



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

The Allen Mathers Case

Author(s)

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Description

When a graduate student working in a preschool classroom finds that the child he is observing is scared of him and does not want to participate in the research study anymore, questions arise. The child's father wants to proceed with the study, regardless of the child's preferences.

Body

Speakers

Narrator; Allan Mathers; Professor Pamela Thompson; Pre-School Teacher.

Background

Allan Mathers is a graduate student in developmental psychology, with an emphasis on second language acquisition. His adviser is Pamela Thompson, who is nearing retirement and highly respected in the field. Their collaboration has been very successful and they work extremely well together. Under Professor Thompson's mentorship, Allan has developed impressive skills at observing and documenting second language acquisition among pre-school age children.

January

Allan is speaking with Professor Thompson about his assignments for the next few months.

THOMPSON: Your observational workload is going to be very light this semester, Allan. There's only one appropriate subject – a boy called Shally.

ALLAN (*laughing*): Well, that'll be a change. Five last semester, one this semester.

THOMPSON: Yes, it is disappointing. He should just provide the last data I need for the international conference this summer.

ALLAN (*looking through papers*): I see you've gotten consent from his father and from the preschool, and Shally's schedule is here. It looks like I'm all set to start next week.

Two weeks later

ALLAN: I don't know what it is; Shally just isn't warming up to me.

THOMPSON: Give it time.

ALLAN: It's never taken this long before. Usually, when I start observing a child, it only takes a few minutes, or one day, maximum, for the kid to get used to me and start ignoring me. It's been two weeks with Shally, and he still acts like he's afraid.

THOMPSON: Some children are more sensitive than others. You've been lucky up till now. Just be patient and unobtrusive, and he'll come around. The next week Allan is talking with Shally's pre-school teacher.

TEACHER: I spoke with Professor Thompson, as we discussed. I told her that there's no doubt that Shally is afraid of you.

ALLAN: Did you ask her if we could stop the study or get someone else to observe Shally?

TEACHER: Yes, I did. Professor Thompson was adamant that the observations must not stop. She told me that there's no one else available to do the observations, and she insisted that Shally will get used to you.

ALLAN (*discouraged*): This is so frustrating. When I show up, Shally clams up and looks like he wants to hide. I'm not learning anything from him. (*Sighs.*) Well, did you get a chance to talk to Shally's mother?

TEACHER: I should have told you earlier that Shally's mother isn't really relevant here. They come from a strict and conservative background; the father is really the boss of the family. He's here as a visiting professor in mathematics, and he has the highest regard for science, so any contribution his family can make is worth any sacrifice. He wants the study to continue, too.

ALLAN: Does he have any idea why Shally is afraid of me?

TEACHER: Yes. It's because of your eyes.

ALLAN (*surprised*): My eyes? You mean my one blue eye and one brown eye?

TEACHER: Yes. I'm sure you know that they are very striking.

ALLAN: Of course. They're usually an advantage; kids notice them and think I'm interesting right away.

TEACHER: Well, Shally thinks you have the evil eye. His father got quite angry when he talked about it. He described it as an old peasant's superstition from their homeland, something Shally learned from his mother. He says it's below his son to believe in such nonsense and that he should grow out of it.

ALLAN: What a mess. What can I do?

TEACHER (*steeling herself*): You and I agree that continuing this study is not in Shally's best interest. (*Allan nods.*) And you said yourself that you aren't learning anything from observing him. (*Allan nods again.*) Well, since Professor Thompson won't call off the study, and Shally's father won't, I want you to do it.

ALLAN (*chilled*): That won't be easy for me. Professor Thompson is counting on getting this data, and there isn't another child to study this semester.

TEACHER: I don't want to get on Professor Thompson's bad side any more than you do. She's a very influential woman, and she has worked closely with this school for years. But Allan, if you won't do it, I will.

What should Allen do?

Notes

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