

A TEACHERS' AWESOME POWER

Mary Anne Raywid

Teachers don't see themselves as powerful, and in some ways, they are sadly correct in this assessment. In other ways, they are often tragically wrong. They tend to see themselves as relatively powerless – in relation to the negative external forces against which they must struggle, and in relation to the internal authority exerted over them by the system. Teachers know that many students come from homes that aren't particularly supportive of education, or where the youngster receive little support of any kind. They realize that it is difficult to sustain much academic momentum and effort in children who are hungry, or who return daily to a physically unsafe environment, or who are emotionally starved or otherwise abused . Under such conditions, efforts to educate are an uphill struggle, and it is not surprising that teachers feel powerless.

Moreover, within schools and school systems, the teacher occupies the subbasement of the pyramid. Department chairs, grade-level chairs, principals, supervisors, superintendents, test makers, textbook authors, parents and other community members, as well as legislators and governor and city council members, can all shackle, shape, or coerce teacher behavior. From the teacher's uneviable perspective, he or she stands vulnerable on the none-too-sturdy bottom rung of the power ladder.

Teachers certainly have justification for perceiving themselves as relatively powerless. Yet there are also grounds for seeing things in a very difficult way – a diametrically opposed way that makes the teacher an awesomely powerful figure. This is the teacher in relation to the child. Even though the teacher may be weak vis-à-vis the socioeconomic environment and the educational system, he or she often virtually all-powerful vis-à-vis the student. A lack of awareness of this has made tyrants out of people who never intended to function that way and may not even realize that they are doing so.

Teacher power is awesome with regard to establishing and controlling the social environment of the classroom. It is the teacher who determines the roles of every person in the room and the expectations that will govern every interaction. It is the teacher who decides whether the general tone of the classroom will be relaxed and informal, friendly and supportive, brisk and businesslike, essentially competitive or cooperative. And this decision has profound implications for students and what is expected and required of them. A teacher

who distributes multipaged sets of classroom rules on the first day of school makes quite different demands on students than the teacher who spends the first week having students become acquainted and helping them develop class rules. But both of these teachers are dictating classroom personae for the students.

It is the teacher who decides whether students will be treated as persons deserving of respect or as a group to be structured and controlled lest it gets out of hand. And it is the teacher who decides what kind of power students will possess; to what extent and in what degree they will retain the power to express themselves within the classroom. Which kinds of dress and speech and decorum will be permitted and which rendered taboo? Over what matters will individuals be able to exercise choice and some control for themselves? Over what matters will there be joint and shared control such that students in effect collaborate in policy determination for the classroom: It is the teacher who decides all this. As one insightful analyst summed it up, it is the teacher who writes the constitution for the classroom, determining not only what the rules and regulations will be but also how they will be arrived at (Sarason, 1990).

Not surprisingly, then, it is customarily the teacher who unilaterally decides throughout the day what will and will not be discussed in short, what's worth talking about. It is also the teacher who decides how matters are to be addressed – not just by whom and in what order, but the fundamental rules governing the conversation. For instance, it is the teacher who determines the extent to which negative biases and prejudices can be vented, or indeed what constitutes bias and prejudice and what does not.

The results of all these discrete decisions are powerful and ongoing. In setting the tone of the classroom climate, the roles and expectations of all and what the conversation will be, the teacher has determined who will be the winners and who the losers, whether the classroom will represent a comfortable or an artificial environment to students, permitting unself-conscious operation or requiring guardedness and self-monitoring. And since these decisions determine which children are rewarded in school and which will succeed and thrive there, they have a profound emotional impact on youngsters not only has the power to reward some behavior and punish departures from it; he or she is also in a position to provide the explanations for lapses and to proceed accordingly. The teacher's role gives her or him the power to decide, for instance, that Johnny's just trying to get attention, or that Susie is emotionally troubled, or that Sam is just mean and nasty and determined to make trouble for everybody else. This means that the teacher has the power to provide the crucial explanations that

guide and justify decisions to read students' intentions and assign motives to their behavior. The power to act on such formulations can be far reaching indeed, so far a child's future is concerned.

To cite yet another sort of power: We are aware of the vulnerability of young children, and we recognize the power teachers can have over them when youngsters accept the teacher as a fount of knowledge and as always right, or as a figure to be emulated. What we are sometimes less aware of is the emotional impact teachers can exert on youngsters of virtually any age. One important reason is the enormous authority teachers possess within the classroom, serving as rule maker, assessor, judge, and jury in relation to their students. Another reason is that youngsters are often unaware of protections and protest procedures, and there may be no place to turn despite how bad things get. School is required. A lot of time may pass before a child is even capable of formulating a grievance or perceiving it as remediable or as the fault of someone other than himself or herself. It is this kind of naivete, plus the imbalance in the way the resources are distributed between child and adult, professional and client, that makes youngsters so impotent and vulnerable and that transforms the teacher's considerable formal authority into power that is awesome.

One image I will always retain is of a tiny 6-year-old Filipino boy hopping around his classroom, repeating. "My teacher say I stupid. My teacher say I stupid." I have often thought of the costs that probably attached to the unforgivable comment or behavior that prompted that child's grotesque little dance around the room. The teacher's power remains, however, even after youngsters have become more aware and sophisticated. For instance, a recent study found that fifth graders actually believed that they had become more intelligent once their teachers ceased scheduling them for remedial instructions used to be dumb." They said, in effect. "But now I'm just as smart as anybody" (Vosburgh, 1993). Consider, then, the enormity of the emotional impact of a teacher's fairly routine decision to enroll a student for remedial work – and of the later decision to declare such enrollment no longer preferable.

In reality, however, the youngsters who believed that their intelligence had been altered by a teacher's assignments are not totally wrong. A teacher's power is such that judgment about a child's ability, whether accurate or not, determines the kind of work laid out for and expected of that child. Thus the decision that a youngster is intellectually limited will probably restrict that child's assignments to simpler, less challenging material, which puts the teacher in the position of fulfilling his or her diagnosis. A child treated that way long enough may never

be able to catch up. Such a child actually becomes intellectually limited, whether he or she started school that way or not. Through the making of such decisions, a teacher has the power to decide who will be tomorrow's leaders and professionals and who will be the laborers with far lesser rewards.

We tend to think that by adolescence many youngsters are relatively impervious to their teachers, but even those who appear most indifferent are not necessarily so at all. Indeed, one prominent theory about why students reject school – either through disruptive behavior or by dropping out – is that it is their only way to protect themselves: Their failure forces them to choose between their own self-respect and self-esteem, on the one hand, and school, on the other. The price of sticking it out in school and deferring to teachers' rules and assessments is their own positive conceptions of themselves (Gold & Mann, 1984). Under such conditions, it may well be that dropping out is the emotionally healthier response.

We know that people of any age may reject learning from an individual they dislike. It is also the case that they may reject learning from an individual they perceive to dislike them. One of the most frequent explanations dropouts give for having left school is non caring teachers. This helps explain why some observers insist that many dropouts are really “pushouts” instead. It means that teachers, through expressions and behavior that convey indifference or hostility, have the power to make a youngster want to leave school. And once that departure has occurred, the youngster's life chances have been seriously compromised – opportunities related to employment, income, job satisfaction, and lifestyle. Thus, the emotional impact teachers have on adolescents as well as on younger students can set power, is indeed considerable.

We have not yet mentioned the teacher's power over the content of student's mind. This, too, is far more substantial than we typically imagine. We know that young people are exposed to a number of powerful influences outside school – family, neighbourhood, and peers, not to mention television. But it would be difficult to over-rate the significance of the teacher in shaping the intellects of the youngsters in their classrooms, By the time a student graduates from high school, he or she has spent in the neighbourhood of 14,000 hours under the tutelage and direction of teachers – in the only institution that is officially charged with mind and person shaping, and the only one (except, periodically, the armed forces) where the individual's attendance and participation are required by law. And it is through the role and person of the teacher that “the rubber meets the road – that is, through whom all this authority is immediately brought to bear.

Consider that within the classroom, the teacher selects and presides over the conversation, deciding what is relevant in the first place and determining the quality of those responses and entries deemed pertinent. The teacher is also the arbiter of meaning within the room stipulating the designation not only of words but also of gestures and actions. Moreover, it is the teacher who assigns significance and value to each of the meanings thus established. The teacher determines, for example. Whether a student's brilliant insights outweigh the crude and impertinent way he sometimes presents them; or whether grammar is more important than substance; or whether in doing math and science, process is more important than product, or vice versa; or whether the possession of factual knowledge is more or less important than what one can do with it.

Perhaps even more fundamentally, it is the teacher who selects the level of discourse for the classroom and, in determining the conceptual level at which business will be conducted, sets limits on the cognitive growth likely to ensue. It is not only as content chooser that the teacher exercises power over what learning is to occur, but also as arbiter of content treatment. If material is always presented and handled in its most concrete form and application, then students are not learning to generate and deal with abstractions. But if the teacher consistently pushes beyond fill-in-the-blank questions to more intellectually demanding queries, students' capacity to cope with the world in more realistic and flexible ways is being nurtured.

The teacher's handling of content also determines students' understanding of the way in which new knowledge should be screened for credibility and acceptance. One teacher's analytic frame-work may prompt her to ask of any statement that is a candidate for belief, whose idea is it? If accepted, who would it benefit and who harm? Another teacher's analytic framework might instead recommend, with which knowledge and beliefs is this idea consistent, and with which incompatible: Yet another may be modeling questions such as, what psychological dynamics would prompt an individual to advance such an idea: The point is that the teacher's mind – his or her own analytic framework for testing and accepting knowledge is constantly being set before the students. Inevitably it figures prominently in the way a teacher assesses student statements, and it may well be internalized by some students not as the teacher's orientation but as part of the way the world is.

Moreover, the way in which a teacher goes about his or her work, and stimulates students to go about theirs, generates particular habits of mind and of work. The teacher for whom neatness is first in importance will doubtless implant in some students the assumption that this is simply one of the world's qualities. The

teacher convinced of the importance of critical mindedness and a degree of skepticism in one's comportment may implant and develop that too.

The cultivation of ideas such as these within students' heads is perhaps the most long-lasting and pervasive of teachings, because they tend to become internalized in such a way as to function as "givens," the typically unquestioned assumptions undergirding what we think and do. It is this sort of learning that prompted the most defiant – but perhaps also the most sophisticated and insightful student rebels of the 1960s to admonish their teachers. "Don't walk through my head with you dirty feet." It wasn't so much content learnings that they were objecting to but the unconscious imbibing of orientations and perspectives too subtle and indirect for recognition, hence rejection. Certainly it is within the teacher's power to implant such learnings.

What, then, does all this mean? What does it suggest for teacher behavior? Teachers' awesome power seems to impose heavy obligations. Extensive moral responsibility flows from the power to benefit and to harm. One who has little such power has minimal responsibility to others. Conversely, one with the awesome power that teachers exert has enormous moral responsibility to those over whom he or she exerts it. Here are some of the things that such power and responsibility seem to recommend.

First, a teacher's obligations extend to all the youngsters in the classroom – not just to the eager and attractive and cooperative ones, but equally to those who appear least responsive and appealing. Indeed, because the least successful and least "worthy" student may be the neediest – and the one whom the teacher has the greatest capacity to help- such children may be precisely our most compelling moral obligations.

Second, since we know that children and adolescents – and perhaps even adults – need teachers to care about them, it appears that teachers have an obligation to at least try to establish personal relationships with their students and to cultivate appropriate ways of extending positive affect to them (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Noddings, 1984).

Third, perhaps teachers have an obligation to share their power. Given what we know about the role of power in eliciting the interest and engagement essential to learning, this may be necessary to teacher effectiveness and student accomplishment. As Saroson puts it:

When one has no stake in the way things are, when one's needs or opinions are provided no forum, when one sees oneself as the object

of unilateral actions, it takes no particular wisdom to suggest that one would rather be elsewhere. (1990, p. 83).

And one who feels this way about school is unlikely to be an achiever. Those cast in the role “pawns” manipulated by others are simply not likely to be effective learners (DeCharms, 1977). Thus, the teacher’s obligation to enable students to succeed may in turn obligate the sharing of power with them.

Fourth, beyond the objective of enhancing teaching and learning, there is another reason that the teacher ought to deliberately devolve some of his or her power to students. Doing so is a prime way of helping them learn major lessons and acquire vital truths about the conduct of human affairs. As Sarason puts it:

The teacher should accord students the right and responsibility to participate in ... (forging) ... the constitution of the classroom ... not not (primarily) to come up with rules but to begin to comprehend the complexities of power in a complicated group setting. (1990, p. 85).

The lesson is crucial, say democracy’s devotees, not only citizenship education but also to peaceful coexistence in any human assemblage of any size.

Finally and perhaps most fundamentally, the teacher’s possession and constant exercise of such awesome power impose an obligation of continuing consciousness of it. The nature of the situation with the enormous power imbalance between student and teacher requires that if teachers are to avoid inflicting considerable they must understand the inevitable asymmetry of power. An awareness of their capacity to damage other human beings must never be far from consciousness. And they can never allow themselves the luxury of what has been called “compassion fatigue.”

The teacher’s power is truly awesome. He or she is in a position to function as the most terrible of tyrants. Unfortunately, to the long-term detriment of children, there are teachers who consistently do so.

REFERENCES

- Bryk, A., & Driscoll, M.E. (1988). *The high school as community: Contextual Influences, and consequences for students and teachers. Madison, WI: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools.***
- DeCharms, R. (1977). *Pawn or origin? Enhancing motivation in disaffected Youth. Educational Leadership, 34 (6). 444-448.***
- Gold, M., & Mann, D.W. (1984). *Expelled to a friendlier place: A study of Effective alternative schools. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.***
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral Education. Berkeley: University of California Press.***
- Sarason, S.B. (1990). *The predictable failure of educational reform: Can we Change course before it's too late? San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.***
- Vosburgh, K.L. (1993). *Remedial pullout programs: Student perceptions. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Hofstra University, Hempstead, N.Y.***