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Characters: single mother, twin boys, two different teachers, a group of classmates

Overview: This story is designed for students aged 10-13. It teaches about the importance of making new students feel welcomed and included, not only for academic success but general happiness.

Questions for discussion:

How does a classroom environment affect a student's ability to learn? Fit in? Be happy?

If Jamal didn't change classes, what could have happened to him?

When people are angry, scared, and/or vulnerable, they are more likely to make bad decisions. Can you think of situations which could lead a student to make bad decisions?

A Tale of Two Classrooms

Before I came to Canada, I was a happy woman with a husband, 2 energetic twin boys, a big supportive family, and a close community of people in my neighbourhood. Now, I am a single mother raising my 11 year old boys, Abdul and Jamal, in Canada without any support because I lost my husband during a war and was forced to make the biggest decision of my life and leave my home country.

When the boys started school in grade 6, they were placed in different classes. It was a hard time at first trying to deal with a new language, different cultures, and losing a sense of belonging. At first, I did not hear many stories about their school and classmates. It felt like they tried to hide everything from me and they became more silent than usual since moving. It has been several weeks and I now hear the boys talking to each other more and more about their time in school. One evening, we were

having dinner together and I thought it was a good chance to talk to them about school so far. To my surprise, they had two very different answers.

Abdul said, "I really like my school mom, it is fun and the kids are friendly. Some classmates were really curious and interested in our country and what was happening there. The teacher even asked me to introduce our country to the class." Then Jamal said, "Oh, really? It seems that my classmates and teacher were not interested in me at all. Actually, I don't even want to go to this school anymore, nobody talks to me and nobody wants to play with me. I feel very lonely." How can this be, I wondered; Abdul and Jamal have always gotten along well with their classmates and never had trouble making friends.

As the weeks and months passed, Abdul and Jamal were not spending as much time together anymore and were starting to argue with each other a lot. Abdul was always happily playing with his new friends at school and Jamal was always alone and angry. Their differences were becoming so noticeable that I decided to go meet the 2 classroom teachers to find out what was going on with the twins.

I first met with Jamal's teacher, Mr. Manson, a big man with a grey beard and a serious look on his face. He began by explaining that he doesn't treat anyone in his classes differently and that he expects the same results from all of his students no matter what their needs were. He claimed that it is best for students if there are many strictly enforced rules so that they do not get lazy about their school work. "But what about Jamal's limited understanding of English? How are you helping him?" I asked. Mr. Manson replied, "I am helping Jamal by treating him the same as all the other students so he doesn't feel different, his English will get better in time". Then I replied, "Jamal is always sad and has not made any new friends and he never speaks English! How is

this helping?" Mr. Manson had no answer for me, he told me to be patient it will get better.

The moment I walked into Ms. Bloom's classroom, I could feel the warmth of her personality before she even spoke. There were fun and colourful posters on her walls with positive messages, plants everywhere and a reading corner with a small sofa and big floor pillows for the students to lie down on. She was so warm and friendly and spoke to me as if Abdul was the only child in the class. She knew so much about him and his personality, it seemed like she had been his teacher for many years. She talked about her classroom as having only 1 rule, respect. Also, she spoke about the fact that being fair does not always mean being equal. Being fair means giving to each student what they need, and what Abdul needed was to feel included in this class. Because we accepted his different language, culture, and personality, he felt safe enough to take chances and make friends which has really helped him to learn English. "So, you see," said Ms. Bloom, "we first had to make Abdul feel safe in class so he could take down his protective wall and open up to new experiences. Without this important step, he will not be able to be a good learner".

On my way home from the teacher meetings I could not stop thinking about how the 2 very different teachers and their classroom environments had such a different effect on my boys' ability to fit in with their classmates and also their success in learning English. As the weeks passed, the twins continued to follow different directions; Abdul was now involved in sports while Jamal was getting even more lonely and depressed. In fact, it got so bad that one day at the dinner table while Abdul was telling a funny story about his friends at school, Jamal jumped up from the table and shouted, "That's it, I can't take it anymore! I hate this place and I wish I was dead!" as he ran up to his bedroom in tears. I was really worried about Jamal, so after consoling him, I proposed to try to have him switched into Abdul's class and he agreed.

The next day, I went to my boys' school and talked to the principal. After several meetings along with the principal and their teachers, it was agreed that they would switch Jamal into Ms. Bloom's class in an effort to get him back on track. Although the process was not easy, I felt really happy that Jamal eventually started to smile again and began making friends. Thanks to Ms. Bloom's caring classroom environment, Jamal was able to regain his self-confidence and started enjoying his life in Canada.