



“It’s Taken Care Of”: A Collaborative Effort by a Student and a Teacher to Keep Trouble out of the Classroom

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The morning was cool and fresh, just after the winter break, as I climbed the steps to the elementary school. I was loaded down with my milk crate bins of supplies, looking forward to introducing a new lesson to my fourth-grade art students.

I was in my fifth year of teaching and felt like the luckiest person on earth. Why? my friends would ask: you have no classroom of your own, you have to cart around all your supplies from room to room, you teach over 400 students in three schools – what’s so great about that? My response was always: The kids! The art! This is a job where I get to bring those two together and witness the surprises that come forth when kids are let loose with art materials. They’re hilariously funny and quick with ideas, they’ll trust me with any crazy lessons – they jump right in. We collaborate, invent, try things, fail, try something else, borrow ideas, use silly voices, wear costumes– all the best of who these young people come forth in an art classroom – it’s just so fun!

This particular morning, I met first with a fourth-grade class, where I was familiar with most of the kids. I found a cart in the storage room and loaded up my supplies for the new project. When it was time, I rolled into the room and said hello to the teacher. Then I noticed one boy sitting next to the teacher’s desk and facing the wall, away from the other students. The teacher came over to let me know the new student’s name was Darnell, and he was “a troublemaker,” who was rumored to have been involved in fights and destructive behavior, so he had to be kept away from the other students.

I flinched at the label. While I really loved working with my students as they created art, I often felt dismayed by the regular use of labels for children, and I

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often wondered about how school systems could feel okay about them. The descriptions were so limiting.

We were about to work on a new group project on African art, where kids could share ideas and help each other with supplies. So, I asked the teacher's permission for Darnell to join the class. With raised eyebrows, she shrugged and said it was up to me.

I told the students they could sit where they wanted, with four students to a table. I motioned for Darnell to join in. He jumped up, and all the students quickly moved about the room until they were settled in groups. I noticed that Darnell was drawn to sit with two other boys. One boy, Tim, did not have a team and was resigned to sitting with Darnell and his two friends.

I asked the students what they thought of dividing up responsibilities so that each person had a role. They could give their own titles to the roles, but someone would need to act as speaker for the group, someone in charge of supplies, another student would write down their ideas, and someone could be a time-keeper. I had found that kids love to form tribes and have roles, so they were quick to organize themselves and came up with titles for their group members. Most groups also gave their team a name.

As I roamed the room, helping each group with challenges, I came to Darnell and Tim's group. The boys were in a big argument, and Tim was sobbing softly. I asked what they could tell me about the situation. Tim claimed that the boys, especially Darnell, were telling him to "shut up" and would not let him speak. I asked the group if there was a problem here that needed to be solved, and Darnell jumped in to say that they didn't like Tim because he was weird.

While my first inclination was to provide a lecture to these boys about inclusion, I decided that would likely go nowhere. What was needed was for me to somehow create an opportunity for Darnell to decide for himself that excluding Tim was not a kind thing to do. But how? I was in a bit of a panic, wondering what I could say that might encourage him to show some kindness to another boy.



In those seconds that passed, I remembered a conversation I had had a few weeks earlier with a new friend, Paul Gallant. He was a therapist who shared his work with me, and one evening, he told me a wonderful story about using the metaphor of strength to encourage a young person to take on Trouble when it shows up. Paul had a simple, but quite clever, approach. But what if Darnell found the idea silly and walked away? I was afraid I might make things worse. I decided to jump in and give it a try.

I asked Darnell if he would step over to the door, as I needed his help with something. His face fell, and he looked very unhappy, but with arms crossed, he walked slowly over to the door. I wondered if he was used to being reprimanded and may have suspected that I would be one more adult who would shame him. I told myself to keep going. I explained that I had not heard nor seen what had happened and I wanted him to know I was not blaming him for anything, but that I could really use his help.

A boy realizes his strength

Virginia: Can I ask, Darnell, how old are you now?

Darnell: Ten. (*Arms still crossed, turned away from me*).

Virginia: And do you feel pretty strong for a ten-year-old?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: Hmm. Would you be willing to show me how strong you are?

Darnell: I don't know. (*Mumbled, barely audible*).

Virginia: Well, I was wondering if you would be willing to test your strength by squeezing my hand as hard as you can.

Darnell: Okay. (*Cautious grin*).



Virginia: Before you do, take a deep breath and put your feet apart. Now look straight at me, and when I count to three, squeeze my hand as hard as you can. Don't be afraid of hurting me.

He squeezed my hand so hard, I had to shake it out.

Virginia: Yow. You're pretty strong. Did you say you're ten years old?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: I don't know, Darnell, I think I felt some 11 and maybe even 11½ year-old strength.

He grinned.

Virginia: But, if you agree to it, I'd like to test you again to be sure. You okay with that?

We repeated the test and, again, I had to take a minute to recover.

Virginia: Yup. No question. You've got some 11½ year old strength.

In that moment, I could see Darnell was excited; his 11 ½ year old strength had been confirmed! Sensing that, I felt encouraged and decided to go on.



Virginia: I've noticed that there's some Trouble in the classroom today, and I'm wondering if you could help me to keep it out in the hallway. Just for today. Do you think you could help?

Darnell: Okay. What do I do?

Virginia: I'm not sure what would work. Do you have any ideas?

Without any direction from me, Darnell grabbed the doorknob, opened the door, stepped out into the hallway, and yelled:

Darnell: Stay out of here!!!

"Oh, no," I thought. Yelling in the halls was prohibited, and I worried that someone might show up to find the source of the infraction. Darnell and I could both be in big trouble.

Virginia: That sounded pretty forceful and strong. You think Trouble will listen to you?

Darnell: Oh, yeah.

Trouble tries to find a way in, but fails

Virginia: Wow, that would be great, wouldn't it? I'm wondering if you could use your 11½ year old strength to help with one more thing. It looks like Trouble might have been hanging around your table and stirring things up for all of you, making people say things to make Tim cry. Do



you think Trouble will stay away now?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: Have you noticed if Tim has a friend?

Darnell: No, we don't like him – he's weird.

Virginia: So, Trouble is talking you into thinking Tim is weird, huh? I wonder how that feels to Tim – what do you think?

Darnell: I don't know – maybe lonely.

Virginia: Hm, lonely – you could be right. Do you think you could help today with that?

Darnell: Yeah.

Darnell rejoined his group, and overheard him say to Tim: Wanna be recorder?

The rest of the class time (50 minutes) went smoothly. The above exchange I had with Darnell took a total of about three minutes. For the remainder of the class, he was kind, helpful, and cooperative. He seemed to actually enjoy working on the lesson. I saw him in the hallway at the end of the school day, talking with two other boys, about 20 feet away from me. I called to him.

Virginia: Hey, Darnell – thank you.

He looked up and grinned.

Virginia: Do you know what I mean?



Another grin.

Darnell: Yeah. *He turned back to his buddies.*

I left school at the end of the day, still puzzling at what felt like an astonishing change in this young boy. It felt unreal, and I was convinced that it was a fluke, not something that would endure. That evening, I called Paul to let him know I had used his suggestion. I was excited but unsure that the change in Darnell would stick; I wasn't even sure what had happened. He talked me through the process step by step and helped me understand how it unfolded and why I might just try holding onto the belief that I was onto something.

I decided to pay close attention to what transpired in the following class sessions and take notes after each class. Here is what happened.

Sharing the story

Darnell once again worked well in his group. Although the noise level was high in the room, the groups were busy and focused. At the end of the class, I asked Darnell if I could speak to him. I told him how impressed I was that he was able to use his Strength to keep Trouble out of the room for a second time. I told him what it meant to me and the effect it had on the class. I also told Darnell that I believed other people should know about his ability to help the class and keep Trouble away. I asked him if he would be willing to meet me in the principal's office one day soon so I could let the principal know what a good job he was doing. Darnell said that would be okay. I told him I would arrange for a meeting and would let him know when we might meet to see if he was still interested.

After the class, I checked with the principal and set a date for two weeks out.

Change continues; skills are put to good use

The teacher had allowed Darnell to join the rest of the students at the worktables.



But I discovered the student art projects were missing from the drying rack, and no one seemed to know what had happened to them. After a search, we had to assume they had been thrown out. The class was extremely disappointed. I was concerned that some students might not want to start over. To my surprise, Darnell was one of the children who, after expressing disappointment, made the choice to start the project again. But one member of Darnell's group was quite upset and declared that he was not going to continue. I asked for Darnell's help, and he agreed to use his Strength to console the group member and ask for his cooperation. Darnell put his arm around the boy's shoulders, talked to him, then came over and reported to me, "It's taken care of." The boys in his group all chatted and continued to work on their art.

Widening the circle: the ripple effect

Later, I asked Darnell who would not be surprised to hear about his Strength Against Trouble, and he quickly said, "My grandmother." I asked if he would like his grandmother to know about his achievements or keep them to himself. He wanted her to know. So, I asked if he would like to share it all with her or if he'd like me to tell her. He wanted me to let her know what had happened, but said he would add anything I might have forgotten. At the end of the day, I noticed Darnell's grandmother in the hallway, coming by to walk him home, as was their custom. I told her about Darnell's achievements in our art class, especially the way he had helped me by using his Strength. Darnell added a few details. His grandmother told Darnell she was very proud of him. Darnell left school smiling.

The weeks went by, and I arranged a meeting with Darnell, his grandmother, the principal, the social worker, and Darnell's teacher. Darnell related the story of his ability to keep Trouble out of the classroom. The group asked several questions, and he responded with more details about his ability to keep Trouble away. I was surprised at his ability to recount his accomplishments, and it appeared that he was feeling a sense of pride in being recognized. The principal complimented him on his achievement and thanked him.

The child teacher the teacher

Darnell agreed to be interviewed about his expertise in keeping Trouble away, not just in art class, but in other situations, like homeroom. Once we sat down, I



asked him if he would be willing to help other children out in their efforts to keep Trouble out of their classrooms and their lives. I explained that I sometimes meet other children who have the same kind of challenge, and I knew he was now an expert in this. He said, "Sure."

Virginia: What exactly did you do, Darnell, to keep Trouble away?

Darnell: Well, I just got ready and put my things away when I was supposed to.

Virginia: How did you keep Trouble away so you could do that?

Darnell: I said, "Trouble, you're bad!"

Virginia: Trouble, you're bad. So you spoke directly to Trouble and told it that it's bad?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: What did Trouble do when you told it that it's bad?

Darnell: It went away.

Virginia: And does Trouble ever come back?

Darnell: Yeah. But I think – You can do that thing to get in trouble, or you can do something else and get to go out and play.

Virginia: Do you mean that even when Trouble tries to show up and give you a hard time, you're able to keep it away and get to go out and play?

Darnell: Yeah.

Virginia: Wow, Darnell, I'm so impressed with your Strength. I wonder if you would be okay if we used your ideas to help other children when Trouble shows up in their lives and tries to take over. Would that be okay with you?



Darnell: Okay.

Trouble still shows up, but strength wins out

The school nurse stopped me in the hall several months later to ask if I had a student named Darnell. She then related the following story to me. I asked her to put the story in writing as I was so delighted that others were witnessing Darnell's growth and conquering of Trouble. Here is her account:

On April 21st, I was at the clinic window, and I noticed a group of boys on the playground. They were playing four squares in the parking area near the dumpsters. One child became visibly upset over the game and lashed out physically at others. He was yelling and swinging his arms. There were no teachers witnessing the incident, and the children could not hear or see me at the window. One student, whom I believed to be Darnell, immediately put his arm around the angry child and tried to walk him away from the area. He went back and put his arm around the other child. I could see that he was talking to him. I wasn't sure of the names of the children involved, so I called the secretary to the window. She verified for me that the peacemaker was Darnell. I wrote his name on my student log, followed by a two-word description of what I had witnessed: Darnell – the hero.

Solidifying the story

During our last art class of the year, students created heavy board portfolios for their work from the year. With markers, they drew and colored designs on the outside of their portfolios that reflected their personalities. I noticed that Darnell was drawing a large face of a young, strong man on his portfolio, and then saw that this man was lifting a barbell with weights.

Virginia: Darnell, that's quite a drawing there – is that you lifting weights?



Darnell wrote "174 lbs." next to the barbells.

Darnell: Yeah, you know – Strength.

Virginia: Of course. I understand.

The other boys at the table asked what we were talking about – what about strength? They wanted to know.

Darnell said, "It's between us". He went back to drawing.

Checking in to celebrate success

Although I married (Paul Gallant!) and moved to another state, I contacted Darnell and his grandmother two months later and sent him a certificate honoring his Strength Over Trouble:

Presented to Darnell

Official Certificate of Strength Over Trouble

in honor of your amazing skill in keeping Trouble out of the classroom and out of your life.

It has become clear to me, to your teacher Ms. Davis, to the school nurse, Ms. Henson, to the principal Dr. Leeds, to the other students, and to your grandmother that you are a boy with determination to keep Trouble away.

Your eleven and a half-year-old strength, and your ideas and methods, will be an inspiration to other students who want to take on the challenge of Keeping Trouble in Its Place.

Congratulations, Darnell, on your extraordinary accomplishment!



Good luck to you in the fifth grade; feel free to share this certificate with your new teacher so she is aware of your Strength Against Trouble.

Signed by Ms. Maxfield, Ms. Henson, and Dr. Leeds

Follow-up at two years

I phoned Darnell's grandmother and asked about her, the family, and Darnell. She reported that he was doing well in sixth grade with no problems at school or home. She commented that he still had the certificate on his wall and enjoyed talking about his Strength Over Trouble. I spoke with Darnell, who said he still had the Certificate of Strength. He told me he had some good friends and was involved in school activities. His grandmother told me he continued to be the protector and advisor to his two younger cousins. Darnell and his mother gave me permission to write up and share his story with others.

Follow-up at five years

A phone call at five years confirmed the transformation in Darnell. His grandmother also told me she was going back to school to get her GED. She had found a tutor in the school system and, since I knew the teachers and staff, she asked if I could guess with whom she was working on her lessons. I named a few teachers who had done GED coaching before, but she said, "No. It's Darnell." It was Darnell who was tutoring his grandmother. He was happy and doing well in school, with his friends, and with his family.

How these interactions with Darnell affected me

Because of the success of this collaboration with Darnell, I was interested in learning more about using a Narrative Therapy approach with children. I studied with Walter Bera at the Kenwood Center and enrolled in a Master's program in clinical social work. Post-graduation, I worked as the children's therapist in a local clinic, then joined Paul in private practice.

My young clients and I collaborated in building an Anti-Worry Machine, a Brain House, and a laboratory for concocting secret ingredients for dispatching Troubles. We used photography, painting, sewing, clay, to build models of the Troubles that tried their best to sneak up on kids. When the kids found ways to



take control, they recorded their ideas in a book titled *Advice for Kids and Teens* by other Kids and Teens. What an absolute joy to experience the delight and pride that children feel when they realize their courage, creativity, and wonderfulness.

Discussion

What stood out for me.

I found this approach with Darnell to be a little different from what I had learned in classroom management trainings. Getting to know your students, tracking behavior, correcting in private, and praising in public— all these, and more, were part of what we practiced.

But what stood out for me in this interaction with Darnell was that he and his expertise were given center stage. He had power (his strength) that I didn't have. He was willing to show me evidence of that strength by doing the test. I wondered: had he ever before considered that he had such strength? What might have gone through his mind about how he could use this mighty strength?

I mentioned that there seemed to be Trouble in the classroom, and Darnell didn't ask what I meant. So likely we both recognized that something was amiss and, by talking about the problem – Trouble – in this way, we were both able to see it as something separate from either of us. He was not accused of anything or shamed. We were in this together.

He then responded to my request for help in keeping Trouble out of the room by jumping in and collaborating with me! I was amazed. He immediately opened the door and commanded it to stay away. He was loud and firm with Trouble. I had not offered any prompt. I didn't try to trade his assistance for a reward. He wanted to help.

So, when it came to asking him to use his 11 ½ year old strength against Trouble that was hanging around his table, he already knew what he wanted to do. He took charge and made it right. Quickly.

It felt like we were two humans working together on a solution to a problem, and he was the one who took the lead. That felt humbling yet very exciting to me. It



made me so much more curious about young people and their skills.

It seemed important to Darnell's preferred story that his Strength Against Trouble was told and retold, remembered and celebrated over the years. Not only did this alternative story about Darnell grow and thrive in primary school, but it also carried over into other areas of his life. He became a focused high school student, a mentor to his cousins, and a tutor for his grandmother. His journey is an example of how alternative stories can recruit new audiences and new contexts over time.

If I knew then what I know now.

I have learned that there are many different directions therapy conversations can take. In my initial naïve approach with Darnell, I chose one and explored that. But upon reflection over the years, I've come to realize that we could have taken other forks in the road. I think about what we might have talked about. Directions that still have me feeling curious about the expanding story of Darnell and his Strength Against Trouble. Here are a few examples:

I would have liked to explore further the importance Darnell put on Strength. I approached him to access something meaningful to him (his physical strength) and asked him to use Strength in a helpful way. He claimed his Strength and saw value in using it for good. I would want to explore the history of this Strength and other ways he may have used it to help. I wish I had asked him:

"When did you first begin to see yourself as a strong young man?"

"Who else might have noticed this strength of yours?"

"What do you think they noticed that told them you have strength?"

"What ways did you build on your strength?"

"How do you think your strength has helped you to become the young man you are today?"



I would have wanted to connect with his interest in being a Leader. What was important to Darnell was to be seen as a strong man with leadership skills. I would be curious about the history of this Leadership skill. I would ask Darnell:

“Was there someone you knew, or learned about, who you chose to model your life after?”

“What was it you noticed about that person that interested you?”

“What kinds of challenges come up for a person in a leadership position?”

“What skills do you already have that have helped you to develop even more as a leader?”

“Can you think of an opportunity you’ve had that has offered you the chance to show your leadership skills?”

I would have encouraged further conversations with Darnell about other skills he might have that are not hidden but may have been ignored or missed in others’ ways of seeing him.

“When problems have come up and hogged all the attention, what abilities and skills of yours have been there in the shadows?”

“Would you be interested in bringing those skills into the light?”

“If so, how might you do that?”

“If I wanted to learn more about these skills of yours, who else might be able to tell me about them?”

I would have liked to have asked him to share some stories or memories of these qualities and skills with me, which would have brought forth even more questions, more opportunities for exploration. And I would like to have had a chance to interview Darnell and his grandmother further about his lifetime



experiences as a young man of strength, leadership, and courage.

Stimulating books and articles

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