

Dodging the Power-Struggle Trap: Ideas for Teachers

Here is a scenario that commonly unfolds in many schools: A student behaves in a way that disrupts the class. The teacher publicly reprimands the student for misbehaving. The student makes a disrespectful comment in return. The teacher approaches the student and in a loud voice tells the student that he “*had better shape up*” or “*be kicked out of the class.*” The student responds by standing up and verbally abusing the teacher. The teacher calls for an administrator, who comes to the room and escorts the angry student to the office to be disciplined.

In this power-struggle, neither the teacher nor the student wins. While the teacher may get some short-term relief by ejecting the student from the room, she has lost valuable teaching time because of the confrontation. The student may be happy to escape the class---but he is certainly not learning anything while sitting in the principal’s office. Teachers who want to dodge the ‘power-struggle’ trap can use several sets of techniques to avert confrontations with students and still maintain classroom discipline. The teacher first makes sure to *disengage* from the power struggle and then uses tactics to *interrupt* the student’s escalating anger and to *deescalate* the potential confrontation.

Disengaging Tactics.

The teacher’s most important objective when faced with a defiant or noncompliant student is to remain outwardly calm. Educators who react to defiant behavior by becoming visibly angry, raising their voices, or attempting to intimidate the student may actually succeed only in making the *student’s* oppositional behavior worse! While the strategies listed here may calm an oppositional student, their main purpose is to help the *teacher* to keep his or her cool. Remember: any conflict requires at least two people. A power struggle can be avoided if the teacher *does not choose* to take part in that struggle.

Disengaging tactics are those that allow the teacher to keep his or her cool in order to manage the conflict situation in a professional manner. However, these tactics are *not* an excuse for educators to look the other way and refuse to get involved when students are misbehaving. To disengage from potential power struggles, the teacher can: Use a brief, simple stress-reduction technique before responding to a provocative remark or behavior (Braithwaite, 2001). For example, a teacher may relax in a stressful situation by taking a deeper-than-normal breath and releasing it slowly. As an added benefit, this technique allows the educator an additional moment to plan an appropriate response--rather than simply reacting to the student’s behavior.

Respond to the student in a ‘neutral’, business-like, calm voice (Mayer, 2000). Surprisingly, people often interpret their emotional states from their own behavioral cues. If a person speaks calmly, that individual is more likely to believe that he or she really *is* calm—even when dealing with a stressful situation.

Keep responses brief when addressing the non-compliant student (Sprick, et al., 2002). Teachers frequently make the mistake of showering defiant students with irrelevant comments (e.g., nagging or reprimanding them, asking unhelpful questions such as ‘*Why do you always interrupt my math lessons?*’). Unfortunately, these educators may then become even *more* frustrated when the student gives a disrespectful answer or refuses to respond. Short teacher responses give the defiant student less control over the interaction and can also prevent teachers from inadvertently ‘rewarding’ misbehaving students with lots of negative adult attention.

Avoid reacting in a confrontational manner to ‘baiting’ student remarks that are deliberately intended to draw you into a power struggle (Walker, 1997). If a student comment is merely mildly annoying, ignore it. If the negative comment is serious enough to require that you respond (e.g., insult, challenge to authority), briefly state in a neutral manner why the student’s remark was inappropriate and impose a pre-selected consequence. Then move on.

Interrupting Tactics.

When students become upset, they may not be able to control the headlong rush of their own anger. In such situations, the teacher can use interrupting tactics--well-timed, supportive techniques that ‘interrupt’ the escalation of student anger. These ‘interrupters’ sometimes have the potential to rechannel a potential teacher-student *confrontation* into a productive *conversation*. As described here, interrupting tactics are *positive* and *respectful* in nature: a teacher who tries to shout down or talk over a defiant student is more likely to inflame the confrontation than to calm it. To interrupt the escalation of student anger, the teacher can:

- Divert the student’s attention from the conflict. If the student is showing only low-level defiant or non-compliant behavior, the teacher may be able to redirect that student’s attention to a more positive topic. The teacher may, for example, engage the student in reading a high-interest book or allow that student to play an educational computer game.
- Remove the student briefly from the setting. If the teacher notices that a student is becoming argumentative with classroom peers or acting defiantly toward adults, the educator may want to briefly remove the student from the room (‘antiseptic bounce’) to prevent the student’s behavior. One strategy to remove the student is to send him or her to the office on an errand, with the expectation that—by the time the child returns to the classroom—he or she will have calmed down.
- Allow the student a ‘cool down’ break. Select a corner of the room (or area outside the classroom with adult supervision) where the target student can take a brief ‘respite break’ whenever he or she feels angry or upset. Be sure to make cool-down breaks available to *all* students in the classroom to avoid singling out only those children with anger-control issues.
- Whenever a student becomes upset and defiant, the teacher offers to talk the situation over with that student once he or she has calmed down and then directs the student to the cool-down corner. (E.g., “*Angelo, I want to talk with you about what is upsetting you, but first you need to calm down. Take five minutes in the cool-down corner and then come over to my desk so we can talk.*”) Teachers sometimes find success in having the student engage in a reflective exercise while taking a cool-down break. For example, one teacher likes to give students the option of writing or tape-recording a private message to the teacher to explain the incident that made them angry.
- Paraphrase the essential points of the student’s concerns (Lanceley, 1999). Many students lack effective negotiation skills in dealing with adults. As a result, these students may become angry and defensive when they try to express a complaint to the teacher—even when that complaint is well founded. The teacher can show that he or she wants to understand the student’s concern by summing up the crucial points of that concern (paraphrasing) in his or her own words. Examples of paraphrase comments include ‘*Let me*

be sure that I understand you correctly...’, ‘Are you telling me that...?’, ‘It sounds to me like these are your concerns...’ When teachers engage in ‘active listening’ by using paraphrasing, they demonstrate a respect for the student’s point of view and can also improve their own understanding of the student’s problem.

- Ask open-ended questions to better understand the problem situation and find possible solutions (Lanceley, 2001). The teacher may pose *who, what, where, when, and how* questions. Some sample questions are “*What do you think made you angry when you were talking with Billy?*” and “*Where were you when you realized that you had misplaced your science book?*” One caution: Avoid asking “why” questions (Lanceley, 2001) because they can imply that you are blaming the student (e.g., “*Why did you get into that fight with Jerry?*”). Also, the student may become even more frustrated when asked a ‘why’ question because he or she may not be able to answer it!

Deescalating Tactics.

When a person is very angry or upset, that individual frequently will demonstrate poor judgment and make impulsive decisions (Lanceley, 1999). One important objective for the teacher is to know strategies to help a confrontational student to reduce his or her anger level and reestablish self-control. Deescalating tactics are those that reduce the sense of acute threat or defensiveness that the student may be experiencing and lower the emotional tension in the interaction between teacher and student. Teachers who use these calming tactics, however, do not allow students to escape appropriate disciplinary consequences for their behavior. A teacher might decide, for example, to postpone disciplining an aggressive or confrontational student until he or she manages to lower that student’s level of anger. After the behavioral outburst is over, that teacher should arrange a conference with the student to debrief about the incident and impose any disciplinary steps that seem warranted. To reduce the student’s anger level and calm him or her, the teacher can:

- Replace negative words in teacher requests with positive words (Braithwaite, 2001). When a teacher’s request has a positive ‘spin’, that teacher is more likely to have students comply. Notice, for instance, how the sentence “*If you don’t return to your seat, I won’t help you with your assignment*” (negative phrasing) seems much friendlier when stated as “*I can give you some help on the assignment just as soon as you return to your seat*” (positive phrasing). Yet these two sentences otherwise convey exactly the same information!
- Use non-verbal strategies to defuse confrontation. When people get into arguments, they often unconsciously mirror the emotional posturing of the other (Braithwaite, 2001; Long, et al., 1980)--for example, pointing when the other points, standing when the other person stands, etc. The teacher can use non-verbal techniques to lower the tension when confronted by a student. For example, if a student is visibly agitated, the teacher may decide to sit down next to the student (a less threatening posture) rather than standing over that student. Or the teacher may insert a very brief ‘wait time’ before each response to the student, as these micro-pauses tend to slow a conversation down and can help to prevent it from escalating into an argument. A note of caution: The non-verbal defusing strategies discussed here are not appropriate if the teacher feels that he or she may be in imminent danger of attack or assault. Instead, that teacher should immediately take those steps necessary to preserve his or her physical safety (Braithwaite, 2001).

- Acknowledge that the student is in control and must make his or her own behavioral choices. Sometimes students defy adult requests because they want to demonstrate their own autonomy and independence. When a student's confrontational behavior appears to be driven by a need for control, the teacher can frankly acknowledge that the student is free to choose whether or not to comply with the teacher's request. Of course, the teacher also presents to the student the likely consequences for non-compliance (e.g., poor grades, office disciplinary referral, etc.). Walker (1997) recommends framing choices for uncooperative students in a two-part statement. The teacher first states the *negative, or non-compliant, choice and its consequences* (e.g., the student loses free time at the end of the day if a seatwork assignment is not completed). The teacher then *states the positive behavioral choice* that he or she would like the student to select (e.g., the student can complete the seatwork assignment within the allotted work time and not lose free time).
- Offer the student a face-saving path out of a potential conflict. Students sometimes blunder into confrontations with their teachers and then are unwilling or unable to back down from those show-down situations. In such instances, the teacher may want to engineer a way out for the student that allows that student to avoid a full-blown conflict while saving face. Here is one example of a face-saving de-escalation tactic: When a teacher finds that he or she is in a tense standoff with a student and is running out of options, the teacher may want to ask the student, "Is there anything that we can work out at this time to earn your cooperation?" (adapted from Thompson & Jenkins, 1993). Such a statement treats the student with dignity, models negotiation as a positive means for resolving conflict, and demonstrates that the teacher wants to keep the student in the classroom. It also provides the student with a final chance to resolve the conflict with the teacher and avoid other, more serious disciplinary consequences. Teachers who use this verbal tactic should be prepared for the possibility that the student will initially give a sarcastic or unrealistic response (e.g., "*Yeah, you can leave me alone and stop trying to get me to do class work!*"). The teacher ignores this student's attempt to hook the adult into a power struggle and simply asks again whether there is any reasonable way to engage the student's cooperation. When asked a second time, students will often come up with good ideas for resolving the problem.
- Use humor to defuse a confrontation. By responding with humor to a defiant student, the teacher signals to that student in a face-saving manner that his or her behavior is not yet as disruptive or confrontational as to be a violation of the behavior code. The student can join the teacher in laughing off the event and return to participation in class activities. Teachers should exercise caution, though, when using humor to defuse confrontations. First, teachers should never use humor in a sarcastic or teasing manner, as the student is quite likely to feel disrespected and become even angrier as a result (Walker, 1997). Second, if a teacher employs humor successfully to defuse a tense situation with a student, the adult should still make it a point to meet with the student privately later to talk about the incident and to ensure that the student understands the inappropriateness of his or her confrontational behavior (Braithwaite, 2001). Above all, the teacher does not want the student to feel 'rewarded' with humor for confronting the adult, as this response may actually make the student more likely to react aggressively toward the teacher in the future.
- Label the emotion that the student's behavior appears to convey. A teacher, for example, who observes a student slamming her books down on her desk and muttering to herself after returning from gym class might say, "*Angelina, you seem angry. Could you tell me what is*

wrong?” ‘Emotion labeling’ (Lanceley, 1999) can be a helpful tactic in deescalating classroom confrontations because it prompts the student to acknowledge his or her current feeling-state directly rather than broadcasting it indirectly through acting-out behavior. Once a powerful emotion such as anger is labeled, the teacher and student can then talk about it, figure out what may have triggered it, and jointly find solutions that will mitigate it. Emotion labeling should generally be done in a tentative manner (“*John, you sound nervous...*”, “*Alice, you appear frustrated...*”), since one can never know with complete certainty what feelings another person is experiencing.

- Consider the ‘communicative function’ of the confrontational behavior. Students may not feel comfortable telling the teacher that they don’t like a class assignment, have forgotten their study materials for the fourth time this week, or do not know how to do the math problem that they have been asked to solve on the board. Instead, they convey the message through disruptive and defiant behavior. When the teacher is able to ‘read’ the message that the defiant student is trying to send through his or her behavior, that teacher can sometimes restructure the assignment or otherwise modify the activity or classroom setting to defuse the confrontation with the student. For example, a teacher who calls on a student to solve a math problem on the board may interpret that student’s resulting disruptive behavior as sending the message, “*I don’t want to show my ignorance on this math problem with all of my friends watching*”. This teacher may decide to skip over that student and instead meet with him individually later to check his mastery of the math item. When teachers make instructional modifications to reduce problem behaviors, they should continue to hold the student accountable for all class work, even as they allow flexibility in how that work is done.

References

Braithwaite, R. (2001). *Managing aggression*. New York: Routledge.

Lanceley, F.J. (1999). *On-scene guide for crisis negotiators*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Long, N.J., Morse, W.C., Newman, R.G. (1980). *Conflict in the classroom*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Mayer, G.R. (2000). *Classroom management: A California resource guide*. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Office of Education. Retrieved September 29, 2003, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/safety/resourceguides/classroommgmt.pdf>

Sprick, R.S., Borgmeier, C., & Nolet, V. (2002). Prevention and management of behavior problems in secondary schools. In M. Shinn, H.M. Walker, & G. Stoner (Eds.) *Interventions for academic and behavioral problems II: Preventive and remedial approaches*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Thompson, G.J., & Jenkins, J.B. (1993). *Verbal judo: The gentle art of persuasion*. New York: William Morrow.

Walker, H.M. (1997). *The acting-out child: Coping with classroom disruption*. Longmont, CO: SoprisWest.