THE CONFLICT CYCLE PARADIGM: HOW TROUBLED STUDENTS GET REASONABLE TEACHERS OUT OF CONTROL

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Introduction

How do you explain why competent teachers find themselves in self-defeating power struggled with troubled students. The Conflict Cycle Paradigm describes how the interaction between a troubled student and a teacher follows a circular process in which the attitudes, feelings and behaviors of the student influence and in turn determines the attitudes, feelings and behaviors of the teacher. During a stressful student incident, this circular process spirals into a Conflict Cycle creating additional problems for the student and teacher. Once in operation, this negative interplay is difficult to interrupt. For examples, students under stress behave emotionally and not rationally. They are controlled more by their feelings than by logic. They protect themselves from psychological pain by behaving in aggressive and defensive ways. When a teacher reacts to these inappropriate behaviors, often a power struggle develops. Understanding and helping disappear and winning become the only acceptable outcome for the teacher. When a teacher reacts emotionally, the teacher becomes part of the problem.

The purpose of the Conflict Cycle is to help teachers (a) become aware of how their personal beliefs are challenged when helping a troubled student and (b) to develop effective skills to prevent students from pushing their emotional buttons. Teachers do not have complete control over student behavior but they do have complete choice over how they react to student behavior.

The Conflict Cycle is a paradigm that describes the circular and escalating behavior of a student–teacher conflict. Figure –1 visualizes the student's Conflict Cycle and its five interacting parts:

- Student's self-concept
- Stressful incident
- Student's feelings
- Student's observable behavior
- Adult/peer reactions

To help understand the dynamic nature of the Conflict Cycle Paradigm, a detailed explanation of each part of the circular sequence of the Conflict Cycle is presented.

PART 1: THE STUDENT'S SELF-CONCEPT

The student's self-concept plays a central role in determining how he thinks about himself, how he relates to others, and what he believes will happen to him in the future (i.e., his self-fulfilling prophecy).

Developmentally, a child's self-concept is formed by the repetitive interactions of significant adults and peers in his life who gives him ongoing feedback about his behavior and character. If a child receives clear and positive reinforcements, such as that he is lovable, curious, happy, smart, attractive, and strong, he will internalize these experiences and statements and slowly begin to

attribute these characteristics to himself and others. If, however, he receives negative feedback and is told he is fearful, difficult, aggressive, sad, stupid, ugly, and rude, over time, the child will internalize a depreciating view of himself and other. As a result, how a child learns to think about himself is critical in determining his subsequent feelings and behaviors. For example, a student may score in the average range of intelligence, but if he thinks he is dumb, then his feelings and behaviors will be consistent with his thoughts about himself, and he may become an underachiever.

IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

In addition to developing a unique set of personal beliefs, the child concurrently develops a personal set of beliefs about his psychological world and the people in it. If the adults in his life are hostile, rejecting, negligent, depressed, helpless, ambivalent, perfectionistic, or inconsistent, the child will learn to mistrust and to avoid interpersonal closeness with them. These negative beliefs about others in his world become the second active part of his self-concept. By early elementary school age, his beliefs about himself and his beliefs about others merge and become the major motivating force of his emerging personality. This solidification of his self-concept results in the child's developing a characteristic way of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving in all new situations. The child now has a predictable and functioning way of responding to most current and future life events. For example, just as a primitive tribe will explain a tidal wave or an exploding volcano as something the tribe had done to off end the gods, troubled children will explain why they were abused, neglected, or rejected. Their search for an explanation does not take place in reality, but in their irrational beliefs about their painful life experiences. This means all their life events are filtered by their thoughts, which are activated by their personal belief system.

RATIONAL VERSUS IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

As helpers, how can we determine if a child's beliefs are rational or irrational? Irrational beliefs are not based on true reality conditions and operate to the detriment of the child's mental health. The distinction between rational and irrational beliefs however becomes vague for troubled children who have experienced chronic abuse, neglect, and rejection. Initially, their negative beliefs about others are an accurate reflection of their life experiences. What causes these reality-based beliefs to become irrational is the psychological process called *overgeneralization.* This is a specific way of thinking, which allows a troubled child to perceive any new relationship or experience in a negative way. Overgeneralization is a cognitive trap that transfers negative feelings from one person to all people. This thinking is achieved by using the words *always* and *never* whenever an individual thinks about this person or event. For example, a troubled student neglected by his parents would say, "My parents neglected me [fact]. I could never count on my parents to meet my needs [fact]. Therefore, I think all adults I meet in the future also will neglect my needs [irrational belief]."
The following lists describe some of the irrational beliefs commonly held by troubled students.

Irrational Beliefs about Self

- I should never express my anger openly and if I do I will be punished.
- I should be perfect at everything I do.
- I am stupid if I make mistakes.
- I am a terrible person.
- I am unworthy of love.
- I never have to listen to anyone except me.
- I have to be in control to survive.

Irrational Beliefs about Others

• Never depend on adults to meet your needs. They will always let you down.
• This world is filled with dangerous people and situations.
• People are too helpless and depressed to care about me.
• People will take advantage of me every time they can.

THE ADVANTAGES OF IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

Why are irrational beliefs maintained when they interfere with everyday, interpersonal relationships and psychological comfort? What are the internal rewards for holding on to pathological and self-defeating irrational beliefs? One explanation is that irrational beliefs provide troubled students with a sense of security and control. Irrational beliefs bring psychological order to the students' unstable and chaotic world. Irrational beliefs make their world predictable and manageable. Irrational beliefs allow students to know in advance what will happen to them in new relationships. Such beliefs also protect troubled students from moving beyond their feelings and becoming responsible for their behavior. Most important, irrational beliefs protect them from experiencing the dreaded and underlying feelings of helplessness and rage. As a result, troubled students feel there is no reason to change. In fact, they reinforce their irrational beliefs by projecting their beliefs on others. They do this by engaging adults and peers in endless and absurd power struggles. This psychological process almost always guarantees the adult will behave in a way to confirm the student's self-fulfilling prophecy.

THE STUDENT'S SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

The self-fulfilling prophecy is the troubled student's way of validating his irrational beliefs by getting staff or peers to act them out. Most staff and peers are unaware of this covert goal of a troubled student and will end up fulfilling the student's prophecy about them. The following three examples demonstrate the dynamics and effectiveness of a student's self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of an Aggressive Student

The aggressive student believes he has the right to meet his needs regardless of the rights of others and to get back at any adult or peer who interferes with his pleasures. Concurrently, he believes adults are hostile and ultimately will reject and punish him. The question is: how can he maintain these irrational beliefs about all adults when his new teacher is kind, compassionate, skilled, and caring? Like a director of a play, his solution is to cast the teacher into the psychological role of a hostile adult, regardless of the teacher's personality, and to look for opportunities when he can accuse the teacher of being unfair and rejecting. The following classroom observation clearly highlights this process.

Earl, a large 12-year-old boy, is sitting at his desk, completing his morning work. He raises his hand and asks for permission to get a drink of water. The teacher approves. Earl stands up, but instead of leaving the classroom, he walks over to Carl's desk and starts talking to him. Carl responds and Earl pats Carl on the head, laughs, and grabs his paper. Carl grabs it back and shouts, "Your sister!"
The teacher intervenes and says, "Earl, you are more interested in causing trouble than getting a drink, so just forget it and return to your desk."
Earl reacts as if he had been slapped, shouting, "What a gyp! You can't even get a damn drink in this school. This is not a school. It is a prison! I could die of thirst and you wouldn't care!" He walks back to his desk, slams a book closed, and looks sullen, and believes his teacher is hostile and rejecting like all the adults in his life.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of a Passive–Aggressive Student

A passive–aggressive student believes the direct expression of anger is dangerous so she must hide and disguise her aggressive feelings and thoughts. It is common for a passive–aggressive student to say, "If adults ever found out how I really feel about them, terrible things would happen to me." Consequently, a passive–aggressive student learns to express his normal feelings of anger in indirect ways. She doesn't hear, see, or remember anything the teacher asks his to do. If she has to do something she doesn't want to do, she does it in a way that frustrates the teacher. If she is really angry with the teacher, she will get back at him by hiding some objects he needs, or by messing up the room without his knowledge. For example, Ruth's indirect and subtle "drip- by-drip" frustrating behaviors begin to overwhelm the teacher. Over time he becomes emotionally loaded but psychologically unaware of his accumulated anger toward her. At the end of a difficult classroom lesson, Ruth falls out of his chair, makes the teacher ask her three times before acknowledging him, and accidentally rips the teacher's newly designed bulletin board. This is the straw that breaks the camel's back. It is the spark that lights the fuse. The teacher explodes, yells, and threatens Ruth. He has a 20-second intense temper tantrum.

Ruth appears shocked, "Gee, it was an accident. I didn't really mean to do it." The teacher is also shocked by the intensity of anger he expressed. He begins to think, "Perhaps it was an accident. Perhaps I did overreact. This is not like me. After all, Ruth is not the most difficult student in my class." He feels guilty and decides to apologize. "Ruth," he says, "I'm sorry I yelled at you." Ruth replies, "Its okay," but thinks: "Wow! Look at how crazy people get when they express their anger. It's a good thing I don't express my anger. My teacher needs to change, but I don't."

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of a Withdrawn, Abused Student

Mary, a 13-year-old student, believes she is a terrible person, unworthy of anyone's love. Her family consists of an alcoholic, an abusive father; a subservient mother, and two younger brothers. Mary has been sexually abused since age 7. His mother knew about it but never said or did anything to stop it. It was a family secret never to be told. Mary believes if she were a better person, these sexual assaults would not happen. Her irrational beliefs include, "I deserve what happened to me, and if others found out what I was really like, they would know how terrible I am and reject me."

Mary's self-fulfilling prophecy is to avoid all meaningful relationships and attachments since she believes they would only cause his more pain, shame, and rejection. Mary's classroom teacher reports that Mary has no friends and appears to be uninterested and unresponsive to any peer and teacher who attempts to reach out to his. She is a loner, and if there were one word to describe her relationship with others, it would be "ignored."

Clearly, Mary has created a social reality in school that maintains her irrational beliefs that she is unworthy of being a friend. To understand and help a student, staff need to recognize the troubled student's self-fulfilling prophecy or pattern of self-defeating behavior is a significant concept.

The second part of the Conflict Cycle is a stressful incident, defined as an external event that threatens the well-being of a student or activates his irrational beliefs. For example, a teacher may ask two students to come to the front of the class to read from a textbook. Gary thinks this request is a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate his reading skills and dramatic voice, believing it will improve his social status among his peers. Jason, however, thinks this same request will be a disaster. He thinks he will mispronounce the words, stutter, and make a fool of himself in front of his peers. Whether this incident is stressful or not for a student depends on the specific meaning a student gives to the request to read aloud. In Jason's case, it triggered his irrational belief that "nothing ever works out for me," so it became a stressful incident for him. Gary, however, perceived it as a manageable challenge, so it became a positive experience for him.

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF STRESS

Four types of student stress have been identified: developmental, economic, psychological, and reality. Once an incident is perceived as stressful, a natural biological reaction follows. This response is automatic, unconscious, and predictable. Stress prepares the body for action. It does this by releasing a series of hormones into the bloodstream that activate the autonomic nervous system. This system controls the involuntary muscles and alters the blood pressure, respiration, and digestive systems. Anthropologically, stress has functioned as a personal alarm system enabling a person to survive a physical attack. During this stress state, all bodily senses are intensified. The person has an abundance of energy, creating increased levels of strength, agility, and endurance. The person can either attack a foe with new ferocity or escape by running great distances without tiring. For primitive humans, stress served a very useful, specific, and important purpose. In many cases, it was the basis of life or death.

In today's complex society, however, there are many rules against attacking others or running away. Students must learn to control what their bodies are urging them to express. They must learn to manage a stressful event instead of acting out. Because self-control takes considerable skill and maturity, even "normal" students will behave inappropriately during a stressful event.

1. Developmental Stress

Developmental stress refers to the normal developmental stages from birth to death. For example, to be born is stressful. To be weaned from the breast or bottle is stressful. To be toilet-trained is stressful. To leave one's parents and home to go to school is stressful. Learning to read can be stressful. Learning to understand sex differences between boys and girls can be stressful. Learning to be part of a group can be stressful. For adolescents, there are numerous developmental stresses: watching one's body change, becoming independent, developing personal values as opposed to group values, understanding the excitement and confusion of one's own and others sexuality, developing career courses, graduating from high school, and so on. Each of these developmental events can be stressful for all students regardless of races, ethnicity, creed, or socioeconomic level.

2. Economic Stress

Economic stress is felt by millions of families in our society who are living on the brink of economic disaster. Not all of these families come from slums, ghettos, or disadvantaged groups. Many striving middle-class families are living beyond their financial resources and have extended their credit lines to the breaking point.

For chronically poor families, economic stress shows itself in poor diet and food; poor health habits; greater susceptibility to illness; lack of acceptable clothes; lack of privacy; lack of sleep; lack of opportunity to participate in social and school-related activities; and greater parent exhaustion, joblessness, and helplessness.

3. Psychological Stress

Psychological stress consists of an unconscious or deliberate attempt by parents, individuals, groups, and institutions to destroy the self-esteem of a student. For example, many students are told they are a financial and psychological burden to the family and the primary source of their parents' problems. They are told life would be better if they were not around. They are told they are destroying the family and neighborhood because of their demanding and ungrateful behaviors. They are told they are stupid, inconsiderate, mean, and useless to themselves and others. For some students, the stress does not come from open rejection but from trying to meet unrealistic parental standards. Students are told they must be successful to be loved. Whatever they do is not good enough. For other students, psychological stress is related to specific adults who are emotionally troubled—for example, the seductive parent who stimulates excessive sexual awareness and fantasy by showing

unusual interest in sexual topics; the psychotic parent, who is suffering from a major mental illness and is not capable of carrying out adult responsibilities; the alcoholic or drug-abusing parent who creates a home where their is little emotional stability. In these homes children never know if their parents will care for them or expose them to more shame or terror. Other students must cope with overprotective or depressed parents. Moreover, any sibling, relative, or significant friend who is emotionally disturbed and active with these students will have a stressful impact on the mental health of these students and their ability to focus on classroom learning.

4. Reality Stress

The impact of Reality Stress had been underestimated for many students. Problems happen by chance and circumstance to students that should not happen to them. These unplanned events are frustrating. They happen spontaneously and not from an organized attempt to frustrate the students. Reality stresses for troubled students seem to happen at a higher frequency than for regular students. Students begin to believe the world and the people in it are against them. The following are examples:

• A boy looks forward to wearing his favorite sweater only to discover that his brother wore it yesterday and spilled syrup on it.
• A girl lends his algebra book to a friend who forgets to bring it to school the next day.
• Two classmates are fooling around in class. One pushes the other into a third girl's desk, tearing his English composition, which is due in a few minutes.
• A teacher warns the class that the next student who talks will be given a detention. The student next to Jason whispers to a friend, and the teacher points to Jason as the offender.
• A teenage boy is asked by a girl to go to the high school basketball game. At the game he discovers she has broken up with the school bully, who is staring at him.

In other words, things go wrong that should not go wrong. It is not anyone's fault, but the stress is very real, frequent, and intense.

For most troubled students, stress comes not from one source but from multiple sources. For example, a student may have the normal developmental stress of a final exam. The evening before the test, his parents have a violent argument, and he is unable to study or sleep. On the way to school, a hostile group of boys call him various racial and ethnic names. As he enters the classroom, a friend greets him by slapping him on the back, causing his glasses to fall and break. Finally, the teacher announces a new school policy that no exam can be taken over, regardless of the circumstances. Teaches need to acknowledge that a student in a crisis needs to talk. Through mutual conversation, a greater appreciation of the students' stresses and a broader perspective of his or his behavior can be achieved.

When teachers understand these multiple cycles of stress, they are more willing to help students rather than blame and punish them for their misfortune. The following list represents some common classroom stresses.

Developmental Stress

• Student experiences group pressure to conform to their norms.
• Student experiences sexual attraction to a classmate.
• Student wasn't called on or selected for a group game.
• Student is teased by his peers.

Economic Stress

• Student is too tired to concentrate on the assignment.
• Student is too sick to concentrate on the assignment.
• Student is too hungry to concentrate on the assignment.
• Student has a handicapping condition that prevents him from competing with his peers.

Psychological Stress

• Student fails an examination.
• Student is racially depreciated.
• Student believes others have a higher expectation of his performance than she does.
• Student is deliberately rejected or scapegoatded by peers.
• Student is too conflicted by his home problems to concentrate on classroom assignments.

Reality Stress

• Student is blamed for something she didn't do.
• Student doesn't have the appropriate textbook for class.
• Student doesn't understand the content of the assignment.
• Student doesn't understand the teacher's directions.
• Student cannot get his locker to open, which contains a report that is due next period.
• A friend accidentally tears the student's favorite shirt.

PART 3: STUDENT'S FEELINGS

There is considerable confusion among teachers and other helping professionals concerning the origin, awareness, accuracy, and expression of students' feelings. The following questions reflect the quandary many helping professionals have in determining how to work with the feelings of troubled students: What is the relationship between thinking and feeling? Are they independent of each other? Isn't it healthy for students to express their feelings and to get them out in the open so they can be understood? Is it accurate to describe feelings as "good feelings" and "bad feelings"? Should negative feelings be controlled? If feelings are swallowed or blocked, don't they come back as psychosomatic illnesses? Because feelings are real, are they an accurate assessment of the precipitating incident or are they an assessment of the student's current emotional state? Is there a difference between acknowledging feelings and expressing them?
If the same feeling can be expressed in different ways are some expressions healthier than others? These questions corroborate the uncertainty, ambivalence, and fogginess that have developed around the concept of understanding and managing students' feelings.

THINKING CREATES FEELINGS

David Burns (1999), a cognitive therapist, wrote, "You feel the way you think." The source of feelings starts with thoughts and not with personal frustrations. It is how one *thinks* about an external event, and not the event itself, that triggers feelings. Positive thoughts about an event trigger positive feelings, and negative thoughts about an event trigger negative feelings, as in the previous example of the two students who were asked to read aloud. The process of thinking and feeling does not follow an independent path but is a continuous circular process. Thoughts trigger feelings, and negative feelings influence the way a person thinks about an event, creating a new cycle of negative feelings. If the same external event happens frequently, the child will develop feelings that affect his or his thinking. For example, if a child is chronically yelled at by an adult, the child not only will have negative feelings such as anger or fear but also will be conditioned to respond automatically to all future acts of yelling. This will occur without the child's being aware of his thinking. For example, I once went to listen to a new student talk about a fight he just had with a classmate.

Without saying a word, I entered the room and sat in the corner to observe the process. The room was extremely warm and after 10 minutes I stood up and took off my jacket. Simultaneously, the student looked at me, panicked, and dove under the desk. The student was convinced that when the principal or a man of authority took off his jacket, the adult was preparing to hit the student. This reaction is called automatic thinking and explains the rapid negative behavior many troubled students demonstrate during conflict.

THE USEFULNESS OF FEELINGS

All feelings are real and powerful, and add excitement to life, but they are not always an accurate assessment of a situation. Emotions are not facts; they are feelings that are triggered by rational and irrational thoughts. If the feelings are triggered by irrational thoughts, then the subsequent feelings are real but self-defeating. When students act on these feelings, their behavior only makes the situation worse. However, if the feelings are triggered by rational thoughts, then the feelings are an accurate assessment of the situation and need to be accepted. For example, this involves a complicated process of distinguishing between acknowledging one's feelings and learning to express these feelings in proper behavior. For example, it is healthy to feel upset and angry when one has been psychologically depreciated or discriminated against, but it is not acceptable to assault the offender. It is healthy to experience fear when someone threatens to hurt or abuse you, but it is not helpful to encourage it to happen. It is healthy to experience intense feelings of sadness when someone you love dies or moves away, but it is not healthy to withdraw from all relationships. It is healthy to feel guilty when you behave in an unacceptable way, but it is not useful to behave so others will punish you. It is normal to experience anxiety when you are anticipating a new experience or a new relationship, but it is not healthy to handle this anxiety through drinking or drug abuse. It is normal to feel happiness when you are in love, but it is not helpful to express blatant sexual feelings in front of others. The existence and importance of accepting one's feelings are irrefutable. The question is: how do students learn to express these feelings in ways that do not get them into more trouble?

THREE WAYS OF EXPRESSING FEELINGS

The three ways children learn to express feelings are to act them out, to defend against them, and to accept and own them.

Act Out Feelings

Many immature, impulsive, and unsocialized children express their feelings directly. There is no attempt to modify or control the direct expression of their feelings in behavior. If they are angry, they hit; if they are sad, they cry; if they are frightened, they run; and if they are happy, they giggle and laugh. There is an obvious one-to-one relationship between their feelings and behaviors. When students express their feelings directly in spontaneous classroom behavior, they almost always create more problems for themselves. Some students cannot distinguish between feeling angry and smashing a chair. For these students, the feeling and behavior are one response and not two.

Defend Against Feelings

Many children are socialized to believe that certain feelings, such as anger, sadness, or jealousy, are unacceptable to show. When these feelings occur, they create in the children a state of anxiety, discomfort, and inner conflict. For these children the psychological goal is to learn ways of avoiding or blocking these unacceptable feelings.

Anna Freud (1937) described the strategy of avoiding the pain of anxiety as Defense Mechanisms. The concept of defense mechanisms provides teachers with valuable insights on how children defend against their feelings of anxiety. Children learn to use defense mechanisms in three ways: (1) by

denying these feelings, (2) by escaping from these unacceptable feelings, and (3) by shifting or substituting the unacceptable feelings to another person or object.
The most common defense mechanisms using Denial are repression, projection, and rationalization. The most common defense mechanisms using Escape are withdrawal and regression; and the most common defense mechanisms using Substitution are displacement, compensation, and sublimation. Although defense mechanisms are successful in diminishing anxiety, they also use up the student's psychological energy, deny the real problem, and usually create new interpersonal problems with adults, peers, learning, and rules. This is like the adolescent driver who is concerned about running out of gas. His solution is to drive to the nearest gas station as quickly as possible, but in the process, he gets a speeding ticket, becomes frustrated, and also runs out of gas.

Accept and Own Feelings

Students who have learned to accept and own their feelings can use them to enrich their lives and to develop coping skills to manage their inevitable frustrations. These students have learned to distinguish between having the full range of feelings and being controlled by their feelings. When students are flooded by their feelings, their behavior is driven by their emotions and not by rational thought. If this pattern happens often, these students are labeled "emotionally disturbed" because their emotions determine their behavior. However, when students learn to accept their feelings and think about them rationally, then the resulting behaviors usually are appropriate, logical, and realistic. Accepting one's feelings and learning how to be friends with them, including the unpleasant feelings such as sadness, anger, jealousy, envy, and rejection, is a major goal of mental health.

PART 4: STUDENT'S OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOR

When students express their feelings directly or defend against them, they usually create additional problems for themselves. Inappropriate behaviors, such as hitting, running away, becoming ill, stealing, teasing, lying, fighting, using drugs, inattention, and withdrawal, cause students to have difficulty with teachers, peers, learning, and school rules. For example, when a student displaces his feelings of hostility he has for his mother on his teacher, an inevitable teacher–student conflict develops. When a student becomes depressed because his mother is ill or battered, the student may not be able to concentrate and complete his assignments, and his grades may drop. When this interpretation of behavior is accepted, the concept that the problems students cause in school are not always the causes of their problems becomes helpful. More accurately, the problems students cause in school are the result of the way they have learned to express their feelings.
Many professionals describe a student's behavior in general terms, such as "Jason hit Sam" or "Jason tore up his assignment." These are beginning statements, but to pinpoint the significance of a student's behavior, it needs to be described by answering the following six questions: Where did the behavior occur? When did it happen? Who or what were the targets of this behavior? What was the duration of this behavior? What was the intensity of this behavior? What was the frequency of this behavior?
Notice the difference in meaning between these two statements:

Jason spit on Sam.

Jason and Sam were on the playground during recess playing tag. Sam tagged Jason by hitting him on the side of his face. Jason reacted by spitting on Sam's face, chest, and hands at least three times over a period of 2 minutes. The spits were intense. This is the third time Jason has spit on another peer this week.

This second description of Jason's behavior provides a much clearer sense of the hostility Jason is expressing by spitting. The behavior was not a simple, spontaneous act, but part of a destructive pattern of behavior he uses when he becomes angry.

PART 5: ADULT/PEER REACTIONS

CATEGORIES OF INAPPROPRIATE STAFF RESPONSES

How a teacher reacts to inappropriate student behavior is the most critical part of the Conflict Cycle. Although a teacher does not have control over the student's thinking, feelings, and behaviors, a teacher does have complete control over how he or she reacts to the student's behavior. Unfortunately, staff members escalate too many student/staff conflicts when they respond in emotional, impulsive, and counter-aggressive ways. An analysis of over 600 student–staff Conflict Cycles documented four categories of inappropriate staff responses to student behavior:. They are: (1) reacting in counter-aggressive ways, (2) having rigid and unrealistic teacher expectations, (3) being caught in a bad mood, and (4) prejudging a troubled student.

Reacting in Counter-aggressive Ways

One of the most important insights a teacher can gain from the Conflict Cycle is the awareness of how a troubled student can create negative feelings in a teacher. If the teacher is not trained to accept these negative feelings, he or she will act on them and mirror the troubled student's behavior. For example, when a student yells at a teacher, "I'm not going to do it," the normal impulse of a teacher is to shout back, "Yes you will!" Once the teacher behaves like the student, the Conflict Cycle escalates into a self-defeating power struggle. Generally, an aggressive student always will create counter-aggressive feelings in others, a depressed student always will cause others to feel sad and helpless, and a hyperactive student will always create feelings of impulsivity in others.

Teachers usually do not start most Conflict Cycles; however, without training, they keep the cycle going by reacting inappropriately. Initially, they has no thoughts or intentions of yelling, threatening, or depreciating a troubled student, but once the cycle of teacher counter-aggressive behavior begins, it is extremely difficult for a teacher to stop or to acknowledge his or his role in escalating the conflict. Usually, a teacher feels unjustly attacked by the student and becomes flooded by feelings of righteous rage. These feelings seem to justify the teacher's retaliatory reaction or counter aggressive behavior. A significant finding from our sample was that teachers reacting in counter-aggressive ways account for 68% of all school-based Conflict Cycles.

Having Rigid and Unrealistic teacher Expectations Regarding Normal Developmental Student Behavior

Occasionally, teachers carry their own psychological luggage with them into the classroom. They are mean spirited, rigid, narrow minded, critical, and exacting about what kinds of behavior they will tolerate in their classrooms. This represented less than 7% of the teachers. These teachers believe students should be obedient to authorities, remain attentive to instruction, be motivated to excel, and use proper language and manners at all times. Problem behavior for them is defined as a discrepancy between what they expect and what they observe in their classrooms based on their personal histories. If there is a difference, it is because the student has a problem and needs to be disciplined. These teachers are unaware of how their forked tongues can become instruments of pain and how this contributes to escalating the crisis. Over time, even "normal" students will react to an autocratic and repressive classroom atmosphere and begin to get back by becoming passive–aggressive toward the teacher. Troubled students in the classroom have even greater difficulties. These students react to the demeaning and critical behavior of the teacher by mirroring the teacher's behavior. In this instance of the Conflict Cycle, the teacher initiates the conflict and a student keeps it going. For example, a teacher may threaten a troubled student and say, "You better stop whispering or else!" only to hear him say, "You better stop talking or else!" After the class stops laughing, the student is labeled defiant and is sent out of the room. However, if the student refuses to leave the classroom, swears, or slams the door on the way out, the problem behavior escalates into a student/teacher crisis.

Being Caught in a Bad Mood

School staff are not robots. They have the same stresses as all adults. Occasionally, their personal or family life takes an emotional dip. As their level of stress increases, they become emotionally stressed and exhausted. For example, their level of tolerance drops when they are dealing with their parents who are ill and need special care, when their children are having academic and interpersonal problems and need additional support, when they are having financial difficulties, and when they are angry with their mate or friends.

These teachers usually are competent, dedicated, and supportive of their students, but periodically something occurs that gives them a bitter attitude toward life. They cannot stomach the acid irritation of the normal and annoying developmental behavior of their students and are ready to spew out their exasperation on any student who upsets them. For example, Jamal decided it would be clever and fun if he added a little excitement to the classroom by making "burp" sounds with his armpits. The teacher reacted to Jamal's attention-getting sounds by becoming punitive, and a crisis developed. Afterward, teachers who are caught in a bad mood usually can acknowledge their role in the crisis and respond positively to supportive confrontation. Teacher stress due to personal life situations accounts for approximately 20% of our sample of student–staff Conflict Cycles.

Prejudging a Troubled Student in a Crisis

In every school, a peer social structure exists in which students are assigned and assume specific group roles such as the leader, jock, nerd, mascot, lawyer, and clown. One group role is the instigator or troublemaker. Everyone knows who this student is. His reputation is acknowledged by the school staff and peers and follows him around like a shadow on a summer day.

If this student is involved in a crisis, and the sounds of trouble are all around him, there is a high probability this student will be prejudged. As the group instigator, he will be judged before all the relevant information is obtained. The staff is likely to say, "I knew it would be you!" If this staff were playing the Mystery game, Clue, he would conclude after the first card. I know who did it. It was the butler with the knife in the library. Call this process faulty clairvoyance or coming to the wrong conclusions it happens to the nicest of people. Judgments are made that are not true, and the targeted student is accused of some act he did not do.

In this sequence, the student becomes upset and the staff is convinced that the student is lying to protect himself. The result is an unfortunate incident that escalates into an ugly crisis. This process of prejudging a troubled student before all the facts are obtained accounts for 5% of our sample of student/staff Conflict Cycles.

These four categories of inappropriate staff reactions during a student/staff Conflict Cycle are helpful in identifying what additional skills adults need in order to break their own pattern of self-defeating behavior. Although the most frequent inappropriate teacher response category was reacting in counter-aggressive ways, further analysis of our sample of student/staff Conflict Cycles revealed that staff in all four categories used "You Messages" when they were angry.

FUELING THE CONFLICT CYCLE WITH "YOU MESSAGES"

The following list of staff "You Messages" were recorded during student–staff Conflict Cycles

- Can't you do anything right?
- You apologize immediately!
- Don't you dare use that language with me!
- You better start acting your age!
- You think you know everything. Should I call you Einstein?
- You have no respect for anyone or anything!
- You don't listen to anyone, do you?

• You better shape up because I have had it with you.
• You just never use your head.
. You are looking for trouble.

The negative and blaming “You Messages” a student receives from a teacher frequently support and confirm a student’s view of himself and his self-fulfilling prophecy that adults are hostile and rejecting. . These comments create more student stress, causing the student to feel and behave in more unacceptable ways. As the student’s behavior deteriorates, the teacher becomes even more angry and disgusted with the student. As the teacher reacts in negative, punitive ways, this intensifies the student’s stress, creating more negative feelings and primitive behaviors. The Conflict Cycle continues around and around until it escalates into a no-win power struggle. Logic, caring, and compassion are lost, and the only goal for each person is to win the power struggle. The teacher is convinced the student is the source of the problem and tells the student to “shape up” and improve his attitude and behavior. If he doesn’t, the teacher labels the student as disturbed, delinquent, dangerous, and disgusting. The student is usually suspended, transferred, or referred to a more restrictive, special education setting.
What is important to remember is that there are no winners when the Conflict Cycle reaches this level of a power struggle. To hope of asking a troubled student to act maturely during a state of stress is unreasonable. A troubled student will never break this cycle. If change is going to occur, the staff must accept the first level of responsibility by responding in a more mature, professional manner. This is not easy to do without additional training this means understanding how troubled students in conflict can provoke concerned, reasonable, and dedicated teachers to act in impulsive, dispassionate, and rejecting ways.

In summary, the Conflict Cycle of a Troubled Student follows this self-defeating sequence:
1. External events arouse irrational beliefs.
2. These irrational beliefs trigger negative feelings.
3. Negative feelings drive inappropriate behavior.
4. Inappropriate behavior incites other.
5. Staff reacts in counter-aggressive ways and creates additional stress for the student, which fuels the student’s next cycle of problems.

CASE STUDY
Example: How an Aggressive Student Successfully Creates Counter-aggressive Behavior in a Student teacher (Ms. Sarah Drue)

I did my student teaching at a city junior high and I was told these were specific rules and regulations I need to follow. This incident occurred because of the school tardy policy. When students are late for school without a legitimate written excuse, they must first report to the office to pick up a sign-in sheet, which is carried to homeroom. After the homeroom teachers sign this sheet, the students are required to stay in Tardy Hall from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m.

Brian, a 16-year-old learning disabled student, came in to my homeroom without his sign-in sheet at approximately 9:30. I had already filled his name in as absent for the day, but he requested I change it immediately. He said he did not want to go to the office because he did not want to stay after school. This was my first day of student teaching this class. The regular teacher was in the classroom to observe me. Therefore, everything I did was being evaluated. Of course, Brian insisted I change his name on my sheet from being “tardy” to “present.” Brian pleaded, “Come on Ms. Drue, it won’t hurt anything. I want to go to the game this afternoon and I can’t stay in Tardy Hall.”

I commented, “Well Brian, if I did this for you, I would have to do it for everyone else. Isn’t that right, class?” Of course, the entire class agreed with me and began approaching my desk. One of my students had already been to the office because of being late. She insisted that if his was changed, I should change her name on the list. I replied I was not going to change anyone’s and that Brian had better hurry to the main office before he’s late for his first-period class.
Brian replied, “You’re not my teacher anyway! I don’t have to talk to you. Ms. Shell will do it for me.” Ms. Shell was the “real” teacher for the Learning Center and she told Brian it was up to me since I was teaching for the rest of the semester. I had already decided not to make any changes. As much as I wanted to, I just could not do it since I felt I had to support the school policy.
Brian began raising “hell” after I had made my final decision and threatened he was going to “kick my ass” after school. Of course, I was scared. Brian stands at least 6 feet tall and is huge! Little ole’ me was not used to this sort of outrage. He called me all sorts of “bitches” and “MF’s,” so I told him to go and wait for me in the office.
Ms. Shell told me I was to report this incident because Brian’s
behavior cannot be tolerated. Brian then threatened Ms. Shell and me. She became angry, grabbed Brian by his collar and escorted him to the main office. “Bitch, you just wait,” he continued to holler. “I’m going to flatten your tires along with your face.” Well, I was in hysterics by now, but Ms. Shell told me to continue with the class.
By 10:30 a.m., Ms. Shell returned to the classroom without Brian. She informed me he had been sent home and could not return without his parents. I was very upset, but she informed me there wasn’t more that I could do. She tried to reassure me, “You did well! You didn’t lose your temper. I’m used to seeing Brian go into these rages every now and then. Why, I am practically the only teacher who can do anything with him.”
I tried to make my day go on as usual, but my mind kept thinking about what Brian said. I already had made up my mind to stay after school, so I could get away scot-free. I thought I would be safe. But by the time I checked out in the principal’s office, I was sweating. I was scared! I proceeded down the hallway and suddenly Brian appears. I should have turned around and gone back to the office, but if he knew I was afraid of him, he would probably provoke me for the rest of the semester. No way. I had to stand up to this kid. If I showed him I am not afraid, maybe he won’t bother with me.

“Yea Bitch, I told you not to send my name to the office. Wait until you see your tires,” I said,
“Aren’t you supposed to be home by now? I thought you were sent home until your parents arrived back to school with you.”
“Yea Bitch, I can tell, you ole’ ho!”
“Okay, I’m a whore and you’re a faggot. Now we’re even.” I continued toward my car.
“Faggot! Does this look like a faggot’s dick?”
I wanted to faint. I hope he didn’t actually pull out his penis! I surely wasn’t going to turn around to find out either. I shouted, “Brian, I am surprised at you. You have really disappointed me. I thought you were one of my better students. Say what you will, just make sure that you don’t touch me. I am here to teach you, not to beat you.”
Why did I say that? Brian then began throwing rocks and sticks at me outside of the school. I still didn’t turn around, but I did warn him that if any of them hit me, I was going to forget about being his teacher and actually “KICK HIS ASS!” “Bang,” a rock hit me in the back of my leg. I stopped and turned around to look at him. He began saying, “Kick my ass, come on, kick my ass.” I proceeded toward my car but began telling him that I was going to call his parents tonight. “Bang,” this rock hit me in the middle of my back, and I turned around and began walking toward him with full force. By now I had forgotten I was a teacher and I was aiming to kick his tail. When I got to him he looked so much larger than I but I was not going to back down. I began hollering and pointing my finger in his face, telling him that my brother would love kicking his tail if he hurt me. He kept breathing real hard down on my face, just trying to provoke me even more. By now the assistant principal and two other teachers came running out of the school and grabbed Brian, dragging him to the office. I began crying. They questioned me about the entire incident and wanted me to press charges. The school security guard stayed with Brian until his parents picked him up from the police precinct.

This student–staff conflict between Brian and Sara Drue demonstrates, with startling clarity, how quickly a Conflict Cycle can escalate into a self defeating, no-win power struggle. The incident began with Brian experiencing a reality disappointment (being tardy), moved on to verbal threats, and then to physical threats and behavior :throwing stones at Ms. Drue. This pattern of Brian's self-defeating behavior was not new to his regular teacher, Ms. Shell, who said, "I'm used to seeing Brian go into these rages," but it was a new and upsetting experience for Ms. Drue, even though she was commended by Ms. Shell as "doing well" and "not losing his temper."

The more Ms. Drue "thought" about Brian's threats, the more anxious and fearful she became. When she saw Brian, she had two thoughts: "I'll show him I'm not afraid of him" and "I need to walk back to the office and avoid this confrontation." She decided to take him on head to head, one to one, teacher against student. Brian started this new cycle by using sexual language, "Yea Bitch, I can tell, you ole' ho!" and discovered Ms. Drue's emotional panic button. She reacted by using similar sexual language, "Okay, I'm a whore and you're a faggot!" This remark only succeeded in escalating the situation. Brian retorted and started to throw stones at his. This triggered her feelings of righteous rage, and when he urged her to "kick his ass," she couldn't refuse. She threw away her professional skills and started toward him with aggressive intentions. If his colleagues had not arrived in time to rescue his, this situation could have resulted in serious physical injuries. The outcomes were predictable. Ms. Drue fulfilled his prophecy that Brian was a dangerous student. Brian fulfilled his prophecy that Ms. Drue was a hostile woman, and Brian ended up being punished for this incident and was suspended with no insight into his pattern of self-defeating behavior.

Could this second student–staff incident have been avoided? If Ms. Drue understood the goal of the Conflict Cycle and was aware that Brian was trying to push her emotional buttons and to get her to act in unprofessional and counter-aggressive ways, she would have selected his second option: avoiding Brian by walking back to the office. With this rational decision, Ms. Drue could have prevented the second cycle of craziness.

SUMMARY

The Conflict Cycle is a paradigm that explains why the management of student behavior begins with the staff and not the student. Unless staff members can control their reactions to inappropriate student behavior and have an awareness of their "emotional buttons," staff members will escalate the incident and make it worse. It is like trying to put out a small fire by throwing gasoline on it. Knowing the dynamics of the Conflict Cycle not only helps staff understand their role in acting out the feelings of students, but also it opens an array of new alternatives to school punishment Once teachers are knowledgeable about how troubled students can push their emotional buttons and create counter-aggressive feelings in them, teachers can use this insight to accept their feelings. Now a conscious choice can be made not to engage in a power struggle with these students.

Figure 6.2-2
THE SEQUENCE OF THE CONFLICT CYCLE
Or
How a troubled student creates counter-aggressive feelings in staff, which frequently leads to a mutual, self-defeating power struggle and reinforces the student's irrational beliefs (i.e., self-fulfilling prophecy).

A stressful incident occurs (i.e., frustration, failure), which
ACTIVATES a troubled student's irrational beliefs (i.e., "Nothing good ever happens to me!" Adults are hostile!", etc.). These negative thoughts determine and
TRIGGER the student's feelings. The student's negative feelings and not his or his rational forces

DRIVE the student's inappropriate behavior.
The student's inappropriate behaviors (yelling, threatening, sarcasm, refusing to speak)
INCITE staff.
Staff not only pick up the student's negative feelings but also frequently
MIRROR the student's behavior (yelling, threatening, sarcasm and refusing to talk to the student).
This adverse staff
REACTION increases the student's stress, triggers more intense feelings, and drives more inappropriate behaviors, thus causing even more staff anger and denunciation. Around and around it goes until the Conflict Cycle becomes a self-defeating power struggle.
Although the student may lose the initial battle (i.e., is punished or rejected), the troubled student wins the psychological war! The student's self-fulfilling prophesy (i.e., irrational belief) is
REINFORCED, and therefore the student has no motivation to change or alter the irrational beliefs or inappropriate behaviors.