

ELEMENTARY CASE STUDY

Tim Kelly: A School Responds to a Family in Need

Tim meanders toward his second grade classroom after a difficult ride in on the school bus. Feeling cooled off after his angry outburst at another child who had taken his seat on the bus, Tim greets his teacher with an affectionate hug. She returns it with enthusiasm. She surveys Tim's disheveled appearance—uncombed hair, dirty t-shirt, and unbathed body—and gently suggests that he wash up in the principal's bathroom.

When he returns, Tim plops down at his desk at the front of the classroom and gobbles up the breakfast snack his teacher has provided. Then he opens up his backpack and proudly presents his teacher with a crumpled, but completed homework sheet. His teacher's thoughts turned immediately to the impending decision about whether to retain Tim or promote him to the third grade.

Terri Kline, Tim's Teacher

“I've taught in the primary grades in this school for over thirty years. My own children even went to this school. I love all the children I work with and am especially fond of Tim. Because I teach in a multi-grade classroom, I've had Tim in my class for two years. He's a wonderful kid, very thoughtful and very sweet. He and I have a very close relationship and he works his level best in my presence to do what he thinks is expected of him.”

“At the same time, Tim has serious problems that are really affecting his relationships with classmates and his math performance, which is well below grade level. So much so that I'm beginning to think he should be retained in the second grade. I mean, third grade is a whole different environment with academic and social demands that Tim may not be able to weather quite yet. But we can't make that decision without someone at the school talking to his mother about it first.”

“Basically, the problem is that Tim often comes to school unprepared for class, both academically and socially. His homework is often missing or destroyed. He doesn't come in clean. He wears the same clothes over and over again, even though he does have others. He has problems managing his anger. I personally think he's just not getting enough supervision at home.”

“Tim and his brothers and sisters live with his mother, Maureen, in what seems like a very hectic household. Maureen works a late shift, so she's usually sleeping when her kids leave for school. I'm guessing he doesn't have a regular bedtime. He gets himself up in the morning and gets himself dressed. He doesn't have breakfast at home—he eats breakfast here. Tim really feels the absence of his mom at home, I think, which seems to make his need for attention in school even greater. He normally doesn't see his mother before he leaves for school in the morning, so he's starting off the day without contact with her and without even a hug. I think he's a very needy child, emotionally.”

“On the other hand, Tim's such a warm, fuzzy kind of kid that something obviously has been right in order for him to be as gentle and as loving as he usually is. So I have to give his mom credit. I think she wants to be a part of his school life. I also think she's interested in him doing well, but she doesn't seem to want to hear about the difficulties he's having.”

“He's especially had a lot of problems managing his anger lately. This has happened before and it's resurfaced in the last few months. The school guidance counselor and I can't help

ELEMENTARY CASE STUDY

thinking it's connected to visits with his father. Even though Tim doesn't see him very often, each time he returns from a visit, he acts out a lot at school. His father has a history of violence and was released from prison last year. I really worry about his influence on Tim. The first time Tim went off with his father, his behavior was very out of bounds when he returned. I would give my right arm to know what happened over this last vacation to result in such a change in Tim's behavior.”

“But even if I do find out all the answers about what's going on in Tim's home life that's affecting him so much in school, it's not my place to ask his mother to do more than she already does, nor can I do anything more than I already do for him. And I'm not convinced that what I already do, or what his next teacher is likely to do, will be enough to ensure that he can succeed in third grade.”

Tim's Mother, Maureen

“I think it's really important for families to help their kids and go to their schools and stuff. I think you have to take an interest in your kids and you have to be right there with them, which, in the last year and three months, I haven't been able to do. And I think it makes a big difference.”

“In a perfect world, I'd be rich and could stay home all the time and just be there. We'd be out there takin' our field trips, goin' to the park, goin' over to the playground, takin' a walk in the night after supper, readin' a book before bed. I hate my work situation. I mean, those kids never went to bed without me readin' them a story. It's tough. They miss it and I miss it.”

“The main thing is that I'm not home with the kids, so I don't see them much—if I'm lucky, I might see them an hour in the mornings every once in a while, and I see them on the weekend. But that's when we do all our errands. I go to the store—you know, haircuts, whatever. So it's hard to schedule. I mean, I have a full schedule and a full house. With the three younger kids, my two older kids, my fiance and his two kids, and my new grandbaby, the house can get pretty crazy. Plus, this swing shift job I've had this past year really makes it hard to spend time with my kids.”

“Sometimes when I'm gone, my older daughter Jane watches the kids, but I can't count on her to read to them or help them with their homework.”

“As far as talkin' with Tim's teacher about his school work, the fall parent-teacher conference was pretty upbeat, and Terri talked about how much better he was doin' in reading. But she seemed kinda rushed. I know for me it's mostly hard to make it to the school or even call 'cause of my schedule. Last year I had to fight to get conferences in the early afternoon because I'm just not up to doin' that so early in the morning after working all night.”

“I think it's a good sign that I don't hear from the school too much now. Just the fact that I'm not getting phone calls about Tim actin' up on the bus means he's probably gettin' better. I know he's still lashin' out at school when he gets mad, and that the guidance counselor wants to help. She's gonna start seein' him in school. She's supposed to call me back Thursday and set it up. We talked the other day. She wanted to know how I felt about everything—Tim, his problems, his school work, you know. I wanna make time to meet with her and think about how to work together, but I'm just so busy, and I can't figure out how to balance it all. How am I

ELEMENTARY CASE STUDY

supposed to stay on top of Tim's school stuff and my other kids' stuff, and also work these crazy hours?"

Shellie Scott, the Guidance Counselor

"I've worked at Lincoln School for almost twenty years, and it's a small school in a small town, so parents and teachers know me pretty well. Parents sometimes call me directly with their concerns, whether it's about a kid misbehaving, or a case of child abuse, or a family problem. I have an open door policy and a listening ear, so it's not uncommon for kids to come see me of their own initiative sometimes. I'm also friendly with just about every community agency in the area, and I try to connect kids to outside resources, like summer camp or family counseling, when I can."

"I have known Tim's family for a long time. In fact, 10 years ago, I was the one who counseled the family when Tim's father first became violent toward family members. Even back then, I think I counted nine people at one point, living in that house. So Tim's mother has had a lot to deal with. It's so chaotic that things don't get enough attention and that nothing runs very smoothly. I think that the kids sometimes get overlooked. I think Maureen works very hard—I think she tries to balance it all. I don't know who could do it."

"I think that Tim's mother hasn't been able to, or hasn't been very comfortable about coming to school. So I imagine that Tim and the other kids might feel that school isn't so important, since their mother doesn't spend any time with their teachers. I'm sure that Maureen doesn't have the time—and I'm sure that there isn't any reasonably quiet place in the house—to kind of sit down and maybe read to the kids. The kids probably don't think much about their own school work as a result. How could they work in such an environment?"

"Tim's behavior problems have been escalating, and I haven't had much success reaching Maureen by phone, so I wrote her a letter expressing my concerns. I didn't raise the retention issue that Terri's debating, because as an academic issue I think she or the principal needs to take the lead, but I did discuss Tim's need for more attention at home and his increasing behavior problems. I thought she'd be angry with me when I read this letter to her—she had missed a couple of meetings with me and she wasn't following through on some things. But I didn't know how else to reach her and I believe firmly in being direct with parents and informing them frequently about their children's school progress. I just hope the letter I ended up sending her doesn't make her feel totally annoyed or alienated."

Tim's Mother, Maureen Kelly

"I think Shellie is great, really easy to talk to. She's someone I can say anything to. Plus she's much easier to reach on the phone than Tim's teacher, because she's not teaching a class or something when I'm off work and trying to call."

"Shellie sent me this nasty letter. Well, it wasn't actually a nasty letter, it's just her opinion of what's going on with the kids and why it's going on. She basically wrote that I maybe wasn't giving my kids enough attention, and I absolutely agree. You know, I've tried to help my kids though. Tim loves to read and I just brought him home a book on dinosaurs. Each week, I also try to keep one of the kids home for one day, so I can give them one day where it's just the two of us, to do something. We'll just hang out, go out to lunch, maybe get some books. We'll talk about feelings."

ELEMENTARY CASE STUDY

“Of course, what I really want is a regular shift, even if it means taking a cut in pay. I may have to work an extra couple of hours to make up for the pay cut, but I'd do it. I've gotta get on the first shift. I liked it better when I was going to the school and picking them up and seeing the teachers, and saying ‘Hi’ every day. You know, volunteering in the kindergarten, that kind of thing. Just bein' there, seeing how things are goin'. That's my dream, and that's what's good for the kids.”

Edward West, the Principal

“I was really saddened when Terri mentioned her concern that Tim might not be ready for the third grade. I really like Tim and am pretty familiar with some of his problems on the school bus and in the playground, because I tend to get involved with disciplinary problems outside of the classroom. So when I see him in the hall, I always try to find out how he's been doing. I also know he's made some progress on his reading, and sometimes I invite him to come read a book to me.”

“Fortunately we're a small school with a close and experienced staff, so we can give students that kind of individualized attention. Plus, I'll create any excuse to spend one-on-one time with the students, especially now that my own kids are grown up.”

“But seriously, when I think about the struggles that families like Tim's face, it has so many implications for how we have to change our role as educators in children's lives. A lot of parents have to struggle to get food on the table, meet their rent payments, and take care of the basics like heat and light. More and more kids are needing extra support from the school, because their parents are so stressed out with work and finances.”

“You know, many of the kids want a lot more attention when they're here, because they're not getting it anywhere else. The economic struggles of our families demand more resources of the school—maybe some extra counseling service, extra nursing service, extra work for the teachers. Teachers are spending a lot more time counseling parents. I think they want to be helpful and supportive, but a lot of them don't have the background to be the advocates, really, that the parents need. So professional development becomes another resource we need more of. But I think the nature of the work is shifting, and more and more we have to do it, because more and more the social agencies are not picking up that need. Besides the issue of limited resources, some people argue ‘it's not your role.’ And my argument is, ‘Hey, we have the kid, we need to help the kid.’”

“So we do some things that a more traditional school might not do, like paying parents' medication bills on occasion, or feeding and putting clean clothes on a kid. We've even talked about having washers and dryers for us to clean some kids' clothes.”

“The question becomes ‘what is our role?’ We're being forced to be much more of a social agency, but really, that's not what our role is supposed to be. But you can't ignore a hungry child; you can't ignore the fact that a child doesn't have clean or warm clothes or that the child's mother—or the child—is abused at home, which makes it impossible for the child to go to school and concentrate. So you end up doing a lot of things so that the child can come ready to learn. And so it's like, ‘how do you do that?’”

ELEMENTARY CASE STUDY

Terri Kline, Tim's Teacher

“Ed, Maureen, and everyone at this school has tried to help Tim. I know I've tried to do some things myself to help him with his hygiene and his eating habits. There are a couple of kids that I have washcloths and towels for. When they come in, obviously very dirty, I just give them the towels and they go down and wash up and feel a whole lot better. I also buy snacks for my students, to make sure they eat healthy food each day and to level the playing field among all the children. I see the nonacademic help I give as just part of my job as a teacher.”

“I think that if you're working with children, that's a part of the role. If you're not involved in the child's whole life, then it doesn't make sense to me. The child as a person is more important than just learning to read. Plus his anger and his lack of attention at home end up getting in the way of his learning. I certainly see that with his struggles concentrating on math and staying on top of his homework. So I try to make up for all of that in class.”

“I also try to encourage Tim to take on some of the responsibility himself. We've tried to give him some hints about washing up and getting himself ready for school. He comes to school smelling of urine and wearing filthy clothes, day after day. So I kind of started working with him and saying, ‘You know, why don't you have a shower before you come to school in the morning, or hop in the bath quickly? It would make you feel really clean and good.’ He says, ‘OK.’”

“After Christmas vacation with his father, Tim's behavior got much worse. At one point, Shellie tried to get a hold of her and have a conference about all of her kids, her work situation, and the other stresses in her life and have some honest dialogue about what's going on, but I don't think she was able to reach her.”

“I personally don't feel comfortable pushing very hard with Maureen—leave that to the guidance counselor. I'd much rather find solutions in the classroom. Besides communication is limited on her end. During our few talks, I don't feel like she's shared a lot with me as far as what's actually going on in Tim's life. She's always private. And even though I've been flexible about scheduling meetings, she still doesn't come to conferences and doesn't return phone calls, so this is at an impasse right now.”

“And now Edward wants to meet with me to discuss the possibility of retaining Tim, which means I really have to be clear about my assessment of Tim and his family issues. And I have to come up with some ideas for how to move beyond the communication impasse with Tim's mom to include her in this decision somehow.”

Epilogue

Shellie Recalls

“After writing Maureen that letter, I really worried that she'd be angry with me. But I felt like I had to write it because there were just things that needed to be said. So, I didn't hear from her for a while. Then she really surprised me by responding positively. She said, ‘I appreciate it, and after thinking about it a lot, I took the letter to my boss, and I'm trying to get things changed.’ She took that letter to her boss to try to get her work shift changed. And it worked! Now she's working days. It'd be hard to share a lot of those things with an employer, but she did do it, and now she's working days. Not only that, but word from Terri is that Tim's shown a lot of

ELEMENTARY CASE STUDY

improvement behaviorally and attentionally, enough so that she's hoping to promote him to the third grade afterall.”

Answer as a group...

1. What does Tim's Mother Maureen see, hear, and feel when she enters an early childhood program, school, or afterschool program?
2. How does Maureen see teachers?
3. What does Maureen hear from and feel about teachers?
4. What might be some potential intervention strategies that could engage this family?

Other Questions to consider...

- What assumptions do school staff make about Tim's home life? About Tim's father? How can the school learn more about Tim's family?
- What struggles does Maureen face in balancing her work and family life? What strengths does she possess and what strategies does she employ?
- How has Tim's home life affected his school functioning and academic success?
- How and when should retention in the second grade be decided?
- Who holds responsibility for responding to Tim's unmet needs?
- What kinds of supports do schools and teachers need to respond to Tim's needs?
- Why did Shellie write the letter? What are the pros and cons of writing it?
- What barriers exist to effective home-school communication?
- What else could the school do to overcome these barriers?

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