

Parent Engagement in Education: Drama or Empowerment?

Introducing: The Power of TED*
(*The Empowerment Dynamic)

By David Emerald

Our schools are a hotbed of triangulation. The dynamic dance between student, parent(s), and school can produce high drama. On the other hand, the dance can also be one of empowerment, if we work consciously to cultivate a set of relationships that I refer to as *The Empowerment Dynamic – or TED*.

Since the beginning of time, the default orientation of humanity has been that of the Victim. Living in an often hostile and dangerous world, we human beings have honed the fight, flight, or freeze reaction to our life experience.

Transactional Analysis pioneer and psychiatrist Stephen Karpman, MD, has observed that most human dynamics involve three roles – that of Victim; Persecutor (or Perpetrator); and Rescuer – which result in what he described as the “Drama Triangle.” In *The Power of TED* (*The Empowerment Dynamic)*, this triangulation is referred to as the Dreaded Drama Triangle (DDT) because of the toxic nature of the relationships that thrive in such an environment.

The **Victim**, which is the central figure in the drama, sees life as happening *to* them and believes they are powerless in the face of the onslaught of the problems they encounter. In order to be a Victim, one must have a **Persecutor**. The Persecutor is very often a person, but it can also be a condition (maybe an illness) or a circumstance (perhaps a natural disaster). When a Victim encounters a Persecutor, they then look around for a **Rescuer** to save them or, at least, to alleviate their suffering.

In the context of our education systems, we can see this dynamic play out in a variety of ways. The student often assumes the role of Victim. Depending on the particular circumstances, the school (be that a teacher, principal, or the school system itself) and the parent(s) can alternate between Persecutor and Rescuer. For example, an elementary school student may get in trouble for excessive socializing in class and the teacher (Persecutor) sends the student to the principal or assigns detention. The student then complains to the parent, saying the discipline is unfair, and the parent (Rescuer) intervenes in an attempt to lessen the punishment.

This is but one example and there are countless others we could recount. Of course, both parents and the school can also take the Victim position, for instance when one feels unduly criticized or made to blame for the circumstances the student faces. When it comes to the current state of many school systems, it seems that everyone is chasing everyone else around the triangle with almost everyone considering themselves the Victim.

There is a subtle and powerful seduction in being a powerless Victim. Besides being a great way to elicit pity and assistance from others, the role of Victim reinforces the belief that one is not responsible (i.e. unable to respond) toward what is going on in their lives. The Victim becomes the star of their own drama. This position lets the victim avoid responsibility for their life since, as far as they are concerned, they are not the cause of such occurrences and, therefore, it's not their fault!

However, the real question is not "whose fault is it?" The essential questions are, "What do we want in this situation?" and "Who do we want to help the student become?" These questions are the basis of what our educational systems inherently are about: preparing pupils to become college and/or work ready and helping them form a healthy sense of self identity.

Such questions, along with the perspective that the education system stands to support the student in preparing for a life of contribution as a citizen and consumer, can only be answered if we can cultivate a triangle of relationships that create a context of empowerment. We need an antidote to the toxic stew of the Dreaded Drama Triangle (DDT) and its Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer roles. TED* (*The Empowerment Dynamic), and its alternative roles of Creator, Challenger and Coach, serves as such a remedy.

The **Creator** is the central role in The Empowerment Dynamic. When this role is consciously chosen, one claims and taps into his or her capacity to choose their response to their life circumstances. They also own their responsibility and contribution to their current circumstances. This role is result- and goal-oriented, focused on desired outcomes.

Along the way, a Creator invariably meets up with the **Challenger**, which is the antidote to the role of Persecutor. Creators welcome Challengers. Creators are able to transform their perspective toward difficulties with people, conditions and/or circumstances into challenges to be met, understood, and (whenever possible) overcome. The Challenger calls forth a Creator's will and ability to create, often spurring him or her to learn new skills, make difficult decisions, and do whatever is necessary to achieve a dream or desire.

In order to more effectively move toward their dreams and desires, a Creator can benefit greatly by having in their life a **Coach**, which is the antidote to the role of the Rescuer. A Coach supports, assists, and facilitates a Creator in clarifying and manifesting the Creator's desired outcomes through the use of powerful questions. Coaches help Creators perceive new possibilities; coaches dare them to dream! Thus, a Coach acknowledges and helps leverage the power and capabilities of a Creator and holds them accountable for taking the steps necessary to move forward. Most importantly, a Coach

sees the other as a Creator that is creative and resourceful – even if they do not know it themselves.

And that is how educational systems of empowerment must see a student – as a Creator. In this kind of environment, both parents and the school can then serve as Coach and Challenger in service to the growth and maturation of the student into a creative and resourceful Creator in their own lives.

While such a shift sounds simple, it is often not an easy thing to do. Parents must resist the temptation to tell either the student or the school what to do. Instead, parents grow in their own capacity to be a Coach who asks good, powerful and guiding questions to help their child articulate outcomes, consider intended and unintended consequences, assess their current realities in light of what they want to create, and to discern possible steps and actions to take to grow in the directions they desire. At times the parent also steps into the role of Challenger, setting boundaries and determining consequences for choices made by the student.

In much the same way, the school also consciously approaches the student as both Coach and Challenger by supporting students in developing their capacity to make choices and learn the skills and disciplines necessary to make their way in the world.

Together parents and the school can partner – as coaches and challengers – to create structures and systems that support the student in his or her growth and development. They may still at times feel like victims and will, themselves, unwittingly serve as a Challenger to both parents and the school from time to time as they test boundaries and explore in ways that lead to undesirable consequences.

How would the previous example of the excessively social student play out using The Empowerment Dynamic? Both the school and the parent would respond to the

situation, first and foremost, by seeing the student as a Creator. Together they would acknowledge the student's need for social interaction, while also establishing the need for a classroom environment that does not distract others from the learning that is going on (i.e. being a Challenger by setting boundaries and conditions). Perhaps a meeting would take place in which the student was asked coaching questions such: "What is it you are wanting in talking with others?" and "How can you go about getting that need met in a way that does not lead to consequences that you don't want (like having such a conversation such as this)?"

Imagine for a moment what the learning experience and environment would be if parents were engaged as a Creator themselves, while also serving as Coach and Challenger; if the student were treated by those around them as a Creator, rather than reacting to them as a Victim; and if the school saw its role as one of developing curriculum for a Creator, establishing and maintaining a system that builds up and inspires the students it serves to gain the knowledge, learn the skills, and develop the self-awareness of their creative capacities; and engaged parents as partners in creating an environment of empowerment.

The triangulation of parent, student and school is inherent in any educational system. The intention of this short paper is to introduce the possibility of a healthy and empowering set of relationships that can take shape in our learning environments – one in which all parties are seen as co-creators. Together, parents and schools can best serve their students by committing to move beyond the Dreaded Drama Triangle and the roles of Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer and to cultivating the skills and abilities associated with the roles of Creator, Challenger and Coach that make up The Empowerment Dynamic.