

On a Problem in the Fifth Grade (Part 2)

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To make better sense of this thought, it would be best to read Part 1, the thought immediately preceding this one; or perhaps this is self-contained enough that you don't need to do that.

To orient you, this is how I began Part 1:

My ten-year old daughter—I'll call her Dee in this writing—lives with her mother, Margaret here, on the west coast of the U.S. I live on the east coast. I see Dee every two or three months, and we write notes back and forth. Just notes, I'm hearing impaired and can't use a phone or hear on Skype. Margaret and I stay in touch by email.

Dee is in the fifth grade. I'll call her teacher Mrs. Johnson. It's now January and Margaret has been reporting problems for Dee in Mrs. Johnson's class. A few weeks ago, on a visit to see Dee, I observed the class and spoke with Mrs. Johnson, not to deal with the problems Dee is having with her but rather to get a sense of her teaching approach and what she is like as a person.

Last week I received an email from Margaret about the most recent problems. Here, I'll include an excerpt from Margaret's email and the part of my reply that bears on this circumstance. You can decide what you think about my approach to this issue and how you would deal with a similar problem as a parent.

This thought has two components: an email from Margaret, and my reply.

From Margaret:

I am getting back to you regarding the meeting with Johnson yesterday. All in all, I thought it went well.

Johnson invited a counselor to the meeting, which was fine with me. She started off by saying that she called for the meeting. I corrected her by saying that she had only sent me an email informing me of two incomplete homework assignments and that I was the one who suggested a face-to-face meeting. She right away agreed with that and I had the

sense she toned down her officious and top dog manner some. Basically in the meeting, I asked questions and she answered them, and I told her things and she responded.

I asked what exactly the issues she sees with Dee's work. Was it grasping new concepts, overall diligence, particularly undone homework, the problems she brought up in her email? Her answer was all of that.

I asked her to give me some particulars. When she did that, they struck me as [henhouse droppings] stuff. I didn't agree or disagree with her. I told her that [the school] is only a part of Dee's life, and listed some of Dee's major non-school involvements. Both Johnson and Johnson agreed that Dee has a "cool life," the term they used, and I'd like to think they had a better understanding of Dee and that how she does in math is not the only, or major, measure by which to judge her.

I tried to be diplomatic about it, but I said that from our perspective school at this point in Dee's life is a place to learn basic skills, but not more than that. I tried to say tactfully, quit making such a gigantic big deal out of what's going on in multiplying fractions. And get off Dee's case, and by implication, my case, and focus on getting your act together teaching math, reading, and writing.

That seem to have some effect, and they stopped critiquing Dee and started talking about things the school could do. Johnson volunteered a few things she could do in the classroom. The counselor brought up the idea of a motivational meeting with Dee and the principal, who was an avid skier when he was young living in Canada, so they could use Dee's passion for skiing as a hook to motivate her on math, reading, and the rest of what's doing on in school. I stroked their egos by praising and encouraging them to be creative and supportive.

My thinking at this point is that we keep Dee in Johnson's class and not transfer her another fifth grade classroom in the school. First, the other fifth grade teachers may not be any better than Johnson. I've talked to some parents of kids with the other fifth grade teachers, and I'm picking up that they are all just about the same type and caliber. Second, I want Dee to learn how to manage her own life. The message to Dee if we keep her in Johnson's class is to face challenges head-on and create something that works for herself, as opposed to running away, or avoiding difficulty.

I am open to hearing your thoughts and reaction.

My response:

Dee needs to transfer to another fifth grade class. Enough of this [stockyard droppings] with Johnson. You and I work together as a united front and get Dee out of there. It's too long until mid-June for Dee--and you--to endure this nonsense. The circumstance in that classroom is bad educationally, but even worse, it is damaging for Dee's development, and it isn't doing you any good, you've gone through a lot of hardship with this. Enough. Out.

I don't see any transition problems to a new class. The only subject where that could possibly be an issue is math, but the teachers are all following the same fifth grade common core curriculum. January-March, they are on fractions and decimals, adding and subtracting fractions and mixed numbers, and multiplying fractions and mixed numbers. So it will be the same math in the new class.

It was really good for you to have the meeting with Johnson and the counselor. The biggest benefit, you got a sense of just what you are dealing with here with these people. They aren't dazzling intellects or steeped in wisdom. I picked up in your email that you are now on to them.

You did the right thing when you pressed Johnson to get into specifics. People like her want to do is stay airy, at the level of generalizations--Dee has trouble grasping concepts, she isn't diligent, and so on. When you pushed her for examples, they were, your term, [henhouse] stuff, as I suspected they would be. Get people like this to particulars when they criticize.

Another good outcome of the meeting, you learned that other parents are having problems with teachers at [the school]. With Johnson, you are dealing with someone who is assigning homework that hasn't even been taught, and claiming homework that has been handed in wasn't.

Johnson isn't Dee's only teacher. There's the Chinese teacher, and [the name of Dee's golf coach] with golf and [the name of one of Dee's ping pong coaches] and the other ping pong teachers. Are they complaining about Dee's inabilities and diligence? No, they aren't. The problem isn't with Dee, it is with this teacher.

You hit it right on the money when you described in

your earlier message as "vibrant, intelligent, hardworking, and sensitive." I can't think of a more apt description. Just a few of the people who have raved to me about these same qualities are [the names of friends and relatives]. [A relative], who you know is a cold fish, sidled over to me when we were in [a city] and raved about Dee.

It is deadly bad for Dee to be around anyone who sees her as low ability and lax in her work ethic. It is both absolutely untrue and very damaging. Dee is only ten years old. She could internalize this negative view of her and see herself in this negative way and conduct her life accordingly. We are dealing with serious business here, Margaret.

I know Dee has to learn to deal with adversity. But there are limits to that. We don't tell a woman being abused by her husband that she must stay in that situation and learn how to make it good. We rescue her; we get her out of there. There are times in life when, indeed, it is best to stay in the game, so to speak, and work things out. But there are also times when the best thing to do is get the hell out of there. I wrote a web site piece recently where I quoted the lyrics of the Kenny Rogers song, "The Gambler." Here are the lines I picked up on in the song:

Every gambler knows
That the secret of survivin'
Is knowing what to throw away
And knowing what to keep.
You've got to know when to hold 'em
And know when to fold 'em
Know when to walk away
And know when to run

Dee has to learn when in life to hold them and when to fold them. As young as she is, she has to be protected until she learns to do this on her own. At ten she is in no position to do anything other than stay in this bad game. Margaret, this is a time when the best call is to fold 'em and run from this Johnson.

You made a great point at the meeting about school being part, not all, of Dee's life. I'm around teachers and future teachers, and they think that school is everything in a child's life. Consistently, when they talk about parents they refer to parents' *students*--not to parents' *children* but rather

to parents' *students*. They see children as simply students. They are like the proverbial carpenter to whom everything looks like a nail. They have been taught in their training that teachers can do absolutely anything with students that comes into their heads, day and night. They feel mandated to order these little kids around all day and then give them homework that ties up their evenings. It broke my heart reading you say in your earlier email, "We spent long hours together learning uncovered areas as well as finishing homework." What parents think or want is of no consequence to these school people. A child's education, the direction it takes, is none of the parents' business in their eyes. The parents are simply deferring aides implementing teachers' dictates. Elementary school math and reading is a gigantic big deal to these people--more than a big deal, it is the *only* deal.

The teaching profession sees parents as the adversary, the extra cook in the kitchen that gets in the way, a threat. They did their standard number with you. First, they ganged up on you. The reason the counselor was there was to make it two on one, and to intimidate you--oh-oh, Dee must be a problem, the school official is here. And Johnson said she called the meeting when she didn't. That was to try to get away with defining the meeting as being about their problem with Dee rather than, as it was, your problem with them. Then they tried to stay general and define the issue as Dee and, tacitly, you not doing your jobs rather than with them not doing their jobs. You nicely brought it back to what they are doing professionally to help this child learn.

The idea of a motivational meeting with [the principal] around skiing was a standard ploy. That was to focus the problem on Dee's motivation and shunt her off to talk about skiing with somebody and avoid the key concern: what is going in the classroom and what the teacher is doing to teach. The problem in that classroom is around math and the other subjects. You made a great point getting it across to them that teaching is their job and to "get your act together and teach math, reading, and writing." Leave skiing out of it. And don't define Dee as a skier or a jock. We don't want her defined that way. So absolutely, positively, no motivational sessions with [the principal] around skiing. Do not go along with that maneuver.

Here's what is going on that matters:

Dee is unhappy with school. You said in your earlier

message note that she is coming home distressed. You said she is feeling pressured. If nothing else were going on, this is enough to warrant a transfer.

And--so vitally important--Dee isn't learning as much as this bright child is capable of learning. Just this would be enough to warrant a transfer.

You say Dee is spending long hours (this is the child the teacher is citing for lack of diligence) on the assigned work, some of which hasn't even been covered in class, and it's keeping her from other, valuable, growth-producing activities.

Based on my observation of the class, this teacher has segregated Dee from other children in the back of the room, because, I guess, she socializes too much.

We have a teacher who has told me that Dee is not as capable academically as the other children. Here I go again, but this is crucially important: perceptions are self-fulfilling--that is a well-established psychological fact. We become what central, powerful people in our lives think we are, and treat us as if we are. Particularly it is true when you are a child and have not yet developed the capability to monitor and filter out and countermand negative perceptions of you. As adults, we can think about what we are told about us that is negative and reject it--"I'm not what this person thinks I am; that's his problem, not mine." Young children's brains and ability with language aren't yet developed enough to engage in that process. If someone in their world tells them they are dumb or lazy or bad or less than other people, they'll buy it, and that is so sad, and so damaging, and so lasting. Negative things that come at us as children before your brain matures, which won't happen until thirteen or fourteen, get stored organically, totally, as internal, physically-felt referents that, even though we don't consciously realize it, direct our lives at forty. My point, don't assume that what happens to Dee at ten will go away. To the contrary, it will literally be a part of her as an adult.

In the day I was there, I saw this teacher dismissively respond to a contribution Dee made to a class discussion. I saw Dee repeated raise her hand and not get called on. And I saw Dee get snubbed at the meeting with the teacher and me.

Both you and I have been told that homework wasn't handed in that was.

Johnson announced to the class that Dee hadn't fully completed an assignment in the time allotted, or somehow that was made public, which resulted in Dee being taunted by other kids.

Issues around conflict with [two girls in the class] surfaced early in the year.

I reported that in my judgment [one of the two girls] detracted Dee from her schoolwork.

I reported that I wasn't impressed with Johnson as a teacher, and that she didn't strike me as being very evolved as a person. Not awful, but we should have a higher standard for Dee.

You say, "My thinking is that we will keep Dee where she is." My respect for your judgment is as high as the sky, but here's an instance where I disagree. I say Dee needs to be rescued from that damaging environment. Even if this were April, I'd say get her out of there. It is January, and there are five more months of that bad situation, and we need to look out for Dee, and she is not in a position to look out for herself. To expect a ten-year-old child to turn Johnson, this situation, the girls and everything, around is unrealistic. This is not a circumstance to cope with; it is a circumstance to get away from. This is not a time to hold 'em, it is a time to fold 'em, and, to keep that metaphor going, to get into another, better, healthier, more uplifting, game on some other table. I strongly believe Dee needs us to help her do that. She can't do it on her own.

Here's what I propose:

We get the attitude firmly in our heads that Dee is our child, not theirs, and that they work for us. You and I together, as a united front, go to [the principal] and request a transfer to another fifth grade teacher. Yes, the other teacher might not be all that great either. But in my judgment it couldn't be worse than what is going on now, and I'm factoring {one of the two girls} into this as well as Johnson. I think Dee would do well to get away from [one of the two girls]. [One of the two girls] alone argues for a transfer.

The goal would be to get Dee in another fifth grade class, period. Whatever it takes to get that done, we do, but no more than that. We aren't trying to fix or attack Johnson, or challenge the way the school functions, anything like that; we just want, demand, a change of teacher, that's it, simple. Every teacher isn't right for every student. This assignment of Dee to Johnson hasn't worked out, so change

it.

You talk this over with Dee and get her OK that we move forward on this. She might be a little hesitant at first, kids like to stay put, represents safety to them, but she trusts you, and it has been bad in there for her, crying, all of it, and my guess is she's give her approval to what we are trying to make happen. You could level with her and say we want her to be with a teacher that will be more helpful to her in math. You can pitch it as positive, a chance to meet some new kids, and be with a new teacher. Plus it was gloomy in the Johnson class when I was there, a real downer quality in there. Dee's not going to miss that place.

You schedule an appointment with [the principal], say next Friday, or the next Monday. In the next week or so anyway.

You and I discuss our pitch supporting the transfer and agree on it. The key with [the principal] is to be narrowly focused. Administrators are zero-sum people, this or that; they aren't into long discussions of what is going on and various options; too foggy and time-consuming for them. I think it is very simple: you and I want a transfer to another fifth grade teacher. He is going to ask why. We have to give him an answer that will allow him to feel good about saying, OK, let's do it.

Prior to your meeting with [the principal], I'll send him an email acknowledging that you and I have discussed this matter and are together requesting this teacher change. So I'll need his email address. In the email, I'll drop some credentials, that I'm a professor of education, and the fact that I was in that classroom and talked to this teacher. I'll list reasons why the change is called for that fits in with our pitch. I'll note that you will be coming to discuss this with him. I'll run this email by you for your approval. I won't do anything without checking with you.

You are very sober, serious, at the meeting. No being nice or sucking up. Don't do with [the principal] what you did with Johnson and her colleague: "I stroked their egos by praising and encouraging them to be creative and supportive." None of that. Those two women had just messed you over. They circled the wagons and hid behind cover while they took shots at you and Dee and got you placated and out the door without taking it to [the principal]. There should always be, tacitly at least, the threat to take whatever-it-is higher up. I was pushing you to bill

the meeting with Johnson as part of the larger issue of getting Dee in the best place [the school] has to offer, and to raise the issue of the advisability of a transfer. That would have increased your power. They wanted to keep it just you and them, and, to end the meeting with your silence and acquiesce to Dee staying another five months in that hellhole.

Don't make this same mistake with [the principal]. Define this issue as a school district issue. The challenge is for the district to get Dee in the richest context. That will keep [the principal] leaning your way because he knows you might take this to his bosses, the superintendent and the school board. There ought to be at least the implied threat that if this doesn't go our way we are taking it higher up in the bureaucracy. Never deal with people under the assumption that they are all-powerful, independent agents and that all we can do is beseech them and they then will have the unrestrained power to do whatever they want. Don't buy their [defecation] that they answer to nobody. Everybody answers to somebody, including the Pope.

Have the meeting with [the principal] and see how it goes. You've had contact with him before and it's gone well, right? He will have been primed by my email. My guess is he will be amenable to the transfer. He'll say, give me some time to look into this and I'll get back with you. Say that's fine. And then, at this same meeting, try to set up a subsequent meeting with [the principal], at a time after he does his checking. He has to contact the new teacher, and he has to smooth feathers with Johnson. But he does this kind of thing all the time, it's his job, you can expect him to be good at it.

Then let's us talk. I could send another email--again, after your review and approval. I'll also fly out there if you to attend a meeting with you if you think that will be helpful.

My guess is the answer will be yes on the transfer. If it isn't, we have the option to go to the superintendent. Then it comes down to logistics. Likely, a meeting of you and Dee and the new teacher, and you pick a day and Dee goes to that classroom and that's it. Kids come into classes in mid-year all the time, moving into the district, whatever; teachers know how to bring new kids into what's going on in the class.

In the meantime, and no matter what happens, keep the totality of Dee's life going. Indeed, Dee has, as you put it, a fantastic life. Keep every one of the wonderful aspects of it

going. In a few weeks you two are going to be in [a ski resort]. That is infinitely more important to her growing up well--which is the concern--than this {school] stuff.

We aren't going to let an impersonal government operation--public schools are government schools--detract from the direction and quality of Dee's life one iota. Don't let the government and its employees--{the school] and [the [principal] and Johnson--supplant you and me as Dee's parents. That is what they are bent on doing, and more, think they have a right to do. Someday we could go into why that is; it's political, ideological. But enough to say here, as parents we aren't deferring the whims and judgments of a government employee, Johnson, whom we didn't choose and had never heard of until these last few months. Who is she to be ordering Dee around and putting her down to us?

So there it is: I'm saying it is vitally important that we get Dee out of that classroom, and my guess is that it can be easily done, no big deal. This is not the first time a child has changed teachers.

I'll look to hear from you.

You, the reader: what is your best thinking about my take on this situation?