
The 4 Powers Of Teachers



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Teachers are a funny breed. If you ask engineers what they do for a living, they will say, "I work at XYZ Company," or "I am in electrical engineering," or something similar. If you ask teachers what they do for a living, they will invariably say, "I am a teacher." That's because teaching is what we are, not what we do.

Recently, a veteran teacher, when asked why she became a teacher, responded, "For the power." I thought about that for quite a while and I am convinced that each of us probably became teachers for very similar reasons. I have identified, from personal experiences, four powers teachers can have.

My first lesson in teacher power occurred when I was four. We lived in an East European neighborhood in Wilmington, North Carolina. We were one of only three families who were neither East European nor Jewish. But, it was the cheapest, safest place to live in the city. Few families owned either their homes or a car. Transportation was provided by the city buses, or, on rare occasions, a taxi.

We had three teachers who lived in the neighborhood and they were revered above everyone else. One was a balding older man with a gray beard. He seemed incredibly old to me. I don't know whether his slow steps and lack of physical energy were functions of age or of his experiences in a German concentration camp.

I do know that when one of those teachers stepped off the bus, every child in view ran to see if there was a package we could carry. Since I was the youngest, I was always the last to arrive and the precious packages were already consigned to someone older and faster.

One day as I arrived, out of breath, to vie for the old man's package, a miracle happened. He had waited for me to get to the bus stop. Very elegantly, he said, "The young one, today, I think."

Like the Red Seas parting, the bigger kids stepped aside to let me get the package. That day I learned that teachers have the **power to elevate children with their peers**. From that day until we moved two years later, I was included in their games even when it meant changing the rules to accommodate my skills, all because a teacher considered me worthy to carry his packages.

The second lesson in teacher power came from Miss Alice Kupf. She was the first person I knew who became engaged. Until then, I thought people were born married. She had rabbits in her room and certain behaviors earned the privilege of feeding the rabbits, certain others the right to water them and still other behaviors resulted in getting to clean the cage. I cleaned the cage as often as I fed them, frequently on the same day.

My mother had sold me on the idea of school by telling me I would learn big words, numbers greater than 10, and geography so I would know where all our neighbors used to live. Miss Alice accommodated those needs so I would accommodate hers. She wanted an orderly classroom and challenging me intellectually was the quickest route.

Friday afternoons were special. I got my new word at the end of the day and we spent ten minutes with her reading to me from the fifth grade geography book. I could choose any page I wanted and she would read that page and answer all my questions. If she didn't know the answers, she looked them up in a still thicker, heavier book. But, she had the **power to challenge children**.

The third teacher power I learned about from my third grade teacher, whom I'll call Miss X. We had moved to Georgia that year to be near the residential school for the deaf. I had a hearing loss which we were told would probably get worse, resulting in permanent deafness. My former school had sent my mother a letter telling her I would have to enroll in the residential school at the beginning of the year. Back then, when the earth's crust was still cooling, deafness must have been contagious because children who couldn't hear were sent to separate schools as a programmatic policy.

We were given my files (such a thing is unheard of now) to hand carry to my next school. Somehow, the dreaded letter "got lost" and my mother decided to "let them find out for themselves." The longer I could fool them, the longer I could stay at home.

At any rate, I spoke too loudly and sometimes inappropriately, but, I knew how to make Miss X look at me when she was talking. I give her credit: it only took two weeks for her to realize she couldn't turn her back on me to write on the board and she learned not to wander far from my desk.

She taught me that teachers have the **power to diminish a child** with both peers and self. I think I hold a record for the lowest conduct grades ever awarded in third grade from January through March. In April, my disability became known when an accident caused my doctors to risk doing the surgery which gradually reinstated my hearing. I

remember little of the spring of that year but I've never forgotten those first three months in her class.

In the fourth grade, I met Miss Annabelle Saxon. She was one of the three "maiden sisters" who taught school. An older sister had already retired from 30 years of teaching and the younger sister, Miss Eva, later taught me algebra.

Miss Annabelle was short and stout. Now, short is a little taller than petite though I was taller than Miss Annabelle. And, stout is somewhere between average and overweight. As my mother used to say, "Miss Annabelle was built to stand."

Miss Annabelle enrolled the same child Miss X had the year before, but her view of the world was very different. I didn't talk too much in Miss Annabelle's class. I just had strong verbal skills. I wasn't easily distracted. I just had an active curiosity and more creativity than others. In her class, I didn't start mischief. I had leadership skills that required nurturing.

Miss Annabelle knew and exercised the **power to restore children** in their peer's and their own esteem. She was a magician!

I walked out of her class an intellect and a leader.

As we walk into our classes, whether the students are in small bodies or large, beautiful or misshapen, young or mature, we choose which of these four powers we will exercise. Whether purposefully or carelessly, we will exercise one of the four. I am convinced much of the verbal abuse heard in some schools and in some classrooms is not only the cause but the result of a diminished child.

I was 17 years finishing my baccalaureate degree but, for the entire time, I knew I *was* a teacher and I hoped someday I could *do it*, as well. Today, I teach in a teacher education program, but I usually have at least one direct contact project with children. The projects keep me in touch with what my students need to remember about power and its use. 🍎

