

Musings of a Heavily Armed Soccer Mom

Reading Class

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This is a revised and expanded version of the original article.

I always knew that, someday, I'd get a call from the school demanding that I come in to explain some aspect of my sons' behavior. Never did I expect it would concern their reading ability.

When my sons were approximately seven and eight years old, I received a call from their school. I was told that I needed to come in for a parent-teacher conference, at my earliest convenience which, they suggested, should be at 4:00 PM the following day. Yes, in their infinite wisdom, they somehow knew what would be convenient for me. The only other information I was given was that I shouldn't bring either of the boys to the conference.

I arrived ten minutes early and waited twenty minutes for the conference to begin. I was ushered into the conference room and I immediately noticed the psychology involved in the decorating scheme. There were two huge, expensive looking, high-backed leather chairs behind a large, heavy desk. Across from the desk was a tiny chair that appeared to have been liberated from a kindergarten classroom. I knew where I was expected to sit, and it wasn't the position of power behind the desk. It was the subservient little chair. They were in a position to look down at me and I had to look up, at an uncomfortable angle, to speak to them.

I took my seat across from two teachers who, I noticed, were viewing me with a certain disdain. It was as if I smelled badly or was a known, convicted child molester. I could tell they didn't approve of me, but I didn't yet know why.

The meeting commenced, without so much as an introduction, when one of the two women, who I suspected were the boys' teachers said, *"Mrs. Komatsu, while testing your sons we've discovered some highly disturbing information."* They now had my complete attention.

I asked, *"In what class are they having difficulty?"* I've always taken their education very seriously and I monitored their progress, in all their classes, on a daily basis.

"The problem we're having concerns their reading abilities," I was told. I was completely speechless. I just sat there like a fool with my mouth hanging open. This was simply not possible. Both boys were excellent readers and read, on an average, a book per week.

Finally, I replied, *"There has to be some sort of misunderstanding. Sean and Mike are excellent readers. As a matter of fact..."*

"I assure you there is no misunderstanding," she interrupted. *"We're professional educators and we are fully competent in our areas of expertise."* At this point I knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that this little meeting was about to get really interesting.

"There must be some sort of mistake," I said again. *"I know how well both..."*

She interrupted me, yet again, to say, loudly and slowly. ***"There... is... no... mistake."***

I was beginning to get a bit irritated. I was called in for a conference, yet I'd already been interrupted, twice, when I attempted to participate. It was becoming clear that my place in these proceedings was to sit quietly and display the proper respect to these highly qualified individuals. However, my respect and my patience was rapidly diminishing. *"So why don't you just tell me what the problem is. I'm sure we all have better ways to spend our afternoon,"* I suggested.

The teacher who had previously been silent now spoke. *"Mrs. Komatsu, we didn't know there was a problem until we conducted a test to determine all the children's levels of reading ability. We've never seen this happen before. The test evaluates performance up to the ninth-grade level and both your boys passed all elements of the test. Because of that we can't determine how well they can read."*

I couldn't help it. I broke out laughing. The second teacher continued, *"Mrs. Komatsu, I don't think you appreciate just how serious this is."*

I replied, *"I believe I do understand. Let me tell you what I've gotten out of this little conference and you tell me if I'm on track. My boys aced your little test that no one in this school is supposed to be able to complete and in doing so you've been unable to label them the way you would like. You obviously know that they read beyond a ninth-grade level so what more could you possibly need to know? They don't fit your metrics and for some unknown reason you need to point this out to me as if it were a problem. What is it that you want from me?"*

I watched the faces, on the other side of the table, turn red. The first teacher took over again. *"Mrs. Komatsu, we need to know why your boys read as well as they do."*

Since the boys started school, I'd been prepared to be called in to explain why Sean punched out a bully on the playground or to explain Mike's unusual sense of humor or a dozen other problems. I was not prepared to address anything related to academics and I was especially unprepared to address questions related to why they exhibited exceptional reading ability.

"My boys read as well as they do because I invested the time in teaching them to read the way I was taught to read. I purchased a couple Phonics books, spent some time teaching them and then I made sure they always had something they wanted to read. Soon, they loved reading as much as I do. It wasn't long before they didn't need me to help them sound out words. Instead they helped each other and, before I realized it, they were off and running. We don't always have a lot of money but when we go shopping the bookstore is always the first stop. I know they're excellent readers but until you told me the test results, I had no idea how accomplished they really are."

The silence, from the other side of the table was deafening. The first teacher, the more dislikable, more pompous of the two spoke. *"Mrs. Komatsu, your degree is in...?"*

"I don't have a degree. I graduated High School, that's all." I answered.

"...and yet, somehow, you felt qualified to do a job best left to trained professionals with years of experience?" said teacher number one. A quick temper has always been one of my problems. Also, back in those days I had a quick mind. This combination got me in trouble more than a few times. Thankfully, that day wasn't one of those days.

“Trained professionals with years of experience, like the two of you?” I asked.

“Yes,” replied teacher number one, *“I’m glad to see you’re getting something out of this conference.”* Something snapped when she said that and teacher number two acted as if she’d heard the “snap.” What had just been broken was my patience. Teacher number two appeared as if she was about to do an impromptu “duck and cover” drill. Possibly the smoke coming out of my ears was some sort of giveaway.

I took a few deep breaths and composed myself before I started speaking. I knew this was an opportunity I couldn’t afford to foul up. I spoke slowly, distinctly and at a higher volume than I should have. I began, *“Since I’m not the sharpest wit in the room, I’d like to make sure I haven’t misunderstood anything that’s happened here, if I may?”* Both teachers nodded at me and I continued. *“As a poorly educated mom I took two young boys and two paper-back books and produced the only two kids who ever maxed your little evaluation. That’s two out of two. That’s 100%. That’s a perfect record. Every student I taught maxed your exam. In contrast, the two of you, and I have no idea how many other reading teachers in this school, with your multiple degrees, all the resources of a modern school system, all the government funding and all the teacher’s aides, have produced exactly none out of the thousands of opportunities you’ve been given. That’s zero out of thousands. That’s a miserable 0.0%. That is a disgrace. Now, unless you’re prepared to hire me as a consultant, I’ve other things to do and places to be. This conference is over.”* I got up out of the tiny chair, with more than a little difficulty, and hobbled toward the door.

Teacher number two requested that I wait just another minute and she asked, *“Please, tell us what made you decide to teach your boys to read rather than allowing us to do it the proper way.”*

I let the last condescending remark slide and answered, *“Because learning to read is simply too important to be left up to pompous jackasses like you two. Oh, by the way, if I hear of even the slightest incident of this school punishing or issuing any sort of retribution to my boys, in any way, for what I’ve said here today, you will rue the day you met me. Have I made myself clear?”* They both nodded and then I left the room.

I hadn’t made it back to my car before I realized that none of this made any sense. Yes, Sean and Mike were excellent readers but how did that threaten anyone? Yes, they aced the exam but how was that a problem? Surely the faculty could claim credit for that and use it as proof that they were outstanding reading teachers. I’ve always had a need to know how and why stuff worked. No matter how hard I tried I couldn’t arrive at a sensible explanation as to what was behind this whole event.

Weeks later, from an acquaintance inside the school system, I learned what had really happened. During the normal course of reading class some of the better readers were enlisted to help some of the slower readers. Sean, being the best reader in his class, was one of those students picked to assist his classmates. All Sean knew was that he was supposed to help his fellow students learn to read and in doing so he chose his preferred method of instruction, Phonics. It just so happened that those he helped also preferred his method as it made learning so much easier.

Inquisitiveness is normally a valuable commodity in children but there are exceptions. One little girl, in the class, asked the teacher, *“Can we use Sean’s way of teaching? We like it a lot better than yours.”* As near as I can determine that was the exact second the excrement contacted the whirling blades of the air circulation device.

After she didn’t receive a satisfactory answer, from the teacher, she went home and told the entire story to her parents. Several days later Mom and Dad were in front of the School Board demanding to know why their daughter was receiving higher quality instruction from a classmate than she was from her teacher. For those of you keeping track, this was the exact second the excrement began rolling downhill. I’m sure your imagination can accurately fill in the rest of this part of the story.

My boys are intelligent but they’re not geniuses and for an amateur I’m an OK teacher... nothing more. The true superstar of this story is Phonics, the method of instruction. While this story doesn’t represent a structured scientific study, it does give some valuable insight. Phonics, which at one time was widely taught in our schools, was abandoned for an inferior method. Why would that happen?

I see only two possibilities and the first is abject stupidity on the part of the Department of Education and the Department of Labor, both of whom have a hand in determining how and what our children are taught. The second, and sadly, most likely, is a concerted effort, a conspiracy if you will, to reduce the population’s ability to read and, also, to comprehend what it reads.

Reading is the most fundamental and most important subject taught to our children. If one learns to read, and to comprehend what’s read, a person then has the ability to teach themselves almost anything else they please. When one’s ability to read is compromised so is one’s ability to acquire new concepts and new skills on their own, completely independent of any state operated education or indoctrination system. When one’s ability to read is hindered so is one’s ability to write and I’m referring to writing in the literary sense and not the handwriting sense. When the population has difficulty reading and writing, their ability to effectively communicate with each other is compromised, at best, or even eliminated. All one needs to do to prove this concept, to themselves, is to attempt to decipher any sort of instruction manual written by anyone who was a victim of the indoctrination system that replaced our education system.

When reading skills are limited self-improvement and the ability to communicate are impacted negatively. What more effective changes can be made to a society if your goal is subjugation and oppression? This is not an accident. This is a sinister, diabolical plot to destroy a nation and a planet. These acts fall into the category of crimes against humanity and if there is ever a day of reckoning we would do well to remember that fact during the penalty phase of any trials that may happen.

Epilog

About a year later I attended an open house at the same school. I had a question for one of the boys’ math teachers. As I said earlier, I checked my sons’ progress in school on a daily basis. Their education was, and still is, very important to me.

Suddenly, a few weeks earlier, Mike stopped bringing his math papers home. He said their papers were no longer returned to them but, instead, they were held by his math teacher. I wanted to ask that teacher if Mike could be given his completed papers just as he had been all year. I thought this was a simple question and I was still relatively naïve at that point in their education. I wasn’t expecting any sort of confrontation this time. I had a simple question and I expected a simple response. I still had a lot to learn.

The teacher, also an arrogant, condescending, self-important type, just like the reading teachers, informed me that he would not return Mike’s papers. He offered no explanation and turned to walk away from me. I wasn’t finished with him, so I said, probably too loudly, *“Not so fast. I’m not finished with you yet.”* I probably was too loud because a number of parents, who had been milling around aimlessly, came over to see what was going on.

He did turn around and he made no secret of his annoyance that his actions had been questioned by a mere parent. *“I no longer return math papers because I keep them on file, at*

home,” he said. Then he glared at me.

It was becoming obvious that he was trying to avoid giving an actual answer, so I asked a better, more direct question. *“What’s your reason for not allowing parents to see their child’s math papers?”*

“I don’t return the papers for a very valid reason,” he began. *“I need to keep them so when a student earns a failing grade I have some evidence as to why he or she failed.”* I must admit that, if you weren’t paying attention, that almost passed for a reasonable answer but, I was paying attention.

“So, your position is that your priority is to have justification for failing a child rather than doing more to teach the child so he can succeed rather than fail?” I began. *“A few of us parents used those papers to judge the progress of our children and they allowed us to give supplemental instruction when necessary.”*

His final words to me, right before he stormed off into his safe space, the faculty lounge, was *“Oh, you’re **that one.**”* I believe he was referring to my altercation with the reading teachers. Right then and there I realized that, before my kids were free of the school system, I would be making a career out of being *‘that one.’*

I should note that about a week after this encounter Mike was, once again, bringing his math papers home so I could review them.

Conclusion

I’m big on solving problems. I hate making the same mistakes over and over again. The first step in problem resolution is to identify the problem. In the first part of the story an English teacher relied on the more skilled students to teach the less skilled students. My son, Sean, ended up doing the teacher’s job. It’s unclear what she did during that time, but it wasn’t teaching the children who needed her most.

In the second part of the story I was forced to deal with a math teacher who found more importance in collecting evidence to prove his justification in failing a student rather than putting extra effort into helping the student succeed rather than fail.

There were two common denominators. In both examples the teachers took the easy way out and in both cases that consisted of opting out on their reason for being there and receiving a paycheck... they both ignored the needs of the slower children. They both chose to not do their jobs. The second commonality is that all three teachers saw me as a threat and/or a nuisance because I wanted my children to get the best education they could. Parents were expected to allow the school to do as it pleased. In contrast to history, parents were discouraged from taking an active interest in their child’s education.

In all fairness there were also some very good teachers and even one that was outstanding. The outstanding one left about a year later. She left teaching for a less stressful and higher paying job. Who could blame her? The three teachers I mentioned here are still on the job, still collecting their pay and still looking down on their real employers... “we the people.”

