



News Report Activity: Case 7

Case 7: 'Skyler: A kind teacher can have a lasting effect'. (The Orange County Register, 2015).



My daughter, Lux, was lucky to have a wonderful Kindergarten teacher, Patricia Hermsen at Kennedy Elementary in Madison, Wis.

PHOTO BY HEATHER SKYLER

I was a kindergarten dropout. That sounds like a joke, but it's actually true. I have a borderline birthday, Nov. 27, so I was not quite old enough to make the cutoff into kindergarten. My mother had me do some testing and I got in early based on those tests, but once I arrived I was almost immediately filled with despair.

For one, I had missed the first month of school so started off already behind, but even more crucially, my teacher was cruel. I don't even remember her real name, but we called her Mrs. Manly, because she was mean ... like a man, I guess. (Sorry men, that was my kindergarten self talking).

Mrs. Manly kept our notebooks in a stack by the windows, and when it was time to work in them, she'd call out our name then throw the notebook onto the floor. We'd each scamper over when our name was called, scoop up the book, then scurry back to our chairs. If you failed to run and retrieve your notebook, she yelled at you. If you ever asked a question, she'd snap at you. Other than that, I can't recall what she did that seemed particularly mean – perhaps I've blocked it out – but I know I was afraid to speak to her about anything.





So I sat there in my tiny plastic chair, staring at numbers I was supposed to be adding together, and wondering how it all worked. I'd missed that initial lesson and never had the courage to ask Mrs. Manly how to do it, so I started guessing, or trying to copy off my neighbor. Basically, I was headed for a life of cheating and confusion when, luckily, I got the chicken pox.

Due to the pox, I missed another long stretch of school. I spent time wandering in my backyard, wearing socks on my hands and being slathered in anti-itch potions, and when it finally came time to return, I told my mom, "I'm not going back." You see, that extended period away from Mrs. Manly had given me time to reflect on my life, and that teacher was not someone I wanted in it.

To my delight, my parents agreed that I could wait and start kindergarten again next year. So, I was an official dropout for half a year, then I got my second chance.

Mr. Ault, my next kindergarten teacher, wasn't a kindly angel by any means, but he was a bit more fair, a tad less scary and I started at the beginning of the year – rather than partway in – so I had an easy time keeping up. Teacher-child relationships matter. I think we all know this, but an unusual study conducted in Germany in 2012 with 120 6-year-olds revealed just how crucial a kindly teacher can be.

The students were each given cognitive tests on a computer, such as solving problems about shapes, patterns and analogies. Between each question, a photo of their teacher's face was flashed on the screen for a second. They didn't even realize it was there – the photo was meant to register only subliminally – but the results were interesting. The kids who had a close, affectionate relationship with their teacher, as opposed to distant or cold, ended up solving many of the problems faster. And other studies have shown that the effects of a warm student-teacher bond during a child's early years can have a long-lasting positive influence, including lower stress levels and better academic outcomes in the future. (For more on the 2012 study, visit parentingscience.com and search "student-teacher-relationships.")

What would've happened if I'd stayed in Mrs. Manly's class? Would I have been forever lagging behind, answering questions slowly as I pictured her disdainful face? Since so many factors influence how a student does in school, it's difficult to say, but I'm guessing I had a better school career due to dropping out, and I'm grateful that my parents listened to me and let me quit.

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