

On a Problem in the Fifth Grade (Part 1)

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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.

First Margaret's email:

Dee is struggling with a decimal topic they covered in school this week. I've been helping her at home quite a bit this week. She is not out of woods yet, but that doesn't concern me too much. What concerns me is that she is feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, and pressured in school. I am not sure what caused it exactly. Coming home for Dee has come to mean spending much more time doing homework than has normally been the case, and that is taking time away from doing other things. I am going to back off some on her other activities so she can spend more time on the homework. Mrs. Johnson sent me an email about a couple of homework assignments she said Dee didn't complete this week. But I'm certain Dee has done all the homework this week. I'm concerned about the dynamics of in that class generally and with Johnson in particular. I didn't respond to Johnson's claims about the missing homework, but I did schedule a meeting with her for after school next Tuesday. I'll let you know what comes out of it. Please share anything you can, I am feeling a bit lost around what's going

on for Dee in that classroom.

This was my email reply. See what you think:

My basic take on the school issue is that it is Johnson's job to teach math and the rest of it, not ours, and that if she doesn't do her job, she should be replaced.

Three premises:

1) Learning is basically appropriated, not received. Whether from teachers or parents: lectures, explanations, and contrived activities students are run through don't get it done. You, the learner, do it, and you see how that attempt came out, and learning from that, you do it again, and over time you get better. Your frame of reference is how you are faring compared to how you did previously. This is true of any activity, math, golf, drawing, whatever. What you need is somebody to believe in you, encouragement, rich opportunities, a comfortable and safe environment to do your work, and tips and suggestions as you move yourself forward.

2) Elementary school math and reading aren't the big deals the self-centered school people make them out to be. What is the big deal is the totality of Dee's childhood. I don't think you should lay off her other activities in favor of her schoolwork in the least. Chinese [she is taking a privately-taught Chinese class], golf [she is an avid golfer], skiing [a downhill racing program], ping pong [she plays competitively], her art work [around the house, at an art table Margaret has set up for her], "Little House on the Prairie" [she is a big fan of the old Michael Landon television series, Chinese Chicken noodle soup [Margaret and she frequent a Chinese restaurant], art gallery visits, Whistler [a ski resort in Canada they go to], etc., etc., etc. are every bit as important as math and reading. It all adds up, it all matters for how childhood turns out for her.

3) If Dee feels judged negatively, threatened, under the gun, or viewed as inadequate, that's bad. We need to stay stable, kind, affirming, and positive with her, and so does Johnson. Basically, promoting motivation and achievement comes down to catching somebody doing something right (not wrong), Dee in this case, and making a big deal about it.

Dee is a razor sharp, perceptive, creative, and positive child. Remember the word games, I think it was on my

birthday at [a restaurant] last year? Stunning. That's Dee feeling free and secure and confident. She's a very sensitive child, person (she'll be this way at 40), things get to her. If she's in a situation where there is a bad, negative, vibe, she'll pick up on it, and it will affect her. So we need to be looking for bad vibes in this school issue, whether at home or in school.

Are things OK with you personally? You've had what could be seen as a career setback, and you've had health issues. Has that negatively affected your behavior or outlook and the climate in the house in recent months? What kind of setting is Dee coming home from school to? Are you to any extent hanging out with media in bed? I'm not saying any of this is going on, I'm just asking.

Some things that concerned me the day I observed Johnson's class and talked to her:

There was a desultory tone in the classroom. The kids seemed kind of docile, robotic. Although not Dee: she was alert and upbeat and engaged the whole way through. I was very proud of her during the time I observed, particularly in a context I didn't find stimulating or uplifting.

I picked up on Dee's seating assignment. The students sit four around a small table, with about six or seven tables in the room. Dee was prominently, I thought, seated by herself--or so it appeared--at a table in the back of the room, kind of separated from the class. There was one very small boy who didn't as much as look up the whole time I was there who was either sitting at Dee's table, or maybe it was the table next to hers. Anyway, he had zero connection to Dee, or anybody else, and there was the appearance of Dee being isolated. It crossed my mind that maybe she was put back there by herself to keep her from socializing too much--we've heard that from teachers. If that's the case, that puts me off. A little ten-year-old being punished for being social. That's a good thing, not a bad thing. The bad thing would be if she went in the direction of being autistic.

The other thing I thought about with the seat location was why a child with vision issues [Dee] is put in the back of the room. Dee had her glasses on, and I suppose she was OK. But the question I had was, why not put a child who's near-sighted in the front of the room?

I picked up that there could be some level of passive aggression going on with Johnson toward Dee, that she was somehow resentful of Dee, or wanted to put her in her place,

silent and literally in the back of the room. I'm not sure exactly what was going on, but something seemed off to me in Johnson's attitude toward Dee.

In a class discussion Johnson conducted, Dee raised her hand and made a thoughtful comment about a book they are reading. Johnson didn't affirm Dee's contribution or extend it, didn't deal with it in any way. She tersely, without looking at Dee, and off-handedly, discounted it and went to another student. For the rest of the discussion, Dee raised her hand at least four times and Johnson didn't call on her.

After the discussion, there was some free time before the class went to physical education (the teacher-led discussion activity went nowhere and ran short). Dee was on task. She took out her math to work on it. Here comes Julie [a friend of Dee's, who I see as overly clingy] who plops down next to Dee. Dee turns from what she was doing to help Julie. Julie does a little bit of math and then starts doodling. Dee tries, amid the distraction of Julie and the example she provided (doodle your time away), to do some math, and she did get some math done. This went on for about fifteen minutes. I thought the class was on the subdued side for ten and eleven year olds, but most of them were doing something or another. Katie [the other close friend in the class], for example, who was seated in the front of the room, quietly looked at a computer program about touch-typing.

The class was dismissed to go to physical education. I went over to sit at one of the tables to talk to Johnson. Dee, upbeat, came to join us. Johnson never as much as looked at Dee. Dee quite quickly excused herself to go to phys ed.

As I saw it, Dee was disconfirmed three times in thirty-five or forty minutes by Johnson. The first time, the dismissive remark in response to Dee's discussion contribution. The second (and I guess the third and fourth and fifth), obviously ignoring Dee with her hand up during the discussion. And third (or sixth), the cold shoulder at the table with me.

In my discussion with Johnson, I was far from impressed: well-intended, but not all that bright, not very informed, not very evolved as a human being. Self-conscious, uncomfortable in her own skin.

She had nothing positive to say about Dee: nothing about Dee's strengths, successes, possibilities; nothing about plans and hopes; it was all negative. Johnson never talked

about projects Dee was doing in class, or how she was working with Dee, what strategies she was employing. Something I noted, almost word for word she made the point I've heard from you, that Dee is upset that other kids get their work done quicker and better than she does. It flashed on me that Dee might have picked up that line, that definition of the situation, comparing herself to other kids in that way, from Johnson.

Johnson mentioned that Dee hadn't turned in the previous day's assignment. I assumed she was accurate in that, and I replied that it could have been because Dee was meeting me at the airport. I wasn't trying to make any big point; it was just an observation. She immediately said, "I apologize for saying that about the homework." I said, "You don't have to apologize, though I think it would be helpful to keep in mind that Dee has, as do most all children, a lot of things going on in her life besides school." I briefly listed Chinese, artwork, golf, skiing, and ping pong. Again, I wasn't trying to make any big point, or maybe I was a bit, I was getting annoyed. Of course I later found out from you that Dee had in fact turned in her homework. And in this last message, you said that Johnson had again falsely accused Dee of not turning in homework.

I asked Johnson how Dee could improve academically. She didn't suggest anything related to this class. All she could suggest was that Dee should go to summer school in order to keep up. I asked in what areas, and she said math and writing. I don't know anything about math, but I do know about writing. To contend that Dee has a problem with writing makes no sense. Writing, language, is a talent that should be nurtured with Dee, not viewed as a deficit that needs to be remediated.

As for what to do in the meeting Tuesday:

Stay cool, collected, and superior (you are in a different, higher, category than this lightweight Johnson).

Don't mention my concerns about Johnson from observing and talking to her. She can dismiss them as subjective, untrue, gossip, slander. It will detract you from your business. This meeting is not to report my impressions or charge her with any wrongdoing or get adversarial with her; rather, it is to identify productive work for [the school] to do.

Don't volunteer or commit to getting on the case more with homework, staying in touch with Johnson better, any of

that kind of thing. That makes you responsible for Dee's success (and not Johnson, who is), and in effect working for Johnson, as a tutor or teacher aide. She is your subordinate; you aren't hers. She's working for Dee, for us.

My guess is that Johnson will basically come on as a definer and critic. She'll say that Dee's work isn't up to par and that she is going to have to work harder than the other kids because the other kids can do things faster and better than she can (that is to say, that Dee has low ability). And she'll talk about missing homework. Don't get defensive when she does that. You don't have to say anything like, "Are you saying Dee isn't as capable as the other students?" or, "How do you know Dee isn't as capable as the other students?" That's tempting because Johnson is wrong about Dee, and it's deadly to have that kind of negative attitude toward students, perceptions are self-fulfilling, and maybe you should get into it, but I think it would probably be a waste of time, and time is short. You might say--though you don't have to--that your understanding of whether homework was handed in has been different from hers in several instances; no argument, just a comment. I know I'm waffling here. This low-opinion-of-Dee issue is very important, but I don't know how to deal with it, other than, I'll go into this later, getting Dee away from this kind of negative perception of her. You have really good judgment; do what you think best about this if it happens.

I suggest these four talking points:

1) What exactly do you [Johnson] see as the academic problem? Math, reading, writing, what? And specifically what parts of those subjects is a problem? You don't have to debate her, just take in her answer, hear it. You are her superior. She is reporting to you.

2) What is she, Johnson, doing to help Dee achieve in school? What interventions, strategies is she employing, and contemplating, and why? Put the ball where it ought to be, in her court. What she wants to do is put it all on Dee and you: Dee has to work harder, and you have to do a better teacher's aide job at home. No. Keep the focus is on what Johnson is paid to do, and that's teach. Again, no debates, just a statement. Don't ask her, "What can I do to help at home?" Don't pledge to do more at home with Dee. Don't commit to staying in touch with Johnson. You aren't unpaid adjunct faculty at the school. At home, Dee should be drawing pictures or reading about the wimpy kid [a book she

likes] or helping you cook. Home is home, dammit. As I say that, I realize I have a dual attitude toward homework: I like the Chinese homework and don't like the [school's] homework. Chinese class is just once a week for a short time and it makes sense that Dee do a lot outside of class.)

3) Point out soberly, matter-of-factly, that while we--you and I--value academics, we value more the totality of Dee's life, and that goes way beyond schoolwork and academic achievement. It is a concern for us that there be room in Dee's life for all the things she wants to do and should be doing--you can mention Chinese, golf, skiing, ping pong, art, reading for pleasure, watching films, travel, being out in nature, and whatever else comes to mind. [The school] has her all day from 8:30 to 3:00. We are OK with some homework (or are we?), but when her school workday becomes ten and twelve hours, we think that is out of proportion to what is optimal; it crowds out other things. As a matter of fact, I see what is going on with these little kids, from dawn to bedtime, as akin to child labor circa 1910, but don't get into that. We are concerned about Dee's growth as a person not just as a student, which includes becoming autonomous, self-directed, confident, and, simply, happy. Dee right now isn't happy with school and that's a major concern for us. Again, no debates, just a statement.

4) Is this fifth grade classroom the richest possible opportunity for Dee at [the school]? There were conflicts among the girls earlier, and now Dee is distressed about school, and Johnson is sending you emails. Does Johnson think it is best that Dee to stay in the class or transfer to another fifth grade class? See what she says. Again, don't argue with her, just listen. Most likely she'll ask you what you, we, think. In any case, say we aren't sure at this point. Again, no debates, just statements.

Point four is your finish. I don't think there have to be any resolutions, agreements, commitments, anything like that. I wouldn't even commit formally to staying in touch. If she suggests it, say yes, certainly, but don't bring it up. You've gotten your message across: we're watching and judging you, Johnson, and you don't know what we are going to do because we don't know what we are going to do. I think that'll put Johnson on notice and has the best chance of getting her on the ball, as much as she can be on the ball.

Then you and I talk. It's just January; mid-June is a long way away. One distinct possibility I see is you go to the

principal and say Dee is not doing as well academically as she has in previous years, she's distressed about how things are going in school, she's crying; and that there are some issues around a couple of girls in the class [there were some spats between Julie, Katie, and Dee over which one, Julie or Katie, Dee was giving the most attention]--nice children, but we think they are getting in the way of Dee learning as much as she can. The issue isn't that Johnson is bad (though my impression is that she is bad, or at least isn't good). The issue is what is the very best learning context that [the school] can offer Dee, and our sense as parents is that another fifth grade class would be better for Dee the rest of the academic year. Ask for his help. It could be really simple: He checks it out with the new teacher. One brief meeting with you and Dee and the new teacher. Pick a day for Dee to attend the new class. Talk it over with Dee--put any spin on it you want, you don't have to tell the truth. I think deep down Dee would be happy to be out of there. A day or two of adjustment by Dee to the new class. And from then on, routine.

I think you are picking up that I think Dee should be out of that classroom. But you are closest to it, I'll go with whatever you think best.

I don't think you should involve [a central office administrator in the school district and a friend] with this. My read on him is that he has the bureaucrat's mentality, which is to say, "Oh, you can't do that." Yes, you can do that. Whatever it is, you can do it. Principals are good to work with, because they are on the front line and make things happen. And their biggest impulse is to make the customer happy. If the principal can keep his phone from ringing, like calls from you, he'll do it. Johnson is new to the school and shaky, he doesn't have to worry about pleasing her. You are a formidable person, trust me, and you are a customer, and schools serve the customer. You want something as a customer? If it is at all possible, schools will give it to you.

I hope this was food for thought. Trust your judgment. Let me know anything you think and need.

That was my response and advice to Margaret. How would you have responded?

