HUMILIATION, BULLYING AND CARING IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

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Guilt, humiliation and shame, like most aspects of our emotional life, take place in a social context. In guilt, the self focuses on a behavior that is an interruption of positive social flow: one fells that a certain standard has not been met. When I feel guilty, I sense that I have done something that has failed to meet someone's standard that I implicitly or explicitly accept. I have myself in tow, and understand my situation and defend myself or even admit I have wronged and move on with my day. Humiliation however requires another person to raise a question regarding the adequacy of my self in the role in which I am acting. If I am speeding, I may feel guilty about my son watching me break the law, but I have the support of many around me who are doing the same thing. However, when I am pulled over by the police for the same behavior and told that I am driving unwisely and risking the safety of those in my car and other drivers as well, I am humiliated. If my fast driving causes a serious accident in which someone else is injured, I feel the pain of shame; I am not just a bad driver, but also an unworthy person; the self becomes the object as well as the subject.

School is the most powerful public social context for young people, and it is here that the struggle to form a positive social identity tests the resources and sense of self that children and adolescents bring with them to the daily fray. In general, children's striving for a sense of belonging, competence and autonomy are promoted by positive, supportive interactions with adults and other children during the school day and diminished or undermined by experiences of humiliation. Because school is a social system defined by rules, boundaries and memes that need to be supported to survive, there must be negative, socially painful consequences for violations or discrepant behaviors that threaten the coherence of the system and the authority of those whose role it is to sustain it.

In this context, humiliation and the fear of being shamed can serve as powerful emotional tools for shaping social behavior as children receive instruction, produce work products, move through hallways and eat together. When humiliation becomes endemic, a classroom, gym class or lunchroom can become a shaming environment, ruled by anger and aggression and a constant concern for emotional and physical safety. Good schools, however, find ways to become communities of caring, where values of mutual respect, trust, responsibility and citizenship are reinforced through school policies, rules and interdependent, supportive, appreciative behaviors.

Bullying is one of the most common behaviors for maintaining authority and enhancing social status for both adults and children in schools. Bulling can be defined as instances

in which the core ethical value of respect for the integrity and dignity of the other person is questioned or denied through various forms of humiliation. Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional, repeated over time, and involves an imbalance of power or strength. A child who is being bullied repeatedly typically has a hard time defending him or herself. Bullying can take forms such as:

- Physical bullying, (hitting);
- Verbal bullying, (teasing);
- Nonverbal or emotional bullying, (such as social exclusion); and
- Cyber bulling, (sending insulting messages by e-mail). [1]

In many schools bullying behavior is a sort of incipient or undiagnosed pernicious social virus that symbiotically feeds on the social arrangements that support the roles of those in authority and serves as a means for accessing higher social status. In toxic school environments, control through humiliation and bulling can sew the seeds of violence, as well.

Bullying can be seen when the teacher draws attention to those in the classroom who have miserably failed an exam, thus making it clear that teacher status is more important than learning supports. It can be seen when teachers ridicule students to enforce behavioral rules and when they use the teacher's lounge as way to set and enforce norms among other teachers that protect their rights to determine what matters in the expenditure of time and effort.

For kids, it is frequently the cliquish atmosphere of rejection and humiliation that makes a significant minority of students, (surveys indicate about ay 15-25 percent) very unhappy. As Elliot Aronson[2] puts it: If kids at the top of the social status pyramid start calling a kid a nerd, then the kids in the second tier of cliques may also begin to tease him because as a way of identifying with the powerful group. Social rejection that is coupled by humiliation and bullying is like having a contagious disease because other students become afraid of losing social standing themselves if they hang out with you.

When such social derision becomes pervasive, it can become so painful that some students seriously contemplate taking their own lives. A handful do attempt or complete suicide, and some become angry enough to lash out at their fellow students almost randomly, as has been the case in some of the most tragic episodes of violence in American schools in the last decade in Columbine, Colorado and Paducah, Kentucky.

Students who are the targets of repeated bullying behavior can, and often do, experience extreme fear and stress:

- Fear of going to school
- Fear of using the school bathroom
- Fear of the bus ride to and from school

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[1] *Take a Stand. Lend a Hand. Stop Bullying Now!* Campaign *(U.S. Dept. of HHS)*
[2] Elliot Aronson, Nobody Left to Hate, 2002

- Physical symptoms of illness
- Diminished ability to learn[3]

There are alternatives to schools with this kind of toxic social organization. Schools which root their policies and practices in agreed upon core ethical in which mutual respect and shared responsibility for the culture of the school are paramount can become communities of caring and safe places conducive to learning and growth. In such schools the most frequent and common disciplinary issues are dealt with openly, honestly and with a way for the perpetrator to make amends or come up with a plan to change the behavior next time. Programs that assist school leaders to change their school culture and practices with these goals in mind are increasing common and rely on the philosophical foundations of character education and the research base of social-emotional learning as their structure.

The evidence-based Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program[4], for example, teaches students to use 'hassle logs' to describe an issue that they need to resolve, need help with or need to think about. Students who have committed a infraction of classroom rules or have interpersonal problems they want to explore are referred to or self-refer to a problem solving lab where they go through a self-guided set of specific social-emotional reflections on their situation and work through problem-solving and goal-setting steps under adult supervision and support until they are ready to rejoin their classmates.

Another research-based program, the Caring School Community, features a classroom environment which engages students in conversations about fairness, respect, responsibility, and concern for others while building positive relationships among students and between teachers and students. Program tools assist students to learn planning, decision-making, and problem-solving related to classroom life. Research has shown that successful implementation results in:

- Greater liking for school and class
- Greater enjoyment of helping others learn
- Greater empathy and concern for others
- More frequent acts of altruism
- Stronger motivation to be kind and helpful
- Stronger feelings of social competence
- More sophisticated conflict resolution skills
- Higher general self-esteem[5]

Witnessing schools in which positive relationships, appreciation, celebration of diversity and a sense of connectedness and common mission dominate everyday life leave one with hope that the pervasive use of humiliation, which is so common in many schools, can be overcome.

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[3] *Take a Stand. Lend a Hand. Stop Bullying Now!* Campaign *(U.S. Dept. of HHS)*

[4] http://130.219.58.44/sdm/

[5] http://www.devstu.org/csc/index.html