

# Focus on Self: Using Dreikursian Principles in Classroom Power Struggles

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One student can't "remember" books and pencils; another constantly bothers the teacher. Some children refuse to do assignments; others provoke fights. Teachers face such situations daily; how they handle them determines whether they find themselves in a power struggle.

For the past seven years I have been teaching teachers Dreikursian principles of classroom management. At the end of one workshop, a teacher expressed a typical attitude when she said "I came here expecting to learn better ways to control children; what I learned instead is that I have to change myself." This teacher was restating a point I recall Dreikurs making in his classes at the University of Illinois: The only person you can change is yourself, but when you change yourself, others will change in response.

Dreikurs' approach to coping with power struggles focuses on (1) avoiding both fighting and giving in and (2) relying on consequences rather than punishment. Because the use of logical consequences has been treated thoroughly elsewhere (see especially, Dreikurs, 1958; Dreikurs, 1968a; Dreikurs, 1968b; Dreikurs, Grunwald & Pepper, 1971), Dreikurs' ideas will not be detailed here. The concepts and techniques discussed will focus on facilitating self-change as an approach to classroom management. Teachers generally find that the more they change themselves, the more effective they are in using Dreikurs' principles to cope with power struggles.

These are three primary areas in which teachers can change: (1) interpretation of problem situations, (2) behavior in a power struggle, and (3) attitudes toward students and toward the teaching role.

## **Changing Interpretation**

*Position and status.* Teachers typically see the issue in a power struggle as solving the problem at hand (getting students to complete assignments,

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maintaining discipline, etc.). The real issue is usually not the problem at hand (much as it may need a solution), but the struggle by both teacher and student(s) to maintain their self-image, especially in regard to their power and status.

Teachers and students often have conflicting ideas about their roles and when this happens, a power struggle may result. For example, it is important to some students to feel that they choose to act as they do. If a teacher insists that these students obey simply because they are told to do so, the teacher threatens the student's image of self as an autonomous person. It is important for teachers to realize that their desire to be accepted and respected as authority figures is often in conflict with students' self-image. It is equally important that teachers realize that students often confront teachers in a way which threatens the teachers' self-image. The result of threats to self-image of either teacher or student is often a feeling of fear and anger.

*Feelings of fear and anger.* When a student challenges a teacher's authority ("You can't make me be quiet!"), the teacher feels threatened (internal response: "I'm losing control!") and angry (external response: "Sit down and shut up!"). How scared and how angry the teacher becomes effects how the student reacts and these feelings are related to what the teacher and student tell themselves about their roles in the group.

*Internal logic.* For many teachers, maintaining position and status within the class means living up to a perfectionistic image of a good teacher. This is not so much an individual flaw but a socially maintained set of expectations which have become internalized. Teachers are encouraged to hold self-defeating, ineffective beliefs about themselves and their performance. An internal logic based on perfectionistic expectations might run like this:

Major premise: Good teachers have good discipline and well-behaved students.

Minor premise: I want to be a good teacher.

Conclusion: When students don't behave, I'm not a good teacher (and I get upset, angry, frustrated, and can't stand it).

As Ellis (1976) points out, this kind of logic is always irrational and leads to self-defeating behavior.

As we know from Dreikurs (1968b, 1971) students also have assumptions about maintaining their place in the group. For some students, maintaining their position means staying on good terms with those in authority and avoiding behavior which adults find threatening (*constructive* behavior, in Dreikurs' terminology [1968b, p. 30]). Other students may see their position in terms of avoiding control ("You can't make me!") or in terms of doing what they want ("I can do what I want"). These students may

become rebellious or stubborn when confronted or when they don't get their own way. Yet both groups—those who conform and those who don't—have the same underlying goal: to achieve and maintain a place in the group.

Once the teacher realizes that everyone in the classroom—teacher and students alike—are in the same boat, the teacher can begin to step back and view the situation as a problem rather than as a threat.

*Win-or-lose situations.* For both teacher and students, finding themselves in a win-or-lose situation activates their internal logic and the feelings of fear and anger which accompany a threat. Power struggles arise out of situations where both teacher and students feel that, if they don't get their own way, they are losers and they must feel bad about themselves. Losing is a threat to self-image, so neither side wants to give in, even where nothing is to be gained by fighting and winning.

The fact that there is a winner and a loser at the end of an episode in a power struggle creates an unstable situation which invites continuation of the struggle. One side may get their way in the short run, but in the long run, both sides suffer because the struggle over position and status in the group is never resolved. Once teachers see how a win-or-lose situation creates a struggle, they are in a position to change.

### **Changing Behavior**

*Focusing on one's own behavior.* Many teachers spend their energy trying to control students instead of focusing on what they could do to improve the situation. Since many similar situations occur, teachers have opportunities to ask themselves: What could I do differently?

*Listening.* Teachers are often advised to listen, but seldom taught how. Many teachers have found that learning Carl Rogers' technique of reflecting content and feeling has been extremely useful. Reflective listening helps teachers (1) avoid moralizing, preaching, threatening, questioning, and other barriers to communication (see Gordon, 1974, for more complete treatment) and (2) become more perceptive listeners. Reflective listening also gives the students the feeling that they are understood, and often leads to a new understanding of a problem situation by both sides.

*Determining responsibility.* Power struggles may begin because a teacher feels responsible for student problems and behavior. Teachers are not responsible for solving every problem or correcting every misbehavior brought to their attention. As long as a teacher assumes responsibility for a student's problem, the student has little reason to solve that problem. Teachers can avoid many power struggles by simply asking themselves before getting involved: "Is this my problem?" At first some teachers feel they are

acting irresponsibly by doing this, but when they see their students begin to solve their own problems, they realize that they are helping the students grow.

*Withdrawing cooperation.* Once teachers realize that power struggles are a form of negative cooperation, they are in a position to ask themselves: “What am I doing to cooperate in perpetuating this power struggle?” When a teacher knows the answer to this question, the power struggle can often be ended by withdrawing cooperation. For example, a number of teachers have asked what to do about students who constantly ask questions. It had not occurred to them to simply ignore the questions, they did not see their replies as a form of cooperation.

*Avoiding demands for agreement.* Some teachers hamper themselves by wanting their students to agree that their actions are right or just or fair. The teacher’s actions may indeed be for the best, but teachers must sometimes assume responsibility for making decisions whether or not others agree. By insisting that others should agree, they invite a power struggle. Teachers can accept the opinions of others, without being defensive, by accepting their own responsibility to take action even though others disagree. This does not mean ignoring others or taking arbitrary action (which doesn’t solve conflict) but rather being aware that it is not necessary for others to agree that the teacher is right.

*Encouraging value judgments.* It is important to help students become aware of their power to make situations better or worse. Students already exercise their power, but are often unaware that they are making a choice or that they are responsible for that choice. Just as teachers can focus on their own behavior, they can encourage students to focus on *their* own behavior. A head teacher reported that a class of junior high school students he talked to blamed an assistant teacher for their misbehavior: “He doesn’t make us behave.” Whatever the assistant teacher’s lack of skill in classroom management, the students did not realize that they also had responsibility for making the situation better or worse; therefore, they felt free to behave irresponsibly.

## **Changing Attitudes**

Changes in behavior often produce changes in attitude; changes in attitude often produce changes in behavior. In practice, both evolve together.

*Feeling threatened.* Many teachers feel threatened or angry when their authority is questioned. I have heard many teachers say about their students, “But they *should* respect authority!” Perhaps teachers should get respect, but when they don’t, feeling threatened makes a teacher less effective in dealing with a difficult situation. Teachers can be more effective when they see that

their concern with how students *should* act is often a way of avoiding the immediate situation.

In a sense, feeling threatened is a form of cooperation. A student does something (intentionally or unintentionally) to threaten a teacher, and the teacher cooperates by feeling threatened. Teachers can learn to reduce their own feelings of defensiveness by changing their expectations from “I *have to* be treated a certain way and students *have to* act in a certain way” to “I *prefer* that students behave in a certain way, but I’ll cope with whatever behavior comes up.”

*Accepting others as equals.* Accepting others as equals means that we accept the right of others to act and to be responsible for their actions (including experiencing the consequences of those actions), however we may disagree with their actions. This means not shaming, blaming, lecturing, threatening, or inducing guilt, since these behaviors only serve to establish moral superiority without really focusing on the problem at hand.

Accepting students as equals is difficult because it means giving up the superior status which many teachers struggle to hold onto. Equality of status has tremendous payoffs, however, which more than make up for giving up a superior position. Equality frees teachers to deal directly with problem behavior instead of focusing on blame and guilt. Equality also frees teachers from accepting too much responsibility for a student’s problem, thereby freeing the students to accept responsibility and to deal with the consequences of their actions.

*Giving up the myth of control.* Teachers are encouraged to believe that a good teacher can discipline, motivate, and otherwise control students. This is a myth which makes many teachers less effective than they might be. In an effort to live up to the myth, they easily become drawn into power struggles or even actively provoke them without being aware of what they are doing. For example, consider a teacher who has the attitude “no kid is going to get the best of me!” A student who insists on having last word easily provokes such a teacher into a power struggle.

Some teachers may feel that they will have little credibility if the student does get the last word, but just the opposite is likely to be the case. Students, like other human beings, will tend to continue a behavior only if it gets results. The student who insists on having the last word achieves his or her goal only if having the last word means defeating the teacher. If the teacher does not feel or act defeated, the student has neither won nor lost because the power struggle has been avoided. Even when teachers know better, they often find that acting on their knowledge is difficult because they have difficulty giving up the myth that they *should* be able to demonstrate their control by having the last word.

Teachers cannot force cooperation, nor can they totally eliminate power struggles. The myth that the teacher can or should control students makes many teachers less effective in coping with power struggles and often leads to feelings of fear (being threatened) and anger. By focusing on changing their interpretation of events, their behavior in response to those events, and their attitudes, they are more likely to effectively cope with power struggles.

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