



Fear in the Schools: How Students Make Teachers Afraid

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Students use body language, eye contact, verbal games, and sometimes even violence to manipulate a teacher's behavior. Fear is the object of the games students play.

We've got a problem in our public schools that people are afraid to talk about. It concerns a four-letter word that most of us are taught we shouldn't discuss or even know.

The word is *fear*. Fear is in our schools, and many teachers fear some of the students in their charge. Students know the teachers who are

afraid, and they use that fear against them. The cost is terrible: students lose respect for teachers, teachers lose respect for themselves, instruction loses its potency, and students ultimately lose out on learning.

Part of fear's power lies in the difficulty we have communicating about it. What is more threatening than disclosing our fears to ourselves or admitting to others that their actions can influence us to feel afraid?

If we do communicate our fears, we usually do our best to mask them. Fear wears many emotional disguises; for example, anger, bravado, cynicism, and apathy. In all our relationships, fear is the great corrupter—between spouse and spouse, parent and child, boss and subordinate, teacher and student. Trust and caring are driven out; manipulation and anger take their place. Loving, listening, and learning die in the fear-filled relationship.

If fear is so destructive, how does it enter our schools? It enters through the student's need to assert power and the teacher's need not to lose power in their relationship with each other.

Teachers have three interpersonal adequacy needs with students: to be liked, to be effective, and to be in control. When these adequacy needs become frustrated, they can transform into adequacy fears. The teacher who experiences strong student dislike might learn to fear rejection, the teacher whose students refuse to learn might begin to fear failure, and the teacher who cannot control a class might learn to fear disobedience. Students who consistently frustrate a teacher can become such a potent stimulus for fear that the teacher will begin to dread encountering them each day.

For their part, students are irresistibly drawn to asserting interpersonal power as part of their social development. Always impatient with their growth, they strive for independence, constantly testing the powers of those adults along the way into whose charge they have been given. Sensing fear in a parent, the child moves quickly to exploit this opening for power. (What child can resist the temptation to manipulate a guilty parent who fears recrimination for past or possible mistakes?) In the same way, students take advantage of teachers' fears.

The most commonly exploited of all teaching

victims are those who are only in partial authority—new, substitute, or student teachers. These individuals are targeted for testing even before their arrival. ("Oh, boy! We're going to have a substitute today!")

"Don't be afraid" is *not* the answer to this problem. The answer for teachers is: "Know how fear works." As long as we taboo discussion of fear in our educational system, we will protect and protract its corrupting influence in our classrooms.

To find out how "fear works," I interviewed some "experts" in making teachers afraid—regular residents of detention halls and in-school suspension rooms. These students shared their knowledge of the not-so-gentle art of teacher intimidation. What follows is a summary of the different "fear games" they described. I want to preface this summary with two impressions gained from these interviews.

First, the purpose of these "games" is not generally to terrorize the teacher; it is rather to play upon teacher fear so as to shift the balance of classroom power into the students' favor. These games by their nature are manipulative, and the use of these particular manipulations is not limited to students or to schools. There is not one of these games that adults have not used on other adults in any other institutional setting.

Second, the sophistication of some of these students is impressive; they are "people-wise" beyond their years. Keenly observant, they notice the slightest tremors of insecurity or fright, and move with incredible speed and accuracy to exploit their momentary advantage. They do not "see" fear so much as they "sense" it. And they do know how to use it.

Fear Games

- *Physical Posturing Games.* "Find out what they want, and don't give it to them" seems to be the strategy of this game. In other words, students exploit the teacher's need to impose some standards of physical bearing upon classroom behavior.

For example, take the "old-fashioned" teacher to whom "sitting up straight" is an important sign of attention and respect. Students insult that standard by lounging back or slumping forward until the teacher feels impelled to correct

them. What about those student teachers who need smiles to feel approved and accepted? Students set their facial masks into an expression of unyielding discontent. When teachers want them to laugh, they look serious; when they want the kids to be serious, they laugh; and when they at last don't know what to do, students do with them what they want. Nonverbal posturing of facial or total body expression creates a powerful arsenal of silent weaponry.

- *Physical Distancing Games.* "Control the distance, and you can control the teacher." Students sometimes test the teacher's personal space requirements: finding out what "too close" is. When a student intrudes into the teacher's space, can the teacher be made uncomfortable enough to back away? Can he/she be made defensive: "Go back to your seat!" Corners and walls can be used to the student's advantage. If the teacher needs the desk to create a barrier from the students, the students can go around it, come up behind, stand leaning over, and crowd him/her by having a number of students do this at once.

Conversely, when the teacher needs to get close, kids can play hard to reach: moving away as the teacher moves toward them, pulling the teacher into following them, and seeing how far they can lead him/her in this way.

- *Eye Contact Games.* "Play on their projections." In the words of one student: "I stares 'em down." Where there are racial or sexual differences between the student and the teacher, the power of this technique is amplified. Teachers who are unnerved by a cold, hard, unwavering stare, project their insecurity into that stare. "I don't know why they're afraid of my eyes, but I know they are afraid. I don't put anything particular into my staring, but they put a whole lot into it."

Then there are those teachers who are bothered by a lack of eye contact, who demand eye contact as a condition of listening or even respect: "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" One student I interviewed advises, "Don't give them your eyes, but listen carefully. Then when they accuse you of not listening because you haven't been looking, you can fool them."

- *Physical Motion Games.* "Make them come after you." The major motion violations have to

do with moving too fast, too slow, or when too many students move at once. Each teacher has a personal definition of how fast *running* is and how slow *dawdling* is. If students know what these are, they can make the teacher come after them for moving too swiftly down the hall or for not moving swiftly enough into the classroom. Because the teacher is always outnumbered, students can use the numbers to their advantage. "Crowding the classroom" is always an effective control-taking device. There are so many students contributing their motion to the commotion, and there's no one student identifiably responsible for creating it.

Minor motion violations are useful. If a teacher will not allow hair combing during class, the student can try hand grooming it or head scratching. Desk tapping with a pencil can be unnerving. One student who was always seated front row center was told not to do that and so shifted to quietly tapping the pencil into the opened palm of his left hand. "Why would that work?" I asked. He replied, "Tap, tap, tap is like tick, tick, tick. It's like watching a time bomb, man. They never know when I'm going to explode."

- *Voice Modulation Games.* "It's not so much what you say as how loud you say it." The power of voice raising for many teachers carries with it the implied threat of rising emotions. Simply by turning up volume, students can demand immediate attention.

Lowering the volume can be just as effective, but for different reasons. Inaudibly whispering in a teacher's presence can suggest secrets being kept from him/her. If the teacher already distrusts a student, this appearance of secrecy can imply conspiratorial intent.

A variation of this intimidation is the soft response. The teacher asks a question, and the student responds in sufficiently low volume that he/she feels forced to ask the student to repeat what has been said. The student has controlled the teacher's behavior by controlling the volume of his/her voice.

- *Unknown Language Games.* "If they don't know what you mean, they don't know what to do." Purposely unclear speech—spoken too fast, slurred, or mumbled—gives the teacher three response choices: to ignore, interpret, or inquire what has been said. The student cannot be faulted



for not responding; but, neither can the response be readily understood.

Dialect and "street talk" provide direct ways of communicating with other students in meanings hidden to the teacher; while speech in another language can absolutely exclude the teacher who understands only English. Thus is ignorance exploited.

- *Unacceptable Language Games.* "What they won't let you say lets you know what to say to set them off." Certain teachers can "fall apart" at the simple utterance of a forbidden word. The command, "Never let me hear you say that again!" is an irresistible invitation to repeat the same verbal offense. Discourtesy, verbal abuse, and insults (particularly racial or ethnic in character) are powerful explosives. Hate messages carved into desks, inked on walls, or anonymously scrawled on a chalkboard to the unsuspecting teacher's surprise can establish an underlying atmosphere of hostile communication within which many teachers find it difficult to work. Sexual terms are, of course, particularly power-laden: "Lots of teachers just don't know how to handle sex words."

- *Nonresponse Games.* "What you don't say can hurt them." For example, a new teacher stops a child in the hall for running and asks who he/she is. Since the teacher doesn't know, the student gives him/her a fake name, which he/she suspects the student has done, but doesn't know for sure. This is one way for the student to non-

respond: by not giving a teacher the truth or at least not all of the truth. The power of bluff is with the student because the burden of proof is on the teacher.

Another way is simply not to respond at all. Students can put a "freeze" on the teacher by refusing to speak when spoken to. Information withheld in this manner frustrates the teacher's need to know what students are feeling, thinking, or have been doing. Denial of communication by students will frequently put a teacher at the mercy of his/her ignorance.

"Pacing" was described as a consistently effective way to keep a teacher off balance: for students to be open and friendly in their communication one moment, and closed and cold the next. That kind of unpredictability and inconsistency can drive teachers wild.

- *Outright Refusal Games.* "Trap them into trapping themselves." The power of outright refusal is dramatically increased if the teacher responds with a conditional threat ("If you won't . . . I will . . ."). "When they do that you have them hooked." Now the teacher has been committed to a course of action that is in the student's power to control. The student has the teacher trapped between two bad choices if the student chooses to refuse: the teacher must either "put up" or "back down." The only way to escape this trap is if the student relents—asserting the student's power in this situation.

Manipulating teachers into issuing non-negotiable demands is a good way for students to pick fights with them. A student can increase the power of this game by playing it with a full class present. Public attention amplifies the effect.

- *Emotionality Games.* "If I lose control, they are responsible for getting it back." Of all the social controls important to teachers, none are more important than emotional restraint. If a child is willing "to make a scene" within the public forum of the classroom, this unbridled display of anger and suffering can have great effect. That child immediately draws attention to himself/herself, and then to the teacher who is expected to "do something" about this sudden outburst of tears and rage. "One good scene can work for a long time." The teacher will be very "careful" how he/she handles that child after-

wards. He/she doesn't want to go through another "scene" again.

- *Negative Regard Games.* "Put them down enough, and you can put them on the defensive." Personal put-downs are a particularly good way to "get" a new or student teacher. *Sarcasm* ("Yes, ma'am to a man, "Yes, sir" to a woman) and *ridicule* ("That's stupid!") can effectively injure a young teacher's confidence. Couple these techniques with *direct criticism* of a unit or project specially prepared, and the student can lower esteem to almost zero. Comments like: "We don't want to do this," "Not again," "This is boring," "We've already done this before"—all are serviceable to this end.

- *Resistance Games.* "Always have your excuses together." For the disrupting student, the fine art of pushing the limits without breaking them is an important one to master. He/she can disobey what is exactly required because he/she has some *reason* for doing so. Useful reasons include: "You're late because you were delayed; You don't have your notebook because it was stolen; You broke the rule because you didn't understand; You would have remembered except you forgot (weak); You couldn't get it done last night because of family problems at home." The best "reasons" are those that will either check out if tested, or that can't be checked out. The more often the student uses the same excuse, the weaker it becomes.

- *Physical Appearance Games.* "If the difference makes a difference, use it." Dress is the easiest to manipulate. Small accessories are used to great effect. A hat worn in class offends a teacher's desire for "respect." Studded belts with heavy buckles threaten weaponry (as do combs and more direct devices like pocket knives). Dark glasses that conceal the eyes' expression arouse profound distrust.

Sexual differences between student and teacher allow for "sexual pressing." For example, a young female teacher is openly sexually appraised by a young man in her high school class who later approaches her "for a date." A young male teacher becomes an object of seduction for a female student who sits suggestively in the front row and frequently approaches his desk during class, bending down revealingly low to ask a simple question.



Most powerfully used are racial differences. Particularly white teachers unused to racial contact allow their racial fears to be exposed and exploited. According to one student, "They're afraid of you before you even get into their class." Racially fearful teachers signal their fear in three ways: (a) the "color blind" teacher who denies the differences exist (in the hope that they will somehow disappear); (b) the critical teacher who demands that the "different" students become like he/she is if they want to do well and be accepted; and (c) the guilty teacher who tries to be like the "different" students in order to be liked by them.

- *Threat Games.* "Tell them what you'll do if they don't do what you want." There are a lot of ways this game is played. There are *direct physical threats* to teachers ("I'll get you after school.") or to their possessions ("Wait and see what happens to your car."). There are *indirect threats*—phone calls, no name given, warning what "we will do."

By telling the teacher that they're going to bring their parents up to school, or that if they don't "pass" they "will get a whipping at home for sure," students can apply external pressure on a teacher. If there is strong peer influence among an influential group of students, a powerful implied or direct message can be: "Mess with me, and you mess with my friends." Collective threats to a new teacher can intimidate: "We are all going to complain about this to the principal."

Of all intimidation games, this game and the next play most openly upon a teacher's fears.

• *Violence Games.* "Strike out one time, and they'll never forget it." This game plays on the ultimate teacher fear—that students have the power to physically hurt a teacher and can do so if they choose. The incidence of one "violent act" in a school reminds every teacher that this possibility is always there. Only slightly less threatening is student violence perpetrated upon other students. The power of one violent act by a student not only enlivens this fear among many teachers, it gives that student a reputation for violence that he/she can take advantage of if he/she chooses: "I use my reputation on them."

These are some of the ways in which students can make teachers afraid. I have described them separately, but they are most frequently used in combination. There are two dysfunctional responses that teachers can make to these games—each response posture clearly signals to students that the game is working.

The first type of response is represented in the *overrestrictive* teacher who masks fear as anger. Students described this teacher as follows: "They overfocus on you, watch you all the time. You get called down for the littlest things—things that wouldn't matter if someone else did them. When they describe what you've done to the principal, they distort and exaggerate the offense. Whenever anything bad happens, it's you they first suspect of doing it. They overpunish you, the punishment never fits the crime—someone else wouldn't get as severely treated for the same act. They remember everything you ever did—they hold your history against you."

The second type of response is represented by the *overpermissive* teacher who masks fear as apathy. These teachers were described as follows: "They don't look at you; they don't call on you; they don't make much effort to control or punish you; they don't care how you do; they encourage your absence; they give you a lot of distance; and when they want to get you to do something, they either bribe or flatter you."

It is important to realize that each response in its own way shows that the teacher is afraid, and that each teaching relationship with the feared student is educationally bankrupt. As men-

tioned earlier, fear is the complete corrupter. There is little if any learning in the instructional relationship between the fearful-acting teacher and the student of whom he/she is afraid.

This, however, is the lesser corruption; there are two others. There is the secondary impact upon other students who recognize this fear at play, resent the unfair treatment that the feared student receives, and lose respect for the teacher. Then there is the final and worst corruption of all: the teacher loses self-respect.

But what is a teacher to do? I asked some of the students this question, and they gave these suggestions: (a) *Don't back away*—physical distancing is one of the most easily identifiable indicators that a teacher is afraid; (b) *Don't back down*—relenting on a demand can indicate sensitivity to pressure from fear; and (c) *Don't fight back*—fighting fear by fighting the student indicates your susceptibility to the fear game being played.

To these I would add some final suggestions of my own. If you are afraid, don't deny it and don't be ashamed of it. Accept it. Having accepted it, try to work through it by increasing your contact with the feared student so that by knowing him/her better you may come to fear him/her less. If you cannot rid yourself of the fear, try your best not to show it—watch your own behavior carefully to see that you are neither too restrictive nor too permissive with the student. If you find that you cannot conceal your fear from the student's acute perception, then take your courage in hand and hold fast to that student when he/she tries to play upon your fears, and do not allow the student to drive you with the fears he/she recognizes it is in his/her power to elicit in you. Know the games, and how they are played—and be steadfast in your refusal to play them.



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