



Parents who bully teachers

Dennis Sleigh

In this series about teachers being bullied, I first looked at the matter of top-down bullying, where teachers are being bullied by the system. I pointed out that some of these cases involved system leaders doing the bullying, while in others, it was the government or other higher power that was responsible. In this issue, I want to consider another form of bullying – that done by parents.

It might strike many readers as strange that parents should be listed as bullies in schools, especially given the great efforts that so many of them make to keep our schools afloat. Indeed, it is fair to say that many schools that are open today owe their existence to the heroic efforts of parents, rather than the beneficence of governments or the performance of churches. I know this because I have worked in such a school – a school that rose from its own ashes because the parents were determined to be heard and to have their children educated the way they wanted.

I salute the many thousands of parents whose voluntary efforts, self-sacrifice and forethought are such a vital component of so many Australian schools today. On the other hand, I also acknowledge that there are some parents who are simply bullies and one of their favoured targets is the teaching profession. I have confronted such people and I am sure that many people reading this article could say the same.

It is appropriate at this stage to recall that a bully is someone who uses their power in order to force others to do things their way. Just as a playground bully can demand lollies from a smaller child, or inflict physical pain, or ostracise a peer by demanding the loyalty of other classmates, so a bullying parent can wreak havoc by calling on various underhanded strategies to make life awkward, even unbearable, for a teacher.

Without claiming to have covered the whole territory, I would suggest that there are five groups of parent bullies, ranging from the pernicious to the irksome. It is quite likely that you will be able to identify people in your own experience who fall into at least some of these categories, and you might be able to add other types. My five classes of bully are:

- The Litigation Expert
- The System Spy
- The Pouting Pull-out
- The Tennis Club Talker
- The Bitter Volunteer

Perhaps I should introduce each of them to you.

The Litigation Expert

Have you ever been pulled up by a pupil who says “You can’t do that – you could be sued.”? I suspect that these are the offspring of parents who want to sue their local Council if they cannot find a parking space in the main street, or to sue their local bakery if the bread goes stale in less than five days. Sadly, such parents do exist and they are not afraid to seek legal redress if

they are unhappy. These are the parents who believe every word from their child's lips about school activities – “My child never lies!” or those who are able to put new words into the mouths of their children if they had previously been happy to report a good day in school.

I suggest that these are the parents who contact the Ombudsman, rather than discussing the problem at school level, because they like to think that they are knowledgeable about their rights. Sadly, they seem very ignorant of their responsibilities. They are so intent on being proved correct in their demands that they fail to appreciate the unnecessary damage being created by their failure to follow the accepted protocols

(This statement in no way aims to limit sensible decisions to go the appropriate authorities if the lower levels have ignored their call for help. Not all legal complaints are vexatious. However, those who insist of going straight to the top – cutting out the middle person – might need to examine their motives. Are they just on a power trip?)

The System Spy

This is the parent who takes on the self-appointed role of reporting every infringement of the rule – real or imagined – that they see in a school. If a road safety flag is left out overnight, they write a passionate email to the system authorities. If the canteen runs out of fruit juice before their little darling gets served, another email hits the airwaves. If a swimmer is awarded a prize ahead of the parent's own child, a lengthy letter is sent to explain how the award winner actually broke the rules, and should have been disqualified (coincidentally raising their own child from second place to first!). The letter, of course, is sent to the Director-General or even the Minister.

Funnily, these well-informed and highly literate parents rarely have the time or the energy to write positive letters explaining how the teacher's prompt actions saved the lives of three students threatened by a brown snake, or how the close attention to detail by a school secretary prevented serious fraud. Oh no! Let someone else see those things and commend them if they must. The System Spy is too busy digging dirt to think about planting trees.

The Pouting Pull-out

This parent knows the importance of numbers on a school roll and uses his or her power to make it clear to the principal that, unless things change quickly, their child will soon be transferring to another school. Now I cannot say I oppose parents making such decisions if they are legitimately concerned about the quality of education being offered, or for other significant reasons. However, I have heard of parents who make such threats because they don't like the “No hair, no play” rule or because they didn't get their child into the class they wanted.

Confronted by such parents, I have twice rather enjoyed saying “In this country we have

freedom of choice regarding education, so I guess I cannot stand in your way.” I can smugly report that in each case the parents decided that they would stay after all, and although I had heard their complaints sympathetically enough, they had to cope with existing practices.

The Tennis Club Talker

This is the parent whose bullying can do the most damage and, unlike the previous three groups, this parent often seems totally unaware of the power being exercised. The effect of the TCT is the total destruction of the reputation of the person being discussed, often a teacher or – better still – the principal. The tales that are told about this victim between sets of tennis are unbelievable – but they still seem to be readily believed by the hushed audience as they nod their heads and roll their eyes. “Who'd have thought it?” echoes around the court as someone's sanity, morality, intelligence or even their wood-chopping ability fall to the vicious tongue of the idle gossip. Of course, the next day when the tale is retold to a new audience, one rarely starts by saying “Last night Joe (or Flossy) was having a session at the tennis and said...” Instead, the gossipmongers start their diatribe with a sentence such as “I have heard from a very reliable source that...” and the original story is further embellished before being recounted.

The original TCT gets no credit for the tale because everyone in town knows that he or she is about as trustworthy as a political candidate in a tight election. The damage, however, is done and the terrible power of the original tale-teller is undeniable as the victim finds themselves shunned in the supermarket the next day.

The Bitter Volunteer

This bully is perhaps the most innocent, but also can be the most damaging in the long term. Their particular gift to the world of education (or of the arts, the sporting world, the social circuit or anywhere else where they wish to play a part) is that they stop other people from volunteering. Ironically, they rarely realise what they are doing, and perhaps even see themselves as the Volunteer of the Year.

You know the sort of people I mean: they disagree with every proposal made at a meeting, usually starting off by saying “Oh no, dear. We tried that 13 years ago and it was an absolute fiasco. That would never work in *this* school.” If that doesn't stop the newcomer in her tracks, the next ploy is to engage in such a long and boring tirade that no-one wants to hang around to listen. This lengthy and disjointed ranting will be 60 per cent vitriol and at least 30 per cent self-aggrandisement. The self-praise can be easily ignored but the vitriol seems to deter even the most generous of volunteers and they decide that they have another appointment when the next meeting is called. To make matters worse, the bitter volunteer then broadcasts that he or she is the only consistent member of the committee

because the others rarely bother coming to meetings.

You might wonder why I describe this (often unwitting spoiler as a bully, but my reason is simple: that person is using personal power (politely called obnoxiousness) to get their own way. They might well be offended at being included in a list of bullies, but how else can you describe someone who, by refusing to think of others, can single-handedly destroy the good will and boundless energy of people who want to improve education?

Do labels really help?

It would be reasonable to ask whether these labels actually help us cope with bullying in the workplace. As teachers we all know that labels *identify* a problem, but rarely *solve* it. In recent years we have often been reminded that just because we know that a child is autistic or hearing-impaired or spoiled doesn't really help to solve the problem. We have to look more deeply if we are going to find realistic ways to deal with the problem. I readily admit that the same is true in dealing with parent bullies.

Nevertheless, the labels do serve one purpose: they alert us to a real danger. The parents described in this simple taxonomy are to be found in most schools and the damage they can do is both serious and lasting. The litigious parent, the espionage agent, and the parent who is always threatening to leave are deliberate trouble makers. The other two are often unconscious of the damage they cause. All five, however, can make life more difficult, more unpleasant for conscientious teachers as well as for dedicated parents and ultimately for the children they serve.

For your homework, see if you can add to my list (I'd love to hear of other types, and you can contact me at dwsleigh@tpg.com.au). However, a more important part of your homework is to remember the importance of balance: just because you have a bully in your class it doesn't mean you have a class of bullies; likewise, just because some parents offend in the ways I have suggested, let us never overlook the contribution made by the majority of parents who come into our classes. They share with you a genuine passion for the success of their children, and this shared passion will support you as you move through the various challenges of teaching. Be aware of the bullies but be especially grateful for the majority of parents whose efforts are so vital in our schools.

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