Stop Tearing Your Hair Out: What To Do When Bullying Interventions Don’t Work

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The question I’m tackling this month is what to do when bullying interventions don’t work. As in you’ve tried everything and the aggressors are still being mean or bullying the target.

One of the more difficult situations I experienced involved three eighth grade girls who relentlessly bullied another girl in my class. To make it worse, they were hard
to “catch.” On the rare times I saw what they did, they denied it or accused the target of being too sensitive. The girls were also really skilled at getting the target to react and disrupt the class. (By the way, that same year I taught a group of eleventh grade boys with almost the same dynamics and it took me a lot of trial and error to change things for the better with them too. That year, there were many times I left the classroom not sure I ever wanted to teach again.)

When I’m faced with a situation like this, I remember a few things:

- I’m not a horrible and incompetent teacher. I’m trying my best in a difficult situation.
- I care about my students and I have the will and capacity to figure out a solution.
- I’m allowed to be frustrated by this situation because it is frustrating.
- I’m not allowed to let my emotions control my actions.
- I’m allowed to acknowledge to myself that at this moment I don’t like teaching this particular student(s) very much.
- A teacher usually sees the reaction not the behavior that “started it.”

Let’s use my eighth grade girls as an example. In that class, I wouldn’t always witness what the girls were doing, so sometimes I would get annoyed at the target. But what that usually means is that the student(s) who initiated the aggression are better at getting away with what they’re doing so the only thing you see is the reaction. I had to look beyond what was most easy to notice.

One of the mistakes I made with them is creating rules when I was frustrated and angry. For example, out of total exasperation I moved the “mean girls” away from each other. But I didn’t do it strategically. I should have thought about where I was moving those girls—not just away from each other because the girls can still look across the room and intimidate their target. One of my better strategies has been to move the most powerful student closest to me, away from any of her “assistants” and place the target near a student that everyone genuinely respects.
Take a Step Back

Let’s look at what to do when you get to a place where you say to yourself “I’ve tried everything.” You have to take a step back. In my experience that phrase means that you have gotten to a place where it’s very hard to reflect thoughtfully or creatively and come up with new ideas. Try the following exercises to look at your situation from a different perspective:

- Write down a few sentences that clearly define what you want to change between these students.
- Observe the group when they aren’t your responsibility. Watch them before school, at lunch or ask another teacher who has these students if you can observe their class.
- Ask a colleague to sit in the class while you teach. They can sit in the back of the room and bring their own work; you have a second pair of eyes and ears to pick up what you’re missing. Then, debrief after class and try to come up with a strategy together. And get over any feeling of failure or embarrassment that you’re asking for help or admitting that things aren’t going great in your class. It happens to everyone. If a colleague says it’s never happened to them, they’re deluding themselves.

Inventory What You Know

After these steps, inventory what you know. Write down exactly what you mean by “I’ve tried everything.” The following questions are some of the ones I ask myself:

- What was my reasoning for implementing the strategy I chose?
- When did I implement this strategy? Not only the date but what was happening in the school?
- What was happening in my classroom that week?
- Did I respond emotionally (out of fear, frustration, etc.) rather than a strategic decision?
Write down specifically, with as much detail as you can remember, what you mean by, “I tried everything.” When you’re done, take a walk around the block or the school, somewhere so your brain can think creatively. Come back and try to write down three insights about why you think your previous strategies haven’t been effective and what you can do to address those obstacles.

Talk With the Students Who are Engaging in Bullying

When you’ve done your inventory and observed the students, schedule a time to meet with the aggressors (one at a time) and then say in your own words:

“I really want you in my class because [insert something positive about the student here]...but what’s going on with you and x student isn’t acceptable to me because... Just like I would defend your right to be in my classroom and be treated with dignity, I will do the same for this student. Is there anything I should know about this situation that would help me understand what’s going on? (Whatever the response it doesn’t justify the behavior but any background/more information is helpful.) More than getting you in trouble, I am asking for your agreement that you understand why it’s important to stop undermining this student. I want you in this class. Do you think you can do this?

Just so there’s no surprises, although I believe you get what I’m saying and you’re taking it seriously, if this doesn’t change, here’s what could happen as a result...[insert next level of discipline here] I don’t want that to happen but if this continues, you’re giving me no choice. Thanks for meeting with me.”

The bottom line is there isn’t going to be one solution for this problem and it’s probably going to take time. And you probably won’t have one “aha” moment with the students where they permanently change their behavior. But if you reflect on
how you're responding to the dynamics between the students and then take the
time to really “see” what's going on between them, you will figure out how to be
more effective.

It is messy. It doesn’t feel great in the moment. But it’s way better than doing
something superficial and tricking yourself into thinking you’re addressing the
problem when you aren't. And of course, the weird and wonderful thing about
teaching is that it’s moments like these where you can build strong relationships
with the most challenging students.

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