

# The “Bad” Teacher: Some Thoughts and Questions for Supervision<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the notion of “bad” teachers from a psychological viewpoint, including the possible unconscious origins of such images, and raises some questions for teaching and supervisory practice. One day, on a whim, I asked the 24 experienced teachers who enrolled in the course to list on index cards up to three characteristics of what they considered to be a “bad” teacher. No one appeared to have any difficulty with the assignment, as they all completed it quickly. I collected and compiled the responses, and recorded the frequencies. The next day I shared the cumulative list with the teachers as a group, presented a ten-minute overview of Jung’s concept of the shadow, and then asked for the students’ reactions. Five categories summarized all 72 characteristics of “bad” teachers. These categories include: having “low motivation” (29%), being “uncaring or disrespectful toward students” (24%), evidencing a “knowledge or skill deficit” (22%), being “inflexible” (14%), and possessing a “difficult personality” (11%).

*Key Words:* The “Bad” Teacher, Supervision, USA

## Kötü Öğretmen: Denetim İçin Bazı Düşünceler ve Sorular

### ÖZET

Bu çalışma, “kötü” öğretmen kavramını, bununla ilgili imajların olası bilinçsiz kökenlerini ve denetim uygulamalarını psikolojik bir bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Bir gün, bir hevesle, derse kayıtlı 24 öğretmene, “kötü” öğretmeni yansıttığını düşündükleri üç özelliği kartlara yazmalarını istedim. Kimse bu çalışmada zorlanıyor görünmüyordu ve hepsi yazmayı hızlıca bitirdiler. Yanıtları toplayıp, derledim ve frekanslarını kaydettim. Ertesi gün tüm listeyi öğretmen grubuyla paylaştım, Jung’un gölge kavramının 10 dakikalık bir özetini sundum ve öğrencilerin tepkilerini istedim. Beş kategori, “kötü” öğretmenin 72 özelliğini özetliyor. Bu kategoriler, “düşük motivasyon” a sahip olmak (% 29), “öğrencilere karşı kayıtsız veya saygısız” olma (% 24), “bilgi ya da beceri eksikliği” gösterme (% 22), “esnek olmama” (% 14) ve “zor bir kişiliğe” (% 11) sahip olmadır.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Kötü Öğretmen, Denetim, ABD

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## INTRODUCTION

Some politicians and policymakers in the United States have begun to use the phrase "bad" teachers when speaking about alleged shortcomings in public education. Identifying and firing the "bad" teachers, they suggest, is a ready solution to the problem of increasing student test scores, a strategy applauded by liberal and conservative media pundits alike. This article explores the notion of "bad" teachers from a psychological viewpoint, including the possible unconscious origins of such images, and raises some questions for teaching and supervisory practice.

As infants and children, according to the psychologist Carl Jung (1964; 1976a), we all possess a limitless range of potential feelings, behaviors, talents, and creative responses. The adults in our lives, as well as siblings and peers, gradually constrain these inherent capacities by force or by subtle means such as shame or withholding affection. Due to our helplessness, we begin to bury in our unconscious the emotional and behavioral characteristics that these other people find unpleasant, inconvenient, or unacceptable. Thus, we gradually define our ego – our conscious identity – by deliberately rejecting a large number of the innate capacities and traits with which we were born. This same process, Jung believed, results in the formation of a "shadow" of our ego, which continues to reside in our unconscious and contains all of those rejected possibilities.

Throughout our lives we learn how to present ourselves so that we continue to be accepted and loved by others and come to view those rejected portions of ourselves as negative. We therefore remain ever vigilant to ensure that the shadow remains repressed and fear that someday it may escape (Zweig & Wolf, 1997). Each of us, in our everyday lives, also develops a "persona" or a mask that we display to the world. This persona and our conscious ego may be identical with each other, but the persona usually represents a compromise between the ego and society with regard to what one should "appear to be" (Jung, 1976b, 106).

Like members of all professions (Jung, 1990, 122-123), teachers cultivate a very specific and powerful persona that we display to students, parents, and colleagues; ideally, one that is vital, caring, and intelligent, as well as energetic, efficient, empathic, and dedicated. In fact, the list of positive attributes associated with the teacher persona is virtually endless, which sometimes results in a persona that may be unnecessarily rigid, burdensome, dysfunctional, and self-defeating (Craig, 1994). The reason is that, as with the ego, for every virtuous quality that is incorporated into the persona, a corresponding negative trait is deposited in the unconscious, with the result that the shadow's power grows separately and simultaneously.

Because the shadow is the exact antithesis of who we consciously believe we are, it is very difficult to see and recognize within ourselves. To protect our self image and persona we dissociate ourselves from those undesirable elements of our personalities and then project them onto other individuals or groups. In this way, we objectify these negative traits and distance them from who we believe ourselves to be. Our shadow thereby seems to exist outside ourselves, because others safely contain our own repressed and rejected characteristics. Often, what we consider to be the most despicable traits are projected onto our adversaries and enemies. We can catch a glimpse of our personal shadows, therefore, by thinking about the behaviors and characteristics that we most strongly dislike or find distasteful and objectionable in others.

In a very preliminary attempt to determine if shadow projections might have relevance for teaching and supervision, I conducted an informal exercise in a graduate level educational supervision class, which met daily over a six-week summer session. We had spent considerable time in class talking about qualities and behaviors that characterize effective and successful teaching. One day, on a whim, I asked the 24 experienced teachers who enrolled in the course to list on index cards up to three characteristics of what they considered to be a “bad” teacher. No one appeared to have any difficulty with the assignment, as they all completed it quickly. I collected and compiled the responses, and recorded the frequencies. The next day I shared the cumulative list with the teachers as a group, presented a ten-minute overview of Jung’s concept of the shadow, and then asked for the students’ reactions.

After a few moments of silence, a female fourth grade teacher in the class suggested the possibility that shadow projections were most prevalent in relations between teachers and students. This perception was strongly supported by the rest of the class. Consequently, before any further discussion, I asked the teachers to list three characteristics of what they considered to be a “bad” student. Again, responses and frequencies were compiled and shared with the class the following day.

Although detailed results of the second survey are not presented here, categories that emerged from the descriptors of “bad” students included being: “oppositional/defiant,” “apathetic/withdrawn,” “inattentive/impulsive,” “inconsiderate/harmful to others,” “arrogant,” and “obsessive.” After I shared these findings with the class, the same fourth grade teacher who suggested including students in the exploration of shadow projections, as well as a male, middle-school, physical education teacher, explained how they came to understand something about themselves at specific points in their teaching careers. They both reported that they became most impatient and had least success when with students who were most like themselves when they were children.

It seems interesting that the teachers in my class apparently had to process the “student shadow” concept before confronting the “teacher shadow”. One explanation is that as *aspiring* administrators and supervisors, who had not yet been in a position of authority with respect to other teachers, they preferred to explore the “shadow” concept on a level where they had experience and with which they could more easily identify. Another possibility is that the detour through characteristics of “bad students” was related to some need to work through these issues of identity formation in the order that they developed. While both of these explanations may be partially true, the shadow projections of teachers and of students overlap at a psychological level, resist separation, and very likely interact in how they play out in the classroom.

Figure 1 illustrates five categories that summarize all 72 characteristics of “bad” teachers that the students in my class listed. These categories include: having “low motivation” (29%), being “uncaring or disrespectful toward students” (24%), evidencing a “knowledge or skill deficit” (22%), being “inflexible” (14%), and possessing a “difficult personality” (11%). The fact that these five categories account for all of the responses is rather surprising, so I have included in Figure 1 examples of the actual words that were used to describe “bad” teachers under each category.

Figure 1. Characteristics of "bad" teachers

**Low Motivation: (n=21)**

- Lazy, apathetic, unmotivated (7)
- Always unprepared, "winging it" (3)
- Unenthusiastic, not excited (3)
- Tells students to "figure it out themselves" (2)
- Doesn't like his/her job (1)
- Negative attitude (1)
- Does not care about teaching (1)
- Sits at desk without teaching (1)
- Assigns worksheets to keep students busy during class time (1)
- Assigns work without any explanation or discussion (1)

**Uncaring/Disrespectful Toward Students: (n=17)**

- Uncaring, doesn't seem to care (5)
- Cold to students, unfriendly, mean spirited (2)
- Judges children unfairly or inappropriately (1)
- Not concerned about individual students (1)
- Does not recognize individual learning styles (1)
- Not aware of uniqueness of individual students (1)
- No concern for the well-being of students (1)
- Disrespectful of students (1)
- Never solicits input from students (1)
- Refuses to allow students to participate in class (1)
- Always critical of students (1)
- Negative attitudes toward students (1)

**Knowledge/Skill Deficit: (n=16)**

- Not knowledgeable of subject content (4)
- Poor manager of classroom/learning environment (3)
- Inconsistent (2)
- Unclear, poor communicator (2)
- Unorganized (1)
- Unable to see the “whole” picture (1)
- Incompetent (1)
- Poor planner (1)
- Doesn't go to workshops (1)

**Inflexible: (n=10)**

- Unwilling to try new and different approaches to teaching (3)
- Lectures every class, all period long (2)
- Teaches the same way all the time (2)
- Task-focused to the point of not caring whether the students truly understand (1)
- In a rut (1)
- Inflexible (1)

**Difficult Personality: (n=8)**

- Not open to advice (1)
- Self-serving (1)
- Brings personal problems into the classroom (1)
- Stubborn (1)
- Not adaptable to situations or people (1)
- Insubordinate (1)
- Low self-esteem (1)
- Poor interpersonal communication (1)
- Boring (1)



**Category Percentages**

|                         |            |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Low Motivation          | 29%        |
| Uncaring/Disrespectful  | 24%        |
| Knowledge/Skill Deficit | 22%        |
| Inflexible              | 14%        |
| Difficult Personality   | <u>11%</u> |
|                         | 100%       |

Upon examining this data, the students in my supervision class proved very receptive to the notion of shadow projections and openly discussed issues related to recurrent feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, failure, and guilt that they sometimes experienced as teachers. They readily identified examples of early experiences, both as students in school and as beginning teachers that contributed to the development of shadows within themselves that they actively suppressed. The teachers also indicated that these shadow projections sometimes made them less tolerant of students or of colleagues who in some way reminded them of themselves at an earlier phase of life.

The mood in the class generally seemed to range from amusement, to embarrassment, to fascination with the concept of the shadow and with the unusual openness and honesty of the discussion. We did not proceed any further as a group with the process of personal discovery after this class session, but the shadow and shadow projections became concepts that students brought up repeatedly in future discussions as we considered interactions between teachers and supervisors.

According to Jung's analytical psychology, the greater the opposition between the persona and the shadow, the stranger, more alien, and sinister the shadow seems. As individuals, we have great difficulty facing the shadow within us and are repulsed when we see it in others. But as the opposition between persona and shadow grows, the easier it becomes for the shadow to abruptly intrude into our lives despite our conscious efforts to keep it hidden. Slips of the tongue, sarcastic remarks, and outbursts of rage, feelings of envy, chronic irritability, self-destructive addictions, or destructive behavior toward others are all ways that the shadow can manifest itself and exert power over our lives. We may react with guilt, embarrassment, shame, or remorse, or possibly deny responsibility for our actions, but the shadow will continue to sabotage our best intentions unless it is consciously acknowledged and allowed an opportunity to express itself (Zweig & Wolf, 1997).

When dealing with shadow impulses, the first step is to recognize their existence. The second step is to address them consciously, while trying to understand why they sometimes come to the surface. In this way, the ego and persona can be separated from "shadow contamination" or those occasions when the shadow intervenes to defeat our conscious intentions (Pascal, 1992).

The most productive approach is to watch and listen carefully when the shadow speaks to us during our waking hours and in our dreams. Engaging in "shadow work" by recording

and reflecting on our experiences can help us establish a conscious relationship with the shadow, and reduce its power to subvert our effectiveness and undermine our aspirations.

By coming to accept and understand ourselves more fully we may also establish more authentic relationships with others (Zweig & Wolf, 1997). A difficult challenge when confronting the shadow, however, is deciding whether each of the repressed traits or impulses one discovers represents an existing shortcoming that should be overcome or an undeveloped virtue that can be embraced and nurtured (von Franz, 1964). At the very least, if we begin by acknowledging that collective and individual shadows of teaching exist, and come to terms with them, we may connect more authentically to the teacher *self* within each of us and, then, to our students and colleagues as well.

### Some Questions for Practice

Among the many questions that might arise from a more in-depth exploration of the “shadow side of teaching” or the “shadow side of supervision” are: Do we ever project onto students or teachers our own feelings of inadequacy? Do we ever needlessly force them to conform to limitations that we are imposing on ourselves? When we reprimand a student or correct a teacher, are we really suppressing our own impulses? Do we admonish the child or teacher we once were, who now stands before us? Do we actively repress, in the name of duty, an urge to be sympathetic that we may feel at the moment? Is criticism of a colleague ever a reflection of our own internal state? Do we contribute to our own stress and potential for burnout by relentlessly burying our feelings? Do racism and sexism exist abstractly “out there” in the institution, or do they really originate and reside within our own hearts? Can unexpressed anger be channeled and released toward improving schools and society? Most practically, of course, is the question: How might a supervisor integrate these ideas into their supervisory work with teachers?

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