

A Risky Business

Approach to At-Risk Students

Case Overview

Background

Teacher: Mrs. Lillian Slotter

Experience: 18 Years

Class: 1st Grade



Storyline

Lillian Slotter is a veteran, 1st grade teacher who is highly committed to an educational philosophy that values active teaching and who views all children as capable learners. It is the end of November, and Lillian has a particularly challenging class that contains several children who need a great deal of her time and attention. One child, Sidora, is having a difficult time learning to read. Lillian's colleague and Chapter teacher, Joanne Molly, has targeted Sidora as a "classic at-risk child" and is leading an effort to have her tested to see if she qualifies for special education services. Despite Joanne's sincere concern for Sidora's well being, Lillian is not persuaded that testing is in Sidora's best interest at this point in time. She has taught in many urban schools that have, in her opinion, labeled children too quickly. Believing that Sidora needs more time in her classroom before she is tested, Lillian fights to keep her in her regular 1st grade classroom for the balance of the school year.

Star Teacher Function: Approach to At-Risk Students

Some key beliefs and behaviors that comprise this function are:

- ❑ Star teachers believe that all children can learn and do not make excuses for children based on their family background or societal problems.
- ❑ Star teachers recognize that the way a school or teacher responds to a child's needs affects the child's success.
- ❑ Star teachers are uncomfortable with the impact of "labeling" children.
- ❑ Star teachers learn about children's out-of school lives and use this information to make their classroom learning more relevant and meaningful.

For a more detailed description of this function, see pages 48-54 of *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (Haberman 1995), which accompanies this series.

Other Topics and Issues

Although the main purpose of *A Risky Business* is to stimulate reflection on the star teacher function of *approach to at-risk students*, the case provides the opportunity for examining

several other issues and topics. Some of these include dealing with student's individual differences, intervention teams, collegial support, use of observation techniques, special education support services, approaches to teaching children to read, labeling, use of manipulatives in mathematics instruction, use of background information on children, and balancing individual needs with whole class needs.

Scene Summaries and Questions

Scene 1: End of First Quarter. Lillian's 1st Grade Class.

Summary: It is the end of the first quarter, and Lillian is beginning her day by having children come forward to identify words from a reading chart located at the front of her classroom. Lillian calls on Sidora to come up and identify the word "sing." Sidora underlines the word "songs" and identifies it as "smell." The rest of the class laughs at Sidora's mistake.

Possible Questions:

1. What are your observations regarding Sidora's performance?
2. (TQ) How would you respond when the other children laughed at Sidora's mistake?

Scene 2: Moments Later.

Summary: Lillian politely reprimands the children by reminding them how they are supposed to respond when a classmate needs help with their work. She then continues teaching the lesson with several children coming to the front of the classroom to read words. While the other students come forward, Sidora appears quite disinterested. She is distracted with a ball of clay and a pair of scissors with which she is cutting her paper on "the tree" which is the topic of the discussion.

Possible Questions:

1. What thoughts do you have relative to your observation of Sidora's behavior?
2. (TQ) What background information would you like to have on Sidora as you struggle to help her find school success?

Scene 3: Fifteen Minutes Later. Chapter Reading Room.

Summary: The same day in the Chapter classroom, Sidora needs several reminders about focusing, as well as assistance with her reading work. After being unable to sit still at her desk, the teacher places Sidora at a table by herself in an effort to keep her from distracting other students. Moments later, she purposefully dumps an entire can of pencils, loudly disrupting the class. The scene ends with the Chapter teacher visibly frustrated by Sidora's behavior.

Possible Questions:

1. Do you have any new insights or hypotheses regarding Sidora's academic or social development?
2. Have you experienced children with behavior patterns similar to those Sidora is

exhibiting?

3. (TQ) What should Joanne Molly do?

Scene 4: Forty Minutes Later.

Summary: Joanne stops Lillian and asks to speak with her about Sidora. Joanne expresses her concerns about Sidora's inability to read and cites the results of some of the reading tests she has administered in the Chapter program. Joanne ends the scene by asking Lillian to think about getting Sidora tested for special education services.

Possible Questions:

1. Do you agree with Joanne's recommendation?
2. How do you interpret Lillian's response to Joanne's request?
3. (TQ) What would you do if you were Lillian?

Scene 5: Later the Same Day. Math Lesson on Place Value.

Summary: Lillian is teaching a math lesson on place value and is using manipulatives in a game-like fashion. It is evident that Sidora is understanding the concepts being taught and is able to stay focused on the task at hand. While Lillian works with Sidora and a couple of other children, the remaining students are actively involved in other learning activities and occasionally interrupt Lillian, asking for assistance.

Possible Questions:

1. What is your assessment of Sidora's math skills?
2. How would you describe Sidora's behavior during the small-group math lesson?
3. (TQ) What is your general assessment of Sidora at this point in time?

Scene 6: The Same Day After School. Teachers' Lounge.

Summary: Joanne seeks Lillian out to continue the conversation about having Sidora tested for special education services. Joanne has made a home visit to Sidora's foster care home where she has learned from the foster mother that Sidora's birth mother had a substance abuse problem when Sidora was born. In addition, the foster mother has informed Joanne that Sidora has been shifted from foster home to foster home because of her difficult behavior. Joanne identifies Sidora as a "classic at-risk" child and once again encourages Lillian to allow Sidora's case to be brought before the intervention team so that she can be considered for special education testing.

Possible Questions:

1. Is the information Joanne shares with Lillian relevant to consider in relation to the recommendation for special education testing?
2. How would you use this new background information about Sidora in working with her as a student in your classroom?
3. (TQ) If you were Lillian, how would you respond to Joanne's request?

Scene 7: Moments Later.

Summary: Lillian responds by asking for more time with Sidora. She tells Joanne that Sidora's math skills are developmentally appropriate and that she just wants more time with her before she makes this important decision. Joanne responds by making clear that she does not want to label Sidora, either, but feels that testing would provide the kind of information that could benefit Sidora in the long run. Joanne recommends that Sidora's name be placed on the agenda for the next intervention committee meeting. Lillian responds by continuing to ask for more time.

Possible Questions:

1. What do you think of Lillian's response of wanting to give Sidora more time? What advantages could this provide for Sidora? What disadvantages?
2. How might the intervention team discussion prove helpful to these two teachers?
3. (TQ) What other steps might Lillian take in response to Joanne's persistent efforts to get Sidora tested?

Scene 8: Two Days Later. Lillian's Colleague Observes Sidora.

Summary: Lillian asks a colleague, Mary Jo, to come to her classroom to observe Sidora and provide a third-party perspective. Mary Jo watches Sidora and makes observation notes while Lillian reads a story to the class. Sidora has a difficult time paying attention and is continually playing with something on her desk.

Possible Questions:

1. What observations would you share with Lillian if you were Mary Jo?
2. (TQ) How can Lillian balance her concern about Sidora with the needs of other children in the class who need similar attention?

Scene 9: Moments Later.

Summary: Mary Jo shares her observations of Sidora, noting that she appears to be easily distracted and in a world of her own. Despite her knowledge that Lillian has been resisting the testing idea, Mary Jo recommends testing in an effort to acquire more information. In closing, she reminds Lillian that if Sidora were to be removed from her class that it could allow Lillian to dedicate more time to several other children who are also struggling. In response, Lillian shares with Mary Jo her continuing belief that Sidora needs the stability of one classroom.

Possible Questions:

1. What is your reaction to Mary Jo's comment that the classroom teacher knows what is best for the child?
2. (TQ) What is your opinion of Lillian's position? How would you characterize her stance?

Scene 10: The Next Day After School. Intervention Team Meeting.

Summary: The following day at the intervention meeting, it quickly becomes apparent that Sidora is on the agenda. Joanne shares her thoughts as to why she feels Sidora should be tested. In her opinion, Sidora is a “classic at-risk” child. Lillian responds again that she needs more time with Sidora. Jody, a special education teacher, contributes her thoughts to the discussion, including the advantages of early intervention and how testing will provide everyone involved with valuable information. In addition, she reminds Lillian that there are many special education options in their district, including tutoring, inclusion, and special education resource rooms. Lillian ends the scene by making clear her concern that Sidora has many “strikes” against her already and that she doesn’t want school to be one more “strike.”

Possible Questions:

1. What does the term “classic at-risk” mean to you as an educator?
2. How could school be one more “strike” for Sidora?
3. (TQ) What do you think the intervention team will decide to do?

Scene 11: Moments Later. Summary: The team arrives at consensus, with Joanne deferring to Lillian’s request for more time. Joanne offers to work more closely with Lillian in an effort to help Sidora find success in the regular 1st-grade classroom. The team agrees to meet again in May for a reappraisal of Sidora’s case.

Possible Questions:

1. Were you surprised by Joanne’s change of position? What do you think caused her to defer to Lillian?
2. Do you support the decision to postpone testing pending Sidora’s progress in the coming months?

A Risky Business Video Case Transcript



Scene 1: End of First Quarter. Lillian's 1st Grade Class.

(The scene begins with children coming to the front of the room to identify words from a chart.)

Lillian: Since Cloie is not here, we are going to start with Sidora. Sidora, would you come up and underline a word? Would you underline "sing" please? *(Sidora underlines the word "songs.")* What is that word?

Sidora: Smell.

Lillian: Smell?

Class: *(Laughing in response to Sidora's mistake)*



Scene 2: Moments Later.

Lillian: Boys and girls, let's get settled. You know better. What do we do when someone is not quite sure of what a word should be? What do we do? Do we laugh? Do we? Or, are we helpful?

Class: Yes (*class responds in unison*).

Lillian: Okay, I think that's the better way to be. Let's go to Max. Would you come up and underline a word that you know, Max?

Max: Arbor.

Lillian: Arbor. Good. Brittany, would you come up and underline a word?

Brittany: Sing.

Lillian: Okay. Would you come up and underline a word, Esa?

Esa: Morning.

Lillian: Morning, great! That's great! Would you underline a word, Sara?

(Transition to several minutes later.)

Lillian: Now, we're going to work on finding many, varied, and unusual words to describe a tree. Suppose I ask you a word to describe a tree. What would you say? Who could give me a word to describe a tree?

Karen: Branch.

Lillian: Branch, Okay.



Scene 3: Fifteen Minutes Later. Chapter Reading Room.

Joanne: *(the Chapter Room reading teacher)* Sidora, would you kindly go back and walk in this room *(in response to Sidora running into the Chapter Room)*? You know, you learned how to do that. Oh, that's much better, much better. I like the way the rest of you came in the room. That was great. Can you find your folders?

(Transition to several minutes later.)

Joanne: Let me hear a short U sound.

Students: Uhhh.

Joanne: Now, I am going to give you a word. Listen to the vowel sound. Buuuug, Buuug. Sidora, what kind of vowel is that?

Sidora: "O."

Joanne: Listen to it again. Buuug. So you hear the UUUU. What is it again?

Sidora: "A."

Joanne: "A?" Brittany, what is your word? *(Brittany correctly identifies the word.)* What is your word, Sidora?

Sidora: Top.

Joanne: Look at it again.

Sidora: Tap.

Joanne: Good, did you hear the "A" there.

Sidora: Yeah.

Joanne: Let me hear a short "A."

Sidora: "A."

Joanne: *(referring to Sidora's fidgeting with the chalk and off-task drawing on the board)*
Would you stop playing around with that, please? Just keep your hands on the... Jacob, what is your word?

Jacob: Man.

Joanne: Build your word. Good. What is your word.

Chris: Set.

Joanne: Excellent. Sidora, are we drawing pictures or are we doing our work up here?

(Minutes later after students have returned to their desks for seatwork.)

Joanne: *(addressing Brittany)* Put in your short "e." Can you say it?

Brittany: Pen.

Joanne: Sidora, I can't hear Brittany. I really can't. You're going to have to go over to this space. *(Joanne takes Sidora to a separate desk away from the rest of the children.)* Could you work right here, please? Get this done now. Is that a word *(pointing to Sidora's paper)*? Say that word for me. What?

A Student: I'm done.

Joanne: Okay.

(Joanne returns to the rest of the students.)

Another Student: I'm done, too.

Joanne: Good job. Everything's finished here?

(There is a loud crash from the area of the room where Sidora is seated. Sidora has just dumped a large can of crayons and pencils on her desk.)



Scene 4: Forty Minutes Later.

Joanne: Mrs. Slotter, can I talk to you a minute?

Lillian: Oh, sure, of course.

Joanne: I have done some work with Sidora, and she is really having difficulty and is reading below grade level. Her multicriteria check list is really low. I also did some pre- and posttesting with her vocabulary words. Her attention span is short. She has a hard time staying on task. All her test scores indicate that she really needs some special ed testing. I'm hoping maybe we could think about that. *(Lillian listens quietly but shakes her head in apparent disagreement.)*



Scene 5: Later the Same Day. Math Lesson on Place Value.

- Lillian:** Okay, let's start. We have three astronauts, and three more came. What do we do with that? *(Lillian is using manipulatives to help the class with the concept of place value in mathematics. Small plastic markers are being used to represent astronauts.)*
- Student:** Leave one ...
- Lillian:** Leave one in the waiting room, and move the other one over. Okay, now we look up, and there are four more astronauts. What are you going to do? Four more astronauts, Sidora, four more, how many do you have in the waiting room?
- Sidora:** Five.
- Lillian:** What are you supposed to do?
- Sidora:** Put 'em in the space shuttle.
- Lillian:** Okay. Now, how many do we have in the waiting room? What do we have to do, Sidora? Wait, let's stop. What does our launching pad look like, Sidora?
- Sidora:** Two are on the launching pad, and six are in the waiting room.
- Lillian:** What's wrong with that? What do we have to do?
- Sidora:** Take five, all five of them away and leave one in there.
- Lillian:** Okay, then tell me what our board looks like after you do that. *(Lillian waits for Sidora to count the markers.)* What does it look like, Sidora?

Sidora: One person in the waiting room and three on the launching pad.

Lillian: Three on the launching pad. Okay, we are going to bring four more astronauts out.

Brittany: Mrs. Slotter, how do you spell “bananas”?

Lillian: Brittany, what does “bananas” begin with?

Brittany: “B”

Lillian: *(To Brittany)* Okay, see what you can do with it, and I’ll help you later. *(Lillian then speaks to the other child working with Sidora.)* Okay, what are we supposed to do, Sarah?



Scene 6: The Same Day After School. Teachers' Lounge.

Joanne: Hi, Lillian. I wanted to talk to you a little bit about Sidora. I was wondering if you thought anymore about having her tested for some extra help. I'm not sure you're aware that I had a home visit with her foster mom. The foster mom told me she's moved from many foster homes because she is such a difficult child. They keep moving her. The other thing is her birth mom had a substance abuse problem. I'm thinking that certainly might have a bearing on her future education and how she is responding. I do think she's a classic at-risk child. She just shows all the symptoms. I feel she needs to be placed in a special education class.



Scene 7: Moments Later.

- Lillian:** Developmentally, her math skills are wonderful. She's doing a good job. I'd like to keep her with the 1st graders. I don't want to see her moved. We just need to give her time, and my way of giving her time is letting her show me what she can do. How do we know what she can do unless we give her a chance?
- Joanne:** I know, but I feel it would be really good to have the intervention committee and some other people have some input.
- Lillian:** I'm, you know, concerned about the labeling.
- Joanne:** I know. I can understand that. I feel that way in many ways. But I also feel it would be good to get some input from the intervention committee and was wondering if we could put her name on the agenda.
- Lillian:** Well, I'd just like to wait.



Scene 8: Two Days Later. Lillian's Colleague Observes Sidora.

Lillian: “What if I don’t want the tooth fairy to keep my tooth?” she asked. “Then there’s no point in putting your tooth under the pillow,” said Mother Rabbit. “I don’t believe in the tooth fairy,” said Little Rabbit. Sidora, are you listening? (*responding to Sidora’s off-task behavior*) Thank you. “No,” said Mother Rabbit. “No,” said Little Rabbit. “There are lots of things you can do with a tooth besides give it to a tooth fairy.” Little Rabbit took her tooth and went into her room and thought about the things she could do. What do you think she is thinking about now?



Scene 9: Moments Later.

Lillian: Well, Mary Jo.

Mary Jo: Well, Lillian.

Lillian: Thanks for coming.

Mary Jo: You have your hands full, don't you?

Lillian: I do, but what do you think? I really want your opinion.

Mary Jo: Well, I took some notes. She was not on task very much of the time.

Lillian: But, despite that, there's been some improvement and...

Mary Jo: You've seen that over the course of the year?

Lillian: I've seen that, yes.

Mary Jo: Well, I know just from our talking before that you are getting a lot of pressure to have her tested.

Lillian: Yes, and I'm still holding off on that. I'd just like to keep her, you know. She needs the stability. She's absent quite a bit, and I'm just trying to work it out so I can really get to her and really make the progress that I think she is capable of.

Mary Jo: Well, the only thing I can say is the testing would give you more information. And, if she does go to the resource room, it will give you some time to work with some of the other kids. We both know that we have whole groups of

kids that demand a lot of our attention.

Lillian: Well, that's right. I have at least nine others that I could be focusing on, but I still feel strongly that she needs the stability of one classroom. So, anyway, I'll keep thinking about it.

Mary Jo: Well, you know I believe that the classroom teacher knows what's best. I will support whatever you do. It's a tough call. I guess if it were me, I would go ahead with the testing. I know that's not what you want to hear. I have to get going. My kids are coming back. I'll talk to you at lunch time.

Lillian: Okay.

Mary Jo: Okay.



Scene 10: The Next Day After School. Intervention Team Meeting.

- Vicky:** Okay, let's go ahead and get started here. Number one on the agenda are student referrals, and the first person on the agenda is Sidora Wagoner. Joanne, I think you had some Chapter 1 observations.
- Joanne:** Right, Sidora has been working in our Chapter 1 class. She came to us after being in many foster-care homes, and I'm a little concerned that may have had an effect on her. I've also given her the multicriteria check list, and she didn't really do too well. Also, after talking with her foster care mother, I learned that her real mother had some problems with substance abuse. So, I see this child really being a classic at risk student. I'm concerned and feel we need to talk about it.
- Jody:** How old is Sidora?
- Lillian:** She's about six and a half. I just want to respond to what Joanne said, which kind of makes me want to give her more time with all of the things that she has gone through. I think some patience is needed here, and I just want everyone to know that I do have that patience. I would like to see something more concrete develop before she's labeled. I don't mean that in a negative sense, but it could be because of all the things she's had to deal with.
- Jody:** Well, as far as I'm concerned, when I see these kids, I really am a firm believer in early intervention. I think that testing opens the doors to many different programs that we have. It gives us information that you, as her teacher, can use and myself, as a special educator. Once we get her tested, it doesn't mean she'll be in my resource room. You know, we have many options here in the district. We have tutoring. We have my resource room, and we also have inclusion. I think what we really want with the testing is to get the information and go from there. Then, we can meet again as a team and really

find the least restrictive environment for Sidora. You know, I recommend that we really get the ball rolling and get the testing started. We all know how long it takes, and the process is a lengthy one. The only thing I have a little bit of a question about is I haven't heard anything about any medical information on her. Do we have any of that in her file?

Vicky: Let's see. No, I don't see anything. Let me check in the back of her file. I don't see anything in here. That's a good point. I'll check.

Lillian: Okay, I just want to say that Sidora has many strikes against her, and I just don't want school to be another one.



Scene 11: Moments Later.

- Vicky:** Okay, I think I hear everyone sharing some great concerns about Sidora. I think we all have her best interest at heart, but I'd like to find some consensus here. Jody, how do you feel about this?
- Vicky:** Lillian?
- Jody:** Well, I think everyone knows how I feel. I feel very strongly about getting this little girl tested.
- Lillian:** Well, I'm still not decided. I'd like to wait.
- Vicky:** Joanne, how about you?
- Joanne:** That's a tough one, but Lillian and I work closely together with our Chapter children. I feel like, with a little more coordinating effort from both of us, I think I am leaning toward agreeing with Lillian. We'll work together and try to help her improve.
- Vicky:** Okay.
- Lillian:** Well, I think that will give me an opportunity to work with her the rest of the school year, and then maybe we can get back together in May and make a decision.
- Others:** Sounds good. Sure. Okay.