

# The Teacher As Bully

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*The current focus on the problem of "bullying" has produced a flurry of programs, mandates, legal action, books, articles, and web sites; but I have yet to see research on the insidious behavior of the biggest school bully of them all—the teacher.*

Students who don't conform, don't hand in assignments, don't abide by rules and procedures, and who are disengaged, apathetic, and oblivious to bad marks, test results, and low grades, are the scourge of every teacher, though such students exist to varying degrees and numbers in every classroom. Two or three such "troublemakers" categorized as "at-risk" can create havoc, and cause inordinate frustration, off-task time, management problems, and discipline concerns for hard-working, well-intentioned teachers. In too many schools such students are in the majority. Attempts to get the interest, to correct the behavior, and to change the attitude of these recalcitrant, uncooperative, intractable students frequently cause teachers to resort to classroom control strategies that are not only counter productive, but that actually transform teachers into the biggest bullies in school.

Three particular problems form the basis of the teacher as bully: First, many teachers, who were good students when they were in school, fail to understand such misbehavior as defense mechanisms of students who are embarrassed, bored, or fearful of showing their incompetence. Second, in their own school experiences and teacher training, they had little opportunity to learn alternative responses to uncooperative students. Third, teachers frequently employ teaching strategies based on faulty assumptions and erroneous beliefs about negative motivation, reluctant learners, and the underlying causes of students' hostile, anti-learning, anti-teacher attitude.

Believing that punitive responses, withholding approval, using embarrassment, teasing, shame, sarcasm, and failure will cause students to improve their behavior, teachers frequently employ the very same control methods used by student bullies to intimidate their victims. Probably only a few teachers resort to deliberate bullying, humiliation, or intimidation, but too many others use these techniques thoughtlessly, automatically, subconsciously, or because they have learned that bullying, without naming it as such, is an acceptable form of student control and classroom management.

## Teachers Have Power

Although teacher's intentions, reasons for control, and feelings are quite different from those of student bullies, the effect on the victim and the methods used are precisely the same. But, since teachers are role models who possess overwhelming power, authority, and influence in school, their bullying is far worse than that of notorious schoolyard bullying. In addition, teachers' lack of awareness, unwillingness, or inability to acknowledge their role, makes their bullying all the more insidious and deplorable. School culture itself can contribute to bullying. Teacher bullying behaviors are driven by the demand that individuals conform to academic and behavioral expectations whether or not those demands are appropriate or even possible. I was reminded of student perception of teacher behavior, as I observed one of my daughters, a fourth grader, playing school with three of her friends in front of the apartments where we lived. As the game began, everyone wanted to be the teacher. It is no fun being a student. Shannon, a sixth grader, who was a grade level or two above the other three, easily won the starring role.

Her performance was absolutely stellar. Whatever anyone's stereotype of the portrayal of *teacher* might be, Shannon played it flawlessly. From the yardstick she used as a pointer to slam against the knee-high wall, which served as her imaginary desk, to her voice inflection, intonation, gestures, and exaggerated articulation; she *was* a teacher. She gave orders reminiscent of my old Army drill sergeant and meted out punishment fast and furious along with nonverbal gestures and hostility that caused me to cringe. As I expected, because the students, unlike in real school, were volunteers there to play and have fun, the game didn't last long.

With the intimidation by schools and teachers, with the labeling, name-calling, judging, belittling and intimidating aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act, it seems all too logical that the punitive, coercive pressures should be extended to students in individual classrooms wherein teachers can take on the role of "Big Bad Bullies". Teachers, serving as role models, condone bullying behavior in those students eager to identify with the teacher, gain approval, and who avoid identifying with the failing and fearful students.

### **A Bully Pulpit**

Although barely one-rung up the ladder from their students on the educational food chain, teachers nevertheless use their "bully pulpit" to intimidate failing students, who most need acceptance and understanding. Teachers' use of bullying techniques on struggling students not only fails to alleviate the problem, but creates a climate in which such behavior becomes a precursor, giving sanction to student bullying behavior and mistreatment of those same students on the playground, in the unsupervised areas of the school, in after-school activities, within teams and cliques, in homes, neighborhoods, and on the internet.

Forced into unfair competition and public comparison of daily class activities, students who feel insecure, inferior, or inept, anxiously build defenses against vulnerability to intimidation by their teachers and classmates. They learn quickly that being defiant is better than being dumb; that refusing to perform is not as embarrassing as inability to perform; and, that gaining respect of some classmates by disrespectful behaviors and clowning is better than attempting to gain approval of teachers. Sadly, students learn that bullying is the best defense against bullying and they learn to use bravado, swagger, and aggression to preclude its use on them. Teachers who fail to recognize these behaviors as defenses will react in ways that exacerbate the difficulty instead of responding in ways that reduce the problem. Without understanding root cause of the offenses, teachers feel justified in punitive reactions, intimidating gestures, facial expression, sighs, and disapprobation.

### **Bullying: A Universal Problem**

"Bullying is a problem in every school in the world," said Andrew Mellor, manager of the Anti-Bullying Network. "Bullying can be both physical and psychological. It ranges from subtle forms such as social exclusion and labeling, to harassing and tormenting, to threatening, and coercing, and to violence." Among many characteristics that define bullying, it is generally accepted to be an imbalance of power that exists over a period of time between two individuals in which the more powerful intimidate or belittle others. Who would deny that such a definition and characteristics match many student-teacher relationships perfectly?

Bullying is also based on physical size and strength, power, position, authority, superior knowledge and competence -- all of which teachers possess naturally as a part of their responsibility. It takes only a fraction of their potential power to intimidate a student. In fact, it doesn't even take intention to bully. The

mere potential, regardless of the intention to bully is sufficient in many instances to exercise bullying. And in a few cases, it can be the students' perception of the teachers' power that intimidates them.

## **Fear Dominates School Culture**

Fear, whether intentional or not, is the basis of the reward and punishment system of control that dominates school culture. Schools are run on fear. Everybody in the institution is fearful. Fear is not just a characteristic of the "inmates" but likewise of the staff and everyone at every echelon from bottom to top of the educative hierarchy.

John Holt in his first book, *How Children Fail*, described the presence of fear well:

"The idea of painless, non-threatening coercion is an illusion. Fear is the inseparable companion of coercion, and its inescapable consequences. If you think it is your duty to make children do what you want, whether they will or not; then, it follows inexorably that you must make them afraid of what will happen to them if they don't do what you want.

You can do this in the old fashioned way, openly and avowedly, with the threat of harsh words, infringement of liberty, or physical punishment. You can do it in the modern way, subtly, smoothly, quietly, by withholding the acceptance and approval which you and others have trained the children to depend on or by making them feel that some retribution awaits them in the future, too vague to imagine but too implacable to escape.

You can, as many skilled teachers do, learn to tap with a word, a gesture, a look, even a smile, the great reservoir of fear, shame and guilt that today's children carry around inside them. Or you can simply let your own fears about what will happen to you if the children don't do what you want, reach out and infect them."

If students are anxious, fearful, frustrated, worried, or intimidated all of their thinking is focused on the source of the anxiety and on relieving or escaping the painful situation. Far more students are fearful of their teacher than are fearful of student bullies. Many teachers threaten, coerce, intimidate, embarrass, and humiliate students who are different, non-conforming, behind in their work, or not engaged. It is unfortunate that students who most need positive attention, acceptance, and someone to express care and concern about them are the ones most likely to incur just the opposite, negative attention. Whatever it is that school administrators and policy makers think the students most vulnerable to bullying need—surely, bullying could not possibly be one of them.

## **Teachers Are the Biggest Bullies**

The biggest bullies in school are teachers. While their position, reasons, and intentions are very different from the schoolyard bullies, their impact is far worse. Student failure, not just failing a test, but inability to accomplish the required class work and daily assignments, frequently results in repeated failure and continuing condescension, sarcasm, and stigmatizing and embarrassing consequences.

At-risk students live in fear – fear of rejection and humiliation; fear of ostracism, continued failure and grade retention; fear of being thought stupid; and, worst of all, fear that they may actually be stupid. Equally insidious to the "fear factor" is the problem of the "good students" who seek teacher approval by identifying with the teacher and joining the ostracism and marginalization of non-conforming students, or pandering the teacher by "picking on", gossiping about, and tattling on the low-achieving students. "goody-goodies" snitching on misbehaving problem students is an all too common occurrence.

Students who create defensive gambits are marginalized and left with only the other intimidated students as associates, who are likewise marginalized. They become friends. They learn from support and encouragement as they exchange ideas with one another. In sufficient numbers, these students become a major threat to the teacher personally, to class management, and to learning thereby triggering increased drastic bullying procedures by the teachers. The bullying process sometimes encourages classmates to scorn or shun the victim. The process can progress to include added pressure from administrators, auxiliary district personnel and intensified parental pressure.

### **Teachers Need to Recognize their Own Bullying**

If schools are to reduce school bullying, current programs being adopted by school districts which include bullies, the bullied and the bystanders must also include specific procedures for helping teachers to become more aware of their own modeling potential for bullying with its symptoms, causes, and solutions. The potential for bullying by teachers is manifest in some of the same characteristics of student bullies -- an imbalance of power, a desire to control, and approval of bystanders. In other words, because teachers have a natural potential to bully students, they must be aware of that capability and be on guard against it.

Teachers become role models for bullying. Their behavior and attitude toward non-conforming students and failing schoolwork can be a precedent for behavior for other students in the class toward the low or non-performing students. This is especially true for the more successful kids who cater to and identify with the teacher. This behavior and attitude are complex and elaborate. They also can be deliberate and subconscious. From the tensing of the muscles, dilation of the pupils and nostrils, intonation, voice inflection and posture to the word choice, gestures, movement and facial expressions, the message is unmistakable. The criticisms and concerns of school bullying can be applied to the treatment of the at-risk or failing students in a classroom. The students at the bottom of the class are well known to everyone in class, as are the top students. Most adults remember from their schooling students who were "picked on" by teachers.

### **Teachers Don't Knowingly Harm Children**

Describing teachers as bullies doesn't mean that teachers deliberately hurt children. Most teachers, described as bullies, are not mean-spirited, malicious or even uncaring. They are highly educated, sensitive, professionals, who love their students, love teaching and want what is best for children. But schooling, as it is structured with age grouping, lock-step one-size-fits-all, mandatory curriculum, pre-ordained learning procedures, grade levels, schedules, failure, and retention make many students particularly susceptible to bullying techniques for discipline and control. Many students suffer anxiety, fear, and embarrassment by the actions of teachers described herein as bullying. Some former students, to this day, still suffer shame, low self-esteem and psychological problems as the result of their schooling experiences, possibly initiated and condoned by teachers themselves.

### **Teacher Belief Is the Cause**

Teachers act according to their beliefs, however they also act within a hierarchy of those beliefs. I am convinced that teachers believe in the dignity and worth of every child, including those most at-risk. But simultaneously they believe in the importance of effective lessons in an orderly, disciplined classroom. As their classroom sanctity is violated, their priority requires that they deal quickly and certainly with the offenders even at the expense of student dignity and worth. In the absence of better procedures, bullying techniques fit that requirement.

Many teachers firmly believe, however contrary to a preponderance of the evidence, that bullying, punishment, and coercion will solve their dilemma. Others believe that shame and social pressure will change student behavior. Three steps to reducing "the teacher as bully" are first, for schools to provide professional development and study groups to enable teachers to examine and reflect on their beliefs; second, to help teachers recognize student defense mechanisms as symptoms requiring helpful, professional responses; and third, to understand their role as a model of anti-bullying.

As teachers discuss their experiences in managing student behavior, a friendly question ala the Dr. Phil Show, "How's that working for you?" would be a good start toward resolving the problem of "The Teacher As Bully".