

When the Bully is Your Teacher

By Shawnta S. Barnes – October 15, 2018



October is National Bullying Prevention Month. In Indiana, the law requires all school employees and volunteers to receive bullying prevention and intervention training. Schools also teach students about bullying too. Some years back, I was sitting in one of these trainings at a staff meeting. At the end of the training, the presenter asked if there were any questions. A staff member stood and asked, “Does this reporting requirement include reporting staff members who are bullies?” Clearly caught off guard by this question, the presenter hesitated and then replied, “Anyone who bullies should be stopped and reported.” As I left the training, I heard another staff member whisper, “We all know who that question was really about.”

On the website stopbullying.gov, bullying is defined as:

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time...Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose.

Although this definition and many bullying prevention programs focus on children bullying each other, I assure you there are teachers who abuse their power and bully students. They bully students they are supposed to provide a supportive and caring environment for learning.

The teacher in question at one of my former schools was notorious for insulting her students' intelligence in front of them; some of them would cry in response to her words. A few students had accidents in class. Although I don't have enough evidence to prove the teacher caused students to urinate on themselves, I will say none of these students had accidents when they left the classroom for academic intervention or special area classes. She also screamed at children and isolated them frequently. Those children were typically black, latino, or boys. Yes, her behavior was addressed on more than one occasion, but it only caused her to dial it down for a little while and then she would go back to her previous ways.

Teachers who bully students should be fired. They tear down students' self-esteem and cause them to be less trusting of the next teacher. What is worse is these people continue their reign of terror because their tactics are confused with good classroom management or adults are also afraid of these bully teachers. When we tell children to not be bystanders and allow bullying to take place, adults have to do the same even if that means addressing a colleague and/or reporting him or her. A bully teacher can begin to rip apart a child's self-esteem, but what completely shatters that self-esteem is when that child looks up and realizes other teachers are seeing how he or she is treated on a daily basis and they do nothing.