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## 29. THE QUIET ROAR

Bullying within our schools is an issue, that if not acknowledged, could lead to disastrous outcomes for young people. My experience with regards to bullying began as a student and has evolved, but is still present in my function as a teacher. As a child, I was different. I was not a typical “tomboy” in the sense of dress or mannerisms, but I preferred playing with GI Joe figures as opposed to Barbies, and my friends were always male. As an adolescent, I spent my time mowing lawns and fishing rather than hanging out at the mall or spending time on the telephone.

My friends have always been primarily male throughout all phases of life. This presented me with challenges as a secondary student. Female students could not understand how or why I was consistently “hanging out with the boys” rather than the other girls. As a result, I was not accepted by the girls in my age group at all. I was labeled a “whore” five years prior to losing my virginity. I was larger than most, so the nickname assigned to me by other students was ‘cottage cheese’, among other more vulgar names. I ate my lunch alone in the bleachers above the gym so that I did not have to endure the taunts of the other girls in the cafeteria. Some days my one female friend Lola would sit with me there, and I recall her and I sharing a sense of isolation within the school.

Looking back, I realize this feeling of isolation was as much perpetuated by the adults in the school as it was by the students. The “popular” kids in my high school were a very small and elite group characterized by a higher socioeconomic status than most and a great pride in material objects such as designer label clothing and shoes. These were the same students who were favored by almost every teacher, and placed on pedestals by our principals and community members active within the school. As a result, I was able to achieve academically at school, but I did so in a quiet manner with very little engagement, and was rarely acknowledged or recognized by the staff at the school.

The worst I have ever felt about myself was during my 9th and 10th grade years of high school. The other girls had decided at this point to refer to me as a particularly vulgar name and had constructed an entirely false story to go along with it. Our teachers had also heard this story, and did nothing to acknowledge that the popular girls were doing anything wrong when they referred to me in class by the name, as the name itself was a word that had both harmless and vulgar meaning depending on its context. I went from being an “A student” to being an “A student” who despised

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not only going to school, but individually despised the feeling I experienced upon entering each individual classroom.

Luckily, there was one teacher, a Mrs. Fearn from Spain, who decided that I was a student worthy of something more than was recognized. She invited me to join her in teaching kindergarten students from Guatemala English each afternoon after school. Through this experience, I not only acquired a functional knowledge of the Spanish language that serves me well to this day, but I was also able to discover an alternative pathway through the Post-Secondary Education Program that allowed me to exit the small town high school two years ahead of schedule and graduate with enough college credit to be considered a sophomore in my undergraduate program at Kent State University.

My recollections of the reactions of adults in these types of situations are negligible outside of the subtle reinforcement that occurred through their refusal to address the offenders. I recall also the realization that in all cases it was a mistake to share the challenges I was facing with the teachers that I knew at the time. Now, more than twenty years later, I still recall the additional hurt I felt when the teachers in many cases acted as if it were my fault that I had done something to provoke the torment and harassment from the other girls. I do not recall one incident where an adult was supportive or took any action to improve the situation. As a result of this, I feel that now as a teacher I am especially cognizant of when this occurs among my students. Students do not hide their actions in many cases, because we have existed in a society that says “kids will be kids” or “girls are just mean.”. These are excuses that allow adults to dismiss the responsibility that they have to the children they serve.

I teach secondary level science courses at Telle Workman High School in the Northeastern United States. Looking back now, after seven years as a high school physics teacher, I am able to see very clearly that there is a major responsibility attached to becoming an educator that is not taught in teacher preparation programs, nor openly discussed in my current professional setting. Teachers are charged with ensuring the intellectual growth of their students. This mandates that teachers be open to all students and unwilling to pass judgment on them based on the opinions of others. This means that teachers not only have an obligation to care about their students as people, but also to be willing to act accordingly in all situations.

As a teacher and an adult, I believe adults within our schools are ultimately responsible for not only the safety, but the happiness and welfare of all children whom we serve while they are under our care at school. I also believe that the primary influence on school protocol should be the perspectives of the children attending. I would even go as far as to say that in many cases, the voices of the children should be the **ONLY** ones we assign great value to.

Our students in this country are mandated to attend primary and secondary educational facilities. As such, adults should be cognizant of the fact that while they are in school, children have an innate right to sense that they are secure and cared for. Parents in general certainly assume this to be true. Unfortunately, this is not

representative of the reality that children face daily while in school. Both of these concepts require that the adults whom are present have a fundamental appreciation for students, regardless of their age group. Teachers are tested in both content and pedagogy prior to becoming certified to teach. Why is there not an ethical component to this testing? While it seems outrageous to say so, there exists a need in teacher preparation programs to analyze simple concepts such as “Is the candidate kind?”, “Does the candidate demonstrate patience and compassion with young people?”, and “Does the candidate display racist tendencies or attitudes?”

While I would suspect there would be much controversy surrounding the elimination of teacher candidates based on the analysis of these questions, the end result would be that students overall would be treated much better at school. I define ‘much better’ as to mean that they would not be intimidated or bullied by their teachers, they would feel a sense of trust and respect with all teachers, and that they would not be further victimized or marginalized due to the attitudes and actions of their teachers. It is unfortunate, but I can testify to the fact that students are not treated in this manner in a lot of cases. I have worked with phenomenal teachers who were compassionate and kind to students on a regular basis as well as strong content teachers. However, I have also worked with teachers who seem to truly despise teenagers, those who regularly curse at students, those who are obvious racists and make no attempt to hide that fact, and those who even articulate to children that they “are not here for the students, they are here for their paycheck.” In each of the aforementioned cases, children were hurt and felt a sense of isolation at school as a result.

I tend to be the teacher who hears these types of reports in our school, as the children come to me when they are upset. What does a classroom teacher do when they have no authority to question other teachers? I have supported the child in every scenario, but there are limits to the type of support that an individual teacher can offer. I cannot force people to be kind, nor confront the racism that I see in others publicly within my professional environment. What results is that children are mistreated at school, and the institution itself reinforces this with policies that enforce the idea that “the teacher is always right.” The teacher is NOT always right. There is no need for children to be subjected to inappropriate treatment in a compulsory system of education. Additionally, student learning is severely and negatively affected when this occurs. How is a child to learn from someone whom they know does not respect them as a human being? And if the student is able to conform enough to at least be successful in terms of their grade, then I would question how much additional, higher level learning would have been possible in a supportive environment. Our students are already graduating high school with a level of education that requires remedial courses to be taken upon entry into undergraduate university programs. How much of this could be eliminated if we were able to include those three simple questions in the requirements for teacher licensure?

Another aspect to this discussion is centered on the fact that so much of the bullying, done by both children and adults, stems from race. The demographic data

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now available clearly suggests that within a very short time, those who identify as Caucasian will be the racial minority in our country. Knowing the current racial minority population is the emerging majority is central to the field of education, especially if the education that is provided in this country is to remain relevant. Culturally responsive teaching practices urges children be valued as individual resources for knowledge bases be included in the curriculum and policies within American schools.

There exists a stark contrast in this philosophy and the general philosophy that exists in our schools currently. In general, it seems that current practitioners view children through the lens of a deficit model, seeing them as being in school to simply receive information, rather than as holding information of value themselves, or as contributors to what takes place in the classroom. Our minority student populations, those who will soon outnumber the white, middle to upper class students, are those whose needs we must strive to accommodate the most, in the hope that our educational system will evolve into one that is more student-centered, and acknowledging of the fact that we must move beyond the illogical practices of the past. Racism is an example of one of these practices.

The literature that is available, and promoted through Global Education networks, states that relative to other nations in the world, American students are graduating very poorly prepared for the predicted job market of the 21st century. This job market is predicted to be primarily digital in nature, and will require a whole new set of skills from our students if they are to be competitive. They are going to compete and collaborate with individuals from diverse regions of the world, thus requiring not only enhanced technological capabilities, but also the ability to communicate effectively across cultures, investigate and analyze the world they live in and possess both the ability and initiative to formulate and facilitate action plans that will address the needs of the future. These are not skills currently taught as part of our curriculum. However, at the same time, they are skills that can be incorporated into any content area curriculum and pedagogy, simply through the inclusion of a global perspective into content, and an enhancement of the expectations and products placed on children in our classrooms.

At the heart of all of this is the acceptance of ALL children. We, as educators, must move beyond the willingness to place judgments on children based on race, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation or any of the other qualifiers prevalent in today's system. The oppression that has taken place throughout the history of our country has been consistent enough to have now become buried in the institutional protocol not only in education. But in other aspects of society such as housing, legislation and the correctional system just to name a few. Our task now is to recognize this systematic and institutionalized bias and act to change it. Most importantly, however, we have a responsibility to recognize our own bias, and those being practiced in our educational protocol. This is the arena we have the most access to as educators, therefore this is where we can affect the greatest change.

I am of the position that what will result will be truly revolutionary in terms of the experience and preparation provided to the youth in our country. However, teachers must act first. We must ourselves become culturally proficient, and develop the technology skills needed to teach our students. At this point, this requires proactive measures on the part of teachers. There are various grant programs funded both privately and through our federal government that support such efforts. There are university programs focused on global education and cultural knowledge, and there is very little encouragement and seemingly little promotion of these programs in my experience. However, this does not mean that teachers cannot accomplish their goals for themselves, we simply must seek out initiatives and programs aimed at common themes, and be proactive in our pursuits of them. If these concepts were enacted in our schools, as one day I hope they will, there would be no issue of bullying in our schools in my opinion. If adults and youth alike truly respected the diversity that exists among human beings, there would not be racial tensions in schools, or students not wanting to attend classes due to the treatment they receive while in the facility. I would challenge every educator who reads this: Are you ready for the future in your classroom or school? Are you prepared to help eliminate the inequities that we sometimes unknowingly reinforce within our schools? What will YOU do about it?