

Suicide by Educator

By Bernard Gassaway

Suicide by educator is a slow, gradual process. It may lead to an emotional, spiritual or physical death. Children who seek suicide by educator may eventually drop out, go to prison or be killed.

At one time or another, teachers may ask themselves, "Why do so many children commit educational suicide? They do not care about school. They come to class without books or homework. They fail classes and tests. So, why do they come to school?"

"Things never stop. I'm always fighting. I'm tired of having to watch my back. I'm for real. It's crazy. I'm stressed at home and at school. So much is going on in my life. Do you feel me? I don't like school. I can't get a job. I got to get mine. Nobody cares about me. Kids always trying to violate. Damn! I'm tired. It's always something. Stop stressing me. I want out. I want out of my house. I want out of my neighborhood. I want out of school. I want out of ..."

School

Children who seek suicide by educator deliberately act in a disruptive manner towards teachers or children, provoking confrontations, failing grades, suspensions, expulsions or arrests. They feel disconnected, uncared for, stressed, confused and angry. They are almost always victims of abuse or neglect. They are deficient in math and reading. To them, school is irrelevant; failure is common; life is rough; fights are frequent. They lash out at school officials both verbally and physically. Anything or anybody may become the target of their anger.

School personnel are not trained to deal with the level of anger they are experiencing with children; as a result, they often respond to them with punishment, suspension, failure or arrest. They say, "He is out of control. Suspend him! Fail him! Arrest him!" Rarely do public and school officials, particularly in urban, poor school districts, address the conditions that caused the children's disruptive behaviors. In most cases, school officials contact the parent(s). Ironically, in a cruel twist of fate, the home is likely a contributor to the source of the child's problems. So, like in school, the child goes home to get punished, even physically beaten. After the child returns to school beaten or suspended, nothing has changed and the behavior is often repeated. This cruel process perpetuates the cycle of stress, confusion and anger.

In urban school settings, administrators respond to student anger with punishment therapy. In New York City schools, for example, a child is more likely to be suspended or arrested for an emotional outburst than to receive counseling. This is especially true since the Division of

School Safety merged with the New York City Police Department several years ago. School safety agents have been given increased authority to make arrests. School administrators in the name of zero tolerance and because they lack other sound options are quick to support student arrests. I am convinced that student arrests have increased exponentially since the merger. The charge of choice is “discon,” which is short for disorderly conduct. Any angry child may be subjected to arrest on any given day. They are easy prey for people who look to exercise police powers over powerless people—our children.

In a perverse way, children who seek suicide by educator find comfort in chaos. They curse at adults to get an immediate reaction. They disrupt classes and school to get attention. They gain status and notoriety among their peers by breaking rules. When they are confronted about their behavior, they are adept at shifting the blame. “You don’t like me. You’re always picking on me.” They frequently express what someone has done to them. They usually see themselves as victims, never victimizers. They learn this behavior by watching people in their homes and communities.

Culture of Failure

For children who seek suicide by educator, failure has become synonymous with school. They may have experienced institutional failure from as early as preschool. I believe some children have become immune to it. In fact, failure for many is an anticipated result. They say, “I know I am going to fail.” When asked how they know this, they respond, “I just know.” It is not uncommon to hear students say, “I only failed four classes.” Failure has become so common in schools that children who fail all classes may go virtually unnoticed. Parents seem surprised that they were not notified by teachers. Teachers seem surprised that parents were not monitoring their children. This pattern is repeated each marking period. Meanwhile, the children have convinced themselves that school is to failure what crime is to prison.

It is also not uncommon for these children to be sentenced to failure by their parents. I’ve heard mothers say to their sons, “You are just like for your father. You ain’t going to amount to nothing just like him.” These prophetic words provide a confused child with a psychological blueprint for aberrant behavior.

Some children who seek suicide by educator are in a constant state of denial. They seem surprised or angry when they receive a report card with all failing grades. They ask the teacher,

“Why did you fail me?” The typical response to such a question is, “You failed the tests and did not do homework.” The teacher fails to see the broader meaning of the student’s question. The student knows she did not complete assignments and did poorly on tests. In her mind, she made an effort to come to school, and that should count for something. As a response to the documented failure, the child uses this as an opportunity to engage the teacher in a confrontation. Some teachers unwittingly comply, while others wait until the last minute to tell students their final grades in order to avoid a confrontation. Either scenario results in lose-lose situations for students and teachers.

There are no simple solutions. What can we do?

- I. Coordinate social services to support the entire family. We will continue to leave children behind as long as we leave families behind. Poor parenting is a social disease. It, like alcoholism and drug addiction, must be treated. Poor parenting is a plague that is responsible for the slow death of millions of children. If we were to successfully teach and enrich parents, we would eliminate thousands of corporations that profit directly from familial dysfunction, delinquency, dependency, deprivation and depression, all of which lead to other social maladies.
- II. Remove failure from the equation. Failure is what feeds the need for suicide. For a young person who is starved for attention, failure fits the bill. If we feed children failure, that’s what they will crave. If a child fails to complete a class sequence satisfactorily, why do we require him to repeat the entire sequence? Why do we excessively test children in the name of accountability? Clearly, we need to rethink our methods of assessment and instruction.
- III. Replace failure with praise. Seek every opportunity to praise these children. They are often deprived of what so many take for granted—kindness and praise. Schools and community organizations should incorporate kindness into their culture. Good morning. Hello. You look nice today. You have a nice smile. Thank you. All of these niceties take little effort but have tremendous value.
- IV. Support teachers. Fight to defeat the external forces that prevent good, creative teachers from teaching children. Like parents and students, good teachers lose hope. They too are often beaten down by the system.

- V. Protect children. They need positive reinforcement. They need comfort, care and attention – not punishment.

- VI. Provide children and parents with options. The current school paradigms, public and private, are not sufficient. We need to do more than think outside of the box; we need to come up with other shapes, designs.

Children who seek suicide by educator are victims of their environments. They have been dealt an unfair hand in life. We, society in general, have failed these children. Because we have not figured out how to “fix” them, we beat them. We punish them. We label them. We kill them. Listen carefully when a child says, “Nobody cares about me. So why should I care?”

www.bernardgassaway.com
bgas37@aol.com

© April 2007