The shame of shaming

A review of policy documents from nine leading charter management organizations reveals support for disciplinary practices that entail the shaming of students.

By Joan F. Goodman

The ancient practice of shaming in school — remember dunce caps? — has recently resurfaced in the press. According to the New York Times, students who owe money to the school cafeteria have been publicly humiliated: branded with a marker that says “I need lunch money,” made to clean cafeteria tables while peers look on, or presented with a cold sandwich after seeing their hot meal tossed in the trash. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nearly half of all school districts have used some form of shaming to compel payment (though the state of New Mexico, concerned about how prevalent the practice has become, decided to outlaw it) (Taylor, 2017; Siegel, 2017; New York Times Editorial Board, 2017).

This public arousal affords a timely opportunity for deeper consideration: Just what is shaming exactly? How does it differ from similar discipline techniques, such as embarrassment and guilt? How broad and frequent is its occurrence? What are its effects, and what are its implications for educational policy and practice?

What is shaming?

Consider the experience of a child — let’s call her Anabelle — who, lacking lunch money, is offered a thin, cold sandwich instead of the usual hot meal, told that this is all she’ll get for lunch until her balance is paid, and asked to wear a wristband to identify herself to cafeteria workers. Most psychologists would probably argue that this amounts to shaming because it contains three critical elements: (1) public criticism that has to do with (2) a breach of accepted norms (e.g., that students should pay for their lunch) and (3) that is carried out by someone in a position of legitimate authority (Tangney, 1995; Taylor, 1985; Williams, 1993).

But still, it can be tough to pin down whether a particular incident ought to be defined as shaming. For example, what if the criticism had been private and invisible to others (e.g., a letter home, a whispered reminder to the child)? What if Anabelle had been just one of many children who refused to follow the pay-for-lunch norm, preferring to skip the school meal? What if the adult requesting payment was an outside provider who was serving special food on a single day? In those cases, would
everyone agree that Anabelle might have been made self-conscious but would have been spared the humiliation of shaming?

Shaming is a complex event: It involves a shamer, the shamed, and the setting. If the shamer isn’t perceived as a respected authority, or if the rule being enforced isn’t seen as legitimate, then the effort to shame will fail. Thus, if a widely disliked teacher calls out a student for misbehavior, it may not be felt as a shaming experience at all. And if students tend to scoff at the idea that they should pay for hot lunch — preferring to eat a free cold sandwich — then Anabelle probably won’t feel shame when the cafeteria workers demand that she pay what she owes them. In sum, for shaming to occur, people must be observed disapprovingly by others whose values they share, and they must believe that they deserve the criticism.

**Shaming, embarrassment, and guilt**

When shaming does occur, it can be a very powerful experience, entailing “a painful negative scrutiny of the self — a feeling that ‘I am unworthy, incompetent, or bad,’ ” explains psychologist June Price Tangney (1995, p. 117). “Those in the midst of a shame experience often report a sense of shrinking of ‘being small’ — of feeling diminished in some significant way. They feel, for the moment, worthless and powerless. And they feel exposed,” desiring to wilt or become invisible (Taylor, 1985; Williams, 1993). The shamed child is unlikely to reflect on whether and why her behavior was wrong; more likely, she will conclude, “I must have done wrong because you think I did.” The adult’s judgment overwhelms whatever proclivities she might have for independent assessment of the situation.

By contrast, when children experience embarrassment, they do not incorporate the judgment of others into a broad, devastating critique of the self; embarrassment is situation specific.

For instance, a child who is playing a game may be embarrassed when she realizes she doesn’t know the rules, or when she notices that she is the only player wearing long pants, or when she trips and falls over the ball. In such situations, being the target of unwanted attention is indeed embarrassing; one feels foolish, maybe ridiculous, but those sentiments are temporary and superficial. They tend to dissolve fairly quickly without a sense of deep dis-
grace (Hall, 2013; Taylor, 1985). On the other hand, shame is a more totalizing experience and carries with it a more powerful message: You are inadequate, not the equal of others, without the same dignity (Nussbaum, 2004).

Whereas shame emphasizes one's incapacity, another related emotion, guilt, highlights one's responsibility. Imagine that a friend had lent Anabelle money over the weekend, and she promised to pay it back at school. Only, she forgets to do so, leaving the other girl without any money to buy a hot lunch. Seeing her friend nibbling on a cold sandwich, Anabelle may feel guilty and angry at herself, but it's unlikely that she experiences a sense of self-evisceration and loss of dignity. The mishap isn't a sign of personal inadequacy (she wasn't exposed as impoverished) but an external incident easily prevented in the future. Shame feels involuntary and totalizing; guilt feels more voluntary and is limited to a specific behavior provoking the desire for reparation. It supports a robust inward, independent conscience rather than an outward other-directed one (Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearling, 2002; Tangney, 2015; Taylor, 1985; Williams, 1993).

**Shaming practices in schools**

Given the complexity and subjectivity of shaming, its frequency in schools cannot easily be quantified or measured. Therefore, when my colleague and I set out to look for its occurrence, we focused on policies that fit the basic criteria for shaming — public censure of a student likely to induce humiliation — while appreciating that not all students will react to such events in identical ways. Specifically, we scoured student/teacher handbooks; student, teacher, and parent testimonials, and news media in search of school policies that, if followed, would likely result in the shaming of children.

Of the 10 largest U.S. cities, none explicitly endorses a technique that we deem to be a form of shaming (and one of those districts, Chicago Public Schools [2015], specifically prohibits a shaming technique, that of forcing students to eat lunch in silence). However, we did find that a number of shaming techniques are featured in the parent-student handbooks of many charter management organizations (CMOs), which tend to detail their disciplinary methods more thoroughly than do traditional public schools. Thus, we chose to conduct a close study of nine CMO network handbooks covering nearly 500 schools.

We found that two-thirds of those handbooks included markers of probable shaming, including:

- Public data walls in classrooms or hallways, displaying information on student behavior, academic progress, or disciplinary infractions;
- Physical or simulated isolation from the students’ peer group via silent lunches or clothing changes; and
- Public apologies.

Below, we report further findings from the CMO handbooks. (Please note, though, that we cannot say whether schools governed by those CMOs do, in fact, engage in shaming more frequently than do other schools, only that their official policies seem to encourage shaming.)

**Examples of shaming in CMO handbooks**

Some parent-student handbooks explicitly disavow the use of shaming techniques but recommend practices that amount to shaming all the same. For example, Amistad Charter School disapproves shaming (according to a personal communication from a teacher), yet its handbook suggests that students be required to make public apologies for infractions, and it suggests publicly posting the names of students placed on detention. Similar contradictions are evident at Success Academy: Its training materials instruct teachers never to yell at children, “use a sarcastic, frustrated tone,” “give consequences intended to shame children,” or “speak to a child in a way they wouldn’t in front of the child’s parents” (Taylor, 2016). Yet it, too, requires students to make verbal or written apologies to the community (Success Academy Charter Schools, 2016).

Founders of the highly regarded and widely emulated Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) invented a discipline technique called the Bench: Students who failed to complete assignments or behave according to expectations were seated in an isolated space at the back of the room, permitted to talk with teachers but not to one another, and separated from the class at lunch.

KIPP administrators noted that this method failed to correct behavior (Matthews, 2009). (I would speculate that this is because students were unaffected by the status demotion and at times appeared either to like or be indifferent to the attention; the shaming was intended, but it wasn’t experienced as shaming because students rejected class norms.) KIPP subsequently tried other shaming techniques: Solitary lunches, sitting in low chairs, and standing for a full period when a homework assignment was incomplete (Matthews, 2009). Over time, the Bench morphed into the Bench. This also required students to sit at the edge of the classroom and to eat silently with other benched students. They were also prohibited from talking and had to wear a different colored shirt from others (Green, 2014; Horn, 2016; Thern...
These schools forbid them from discarding regular uniform shirts on dress-down days, and/or receiving a new one symbolic of grade advancement. Normally, getting to wear a specific kind of shirt is viewed as a reward, but the student made to wear the “wrong” color on a given day will draw public attention to her failures.

Two other practices — color-coding behavior and the use of data charts — might be classified as “shaming-lite” because the public censure that attends them is likely to be less deliberate and humiliating. Behavioral color-coding (most commonly applied to young children, who tend to be least jaded and most sensitive to the teacher’s disapproval) goes something like this: The names of all students are listed vertically on a chart with several colors on the horizontal axis. Individual clips, denoting each student’s status, are moved back and forth across the chart during the school day. As described in the Young Scholars-Douglass Family Guide:

> [S]tudents will start each day on green that symbolizes that they are ready to learn. Through positive behaviors, students earn their way up to blue and blue star. If students are not following directions or behavioral expectations, they will first receive a warning. After an individual warning, the student’s clip would move down. When a child’s clip moves down to red, they complete a behavioral reflection, and the teacher follows up with a phone call home” (2014, p.18).

Similarly, Mastery Charter Schools tracks student behavior on classroom posters:

> A color-coded choice chart helps students see how their choices are impacting themselves and their community. Students always start the day on Blue-Good Day and strive toward Green-Wow! Great Day! … The following visual cue categories are listed in order from high to low performance. Green-Wow! Great Day! Blue-Good Day, Purple-Official Warning, Yellow-Loss of Privilege, Red-Phone Call Home” (2014, p. 17).

Data charts publicly expose students by posting (often in hallways or other highly visible areas) their scores on tests, grades, and assessments and/or their attendance records. For example, Achievement First posts in the hallways a list of those on detention (Achievement First/Amistad, 2015). Likewise, the Boston Plan for Excellence (2014) has recommended extensive use of data walls — the caveat being that, to preserve anonymity, children’s ID numbers are substituted for names, unless the data include accolades (e.g., perfect attendance), in which case names can be used. (However, while the ID numbers may offer some protection against shame, students still know how they rank, and they may be quite savvy in decoding the numbers.) Such displays are becom-

Even when the full complement of Porch and Bench practices are not employed, some elements (public exposure, isolation, and shirt changes) are still promoted. And as a condition to get off the Bench, some KIPP charters still require students to give public apologies, expressing contrition for misbehavior (Green, 2014; Horn, 2016; KIPP St. Louis, 2015).

Success Academy, too, demands that students make public apologies (written or oral) for infractions that are considered serious and sometimes as a condition for students to return from suspension (Success Academy Charter Schools, 2016). Likewise, Achievement First requires students to write “a letter of apology of acceptable quality (as deemed by the principal or dean) … The scholar presents this letter to Achievement First staff and/or scholars and is then readmitted” (Achievement First/Amistad, 2015, p. 70).

Uniforms tend to be important to many charter schools, often featuring colored shirts that are used mainly to symbolize accomplishment (e.g., see Achievement First/Amistad, 2015; Democracy Prep Public Schools, 2015; Green Dot Public Schools, 2016; and Yes Prep Public Schools, 2015). However, shirts can also be made to indicate wrongdoing, serving as a stigma that publicizes a student’s failures. Often, rather than having miscreants change their shirts as a sign of misbehavior, these schools forbid them from discarding regular uniform shirts on dress-down days, and/or receiving a new one symbolic of grade advancement. Normally, getting to wear a specific kind of shirt is viewed as a reward, but the student made to wear the “wrong” color on a given day will draw public attention to her failures.

Shame fails to inhibit future acts of wrongdoing and may even make matters worse. It is associated with defensively motivated anger, future substance use, risk taking, and externalization of blame.
ing increasingly popular across public schools, an outgrowth of the contemporary emphasis on data-driven instruction and accountability (Strauss, 2014; Hall, 2016).

The effects of shaming

Given the ego-threatening effect of shame, it is no surprise that empirical studies fail to support shame-inducement, particularly when compared to the positive effects associated with inducing feelings of guilt. In thorough reviews of the research base, Tangney and associates (1995, 2002, 2007, 2015) reported that shame fails to inhibit future acts of wrongdoing and may even make matters worse. It is associated with defensively motivated anger, future substance use, risk taking, and externalization of blame.

By contrast, guilt is associated with the development of empathy and with socially constructive and reparative actions. “On the whole,” write Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2007), “empirical evidence evaluating the action tendencies of people experiencing shame and guilt suggests that guilt promotes constructive, proactive pursuits, whereas shame promotes defensiveness, interpersonal separation, and distance” (p. 6).

A number of shaming techniques are featured in the parent-student handbooks of many charter management organizations.

Yet, even if shaming fails to generate remorse, in some instances, it may be justified. For example, the act of shaming can make individual students comply with group norms, can reinforce those norms among the indifferent, and can serve to rally the larger group to recommit to them. In other words, shaming can deter misbehavior, at least if — sometimes a big IF — students do, in fact, share the same standards.

Shaming might also be justified in special circumstances. Take, for instance, the case of an unrepentant bully who finds gratification in going after weaker students and believes (perhaps mistakenly) that her successes will win her at least some peer approval. What matters to her is the display of power and strength, not school norms. The persistent bully is so clearly immoral, cruel, and damaging that, arguably, shaming her is the just thing to do. In so abusing the dignity of others, she has lost her own, forfeiting the right not to be stigmatized (temporarily) by others.

This sort of bullying creates a sense of moral outrage that goes well beyond what we feel when students fail to turn in their homework, say, or when they talk disrespectfully to a teacher. In this case, the shaming, intended as punishment, may seem like an appropriate means of preserving and strengthening foundational standards of equality, in addition to teaching the individual a lesson. Genuinely expressive of group sentiment and directed to a student who is doing serious moral harm, it therefore may be one of the few justifiable reasons for suspending a child’s rights by shaming her.

But such cases are few and far between. The vast majority of the time, shaming is ineffective, and such deliberately induced humiliation violates a child’s dignity. It is, therefore, not just inadvisable but a moral wrong. Children at school struggle to maintain self-esteem amidst the battle for popularity, grades, and social rankings. When an adult induces the belief that one is unworthy — a lesser person — then self-respect and self-assurance are undermined. The task of cultivating a student’s independent thinking and value formation, helping her become fully capable of rational decision making, is replaced by the cultivation of fear, self-disparagement, and self-protection (Hall, 2013; Nussbaum, 2004; Rawls, 1971; Taylor, 1985; Whitman, 2005; Williams, 1993).

The desire to protect human dignity has much to do with the decision by 31 states, so far, to forbid corporal punishment in schools (Freeman, 2010). Whatever the arguments as to its effectiveness or ineffectiveness as a disciplinary method, policy makers have chosen to prohibit it because it amounts to a violation of the individual student. Is shaming dissimilar?

Policy implications

I recognize that shaming — so dependent on a child’s interpretation as well as a teacher’s intent and behavior — is hard to recognize, burdensome to eliminate, and probably unavoidable in our school systems. However, teachers, administrators, and policy makers would benefit from a self-conscious and self-critical review of their shaming practices. The disgrace and subordination that comes from shaming is antithetical to the values of equal respect, autonomy, and dignity (Nussbaum, 2004; Rawls, 1971). Whenever possible, discipline should be a private rather than public matter, and it should be done with the objective of helping a child understand her wrongdoing and taking responsibility for it.

Here is where it is critical to observe the distinction (albeit a fine one, at times) between shame and guilt. Shaming children is almost never appropriate;
inducing them to feel guilt often is. When a child has not discharged an obligation, the preferred remedy should be directed to correcting that omission and supporting the child’s budding conscience.

What value is added by the Bench, public data walls, or the demand for public apologies? If a child has verbally disrespected a teacher, then shouldn’t the solution be to address the language and attitude behind that action, rather than to degrade the child? Generally speaking, isn’t group identity more strongly enhanced by participation in shared projects (e.g., in sports or onstage) than by coming together to hear a forced apology? Does a student’s wrongful conduct so offend her classmates that a public apology is truly necessary? Outside of a few extraordinary cases, the answer is no. While schools should take seriously their duty to ensure a safe and orderly environment, they should be equally serious about supporting the dignity of individual students. Given the contextual and subtle nature of shaming, it cannot, unlike corporal punishment, be eliminated by entering a prohibition into the rule books against its use. Instead, it behooves educational leaders, along with teachers, to appreciate its centrality in the moral life of classrooms and to carefully inspect their practices accordingly.

References
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