consider:

Your Students’ World

First, after school, sit in

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several of your students’ seats to see life from their point of view. In particular, notice what grabs your attention. If your bulletin boards in their direct field of vision are filled with bright colors and wild shapes, many children will be visually distracted. Try redressing those boards with backgrounds in soft colors (blue or green perhaps) and visuals that are interesting or functional but not attention grabbing. By all means, move those three-dimensional objects arranged on a psychedelic background to the back of the room!

Second, as you sit in your students’ seats, notice the extent of their personal space. Are their desks too close to their neighbors? Can they walk to the sink, the pencil sharpener, or your desk without bumping other students’ belongings? Are they sitting with their backs to you or positioned so that they are looking into the eyes of another student every time they lift their heads? It may be time to rearrange desks. My favorite desk formation is a series of arcs (see Figure 1 on page 8). This room design has the cozy feel of a group without the negative aspects. Put three or four desks to a group. If you are doing a project, students can move easily to form a square. The wider walkways created by this formation act as a deterrent to student misconduct without discouraging desirable student interaction.

Time Issues

If space or distractibility issues do not seem to be to the

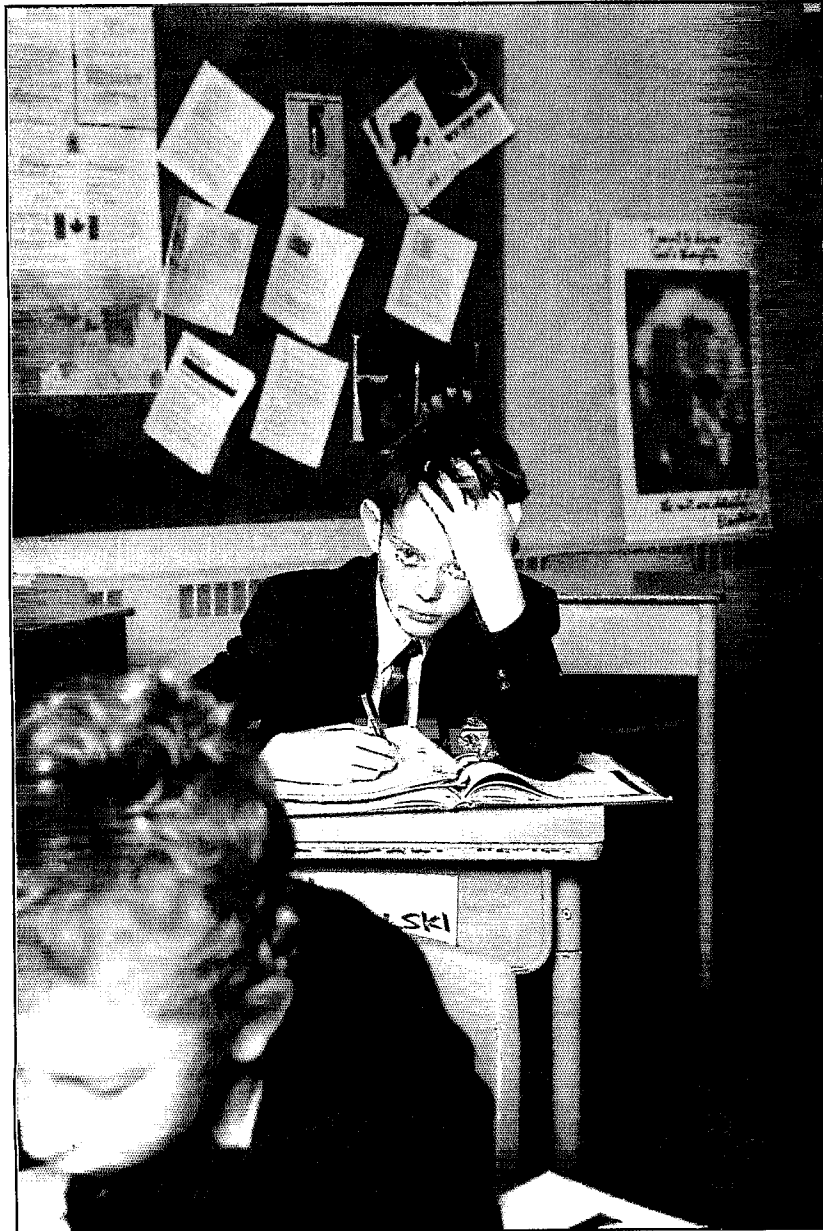
problem—or you’ve made those changes and the problems persist, think about time issues. Does this “bad time” reoccur during a particular portion of the day? It’s time to sit back and ask yourself some more questions.



“Consider these ‘simple solutions’ to your bad day before the stress

of it all builds to crisis proportions and you decide to consider a more peaceful profession—like becoming an assistant flower trimmer in some quiet Tibetan monastery.”

First, how long have your students been sitting in those chairs at a stretch? Children in grades 1–3 can stay focused for 20 minutes or so, while 4th–6th graders can go for about 30 minutes. At that point, they need a shift. Try something as simple as saying “We need time out from all this sitting! Everybody get up and talk to a friend, get a drink, or lie on the floor until you hear the timer ring. Then we’ll get back to work.” I usually give my students two or three minutes before the timer goes off. I know an 8th-grade English teacher who had a five-minute mini-break at the midpoint of each period. Either



How long have your students been sitting in those chairs at a stretch? Consider giving them a five-minute break.

way, this small intermission breaks up the time and prevents classroom-management problems. It also fosters student appreciation and cooperation. Sometimes we forget how tired students must be by the end of the day. Often, they have been sitting in that same position for hours, while we have the freedom to walk around, sit, or stand.

Second, do your students

know what's coming next? We all like predictability in our day. I would guess you have a comfortable routine after school: you kick off your shoes, sit down with a snack, or take a nap. When our routines are rearranged, we can get cranky. Children also like routine. They like to know what is coming. If you suspect predictability issues might be the problem, a few simple steps can

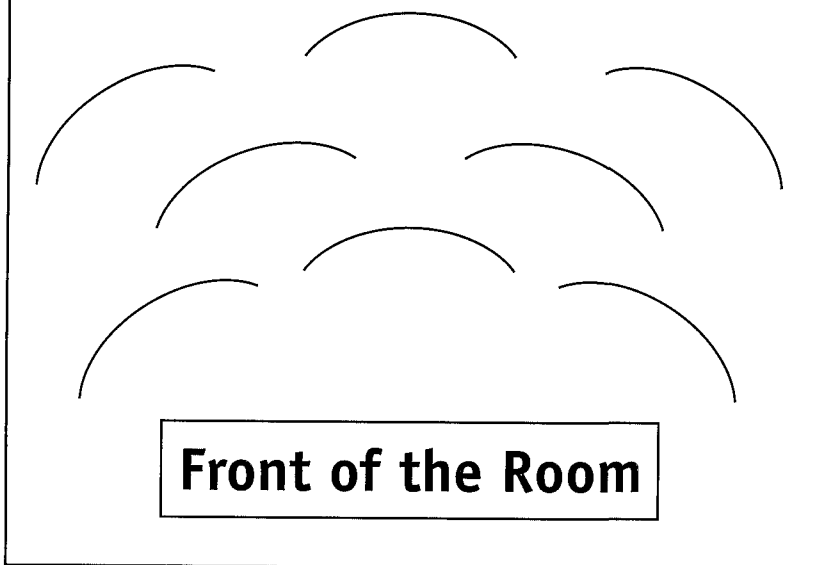
make the difference. As students enter the room, you can let them know what is next and what you expect. Give clear instructions: "When you come in, you will notice water color supplies on your desk. Please wait for directions before touching these materials." Starter lessons are a good way to direct students' attention: "Notice there is a puzzle to solve on the overhead. You have five minutes to see if you can figure it out." Physical education activities or fun time are essential for kids, but they also present great opportunities for losing control of your class. To help with smooth transitions, remember to give some warning when the activity is nearly over: "You have three more minutes. . . . Okay, two more minutes. . . . One minute left before we line up, class." By giving your students a little adjustment time, you will help them learn to cooperate when their activity is over and they need to shift to something else.

Mood

Sometimes, distracted behavior has its roots in the time of the year or week. Students may be excited about an upcoming basketball game, birthday party, or school dance. Perhaps tomorrow is Valentine's Day, and students are worried about getting Mom to take them to the store before the good Valentines are all gone! Or maybe it's the day after Halloween, and sugar is surging through their veins. Or, my personal favorite, your students just came in from a surprise fire drill. Going on a rampage about their inattention and lack of control will usually be

Figure 1

Suggested Desk Formation



counterproductive. You may have to put off your favorite collaborative group lesson on organizing the structure of their city-state until tomorrow. Naturally, postponing this lesson is disappointing to you. After all, that was the lesson that resulted in high-volume discussion and squabbles last year, which you remember as a real learning high point. Yet *this* moment calls for working on maps or drawings with classical music playing softly in the background. It is not a time for wild activity. Sometimes, reading to your students for 20 minutes will do it. Have students read silently while lying on the floor with pillows. Whatever activity you choose, the point is to be sensitive to their need to calm down. You must replace frenetic activity with quietude. We have many children who feel rushed and pressured from morning until night, and they need a caring adult who will help them reclaim their sense of inner calm. Once that peacefulness is restored, you

will all be ready to move on to the next lesson or activity.

Be Prepared

Nothing sends children spinning into orbit like teacher unpreparedness. Right at that crucial moment, when all eyes are on you and excitement fills the air, you realize that something you need is "somewhere" in your cupboard. The games for reinforcing state capitals are enthusiastically anticipated, but where are the dice? The directions for building a pyramid or writing a "concrete" poem are still sitting by the copy machine. Your magic moment shrivels in the confusion that follows. We have all been guilty of such a lack of foresight at one time or another. Though such traumas make for interesting tales in the lunchroom, double checking on materials and procedures *before* lesson time does help to shore up our sanity.

As Anita Woolfolk (2001, 433) has wisely said, "A positive learning environment must be

established and maintained through the year. One of the best ways to do this is to try to prevent problems from occurring at all."

Maintaining Mental Health

I've been there. Some days, you just don't seem capable of winning. Minor irritations and frustrations can accumulate and begin to wear you down. After all, teaching is tough work. The daily dose of classroom unpredictability and the ongoing realization you cannot do it all can make you question your calling. Please don't give up! Remember the lessons you learned in your teacher-preparation courses. Visit a colleague's classroom to see how he or she keeps order. Spend some time with the professional literature. There are some excellent resources on classroom management (Evertson, Emmer, and Worsham 2000a; 2000b; Weinstein and Mignano 1996; 1997). Maintaining an acceptable level of mental health in the classroom must be an ongoing priority. So consider these "simple solutions" to your bad day before the stress of it all builds to crisis proportions and you decide to consider a more peaceful profession—like becoming an assistant flower trimmer in some quiet Tibetan monastery.

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