



## **Reducing Bullying with ‘Tribes’**

*by Wendy Ryan*

Research shows that anti-bullying programs don't always work.<sup>1</sup> One reason for the limited success of some anti-bullying programs could be that teachers may be unable to invest the sustained time and effort necessary to implement a program focused only on bullying because of their other daily preoccupations, such as discipline, classroom management and student motivation.<sup>2</sup>

A general program aimed at school improvement may have a wider impact on many undesirable student behaviors, including bullying, as this approach is easier for teachers to adopt and maintain compared to a program focused solely on bullying.<sup>3</sup>

The Tribes program<sup>4</sup> fits the description of the type of general program that authors Galloway and Roland<sup>5</sup> propose might be effective to reduce undesirable student behaviors, such as bullying. Tribes uses a whole-school, learning community model and aims to create a positive school climate through improved teaching and classroom management, positive interpersonal relations and opportunities for student participation.<sup>6</sup>

The Tribes process consists of four key principles:

- Attentive listening.
- Appreciation and no put-downs.
- Mutual respect.
- Participation and right to pass.

These principles serve as a stable foundation for building positive interpersonal relations in classrooms and throughout a school. Teachers in Tribes classrooms model respectful behavior and encourage respectful interactions among students. Tribes teachers aim to use the most effective teaching methods and meet the learning needs of students with a variety of different learning styles.<sup>7</sup> Instead of focusing solely on verbal (or linguistic) and logical (or mathematical) forms of intelligence, Tribes schools provide students with opportunities to develop other forms of intelligence, such as kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, visual, special, naturalist, existential and intrapersonal.

In classrooms committed to the Tribes process, students participate in daily community circles in which there is an opportunity to share ideas, thoughts and feelings. This can be a time in which problems encountered on the school yard can be discussed and worked through together. It can also be a time to celebrate successes or get to know classmates better.



Students also work together in long-term, small, heterogeneous groups called tribes that foster, in which social skills—such as active listening, problem solving and conflict resolution. In addition, a series of fun activities are interspersed throughout the day to help students develop feelings of inclusion and a sense of community.

Ideally, all school staff members are trained in the Tribes process and agree to follow the principles, and parents are informed about the Tribes agreements and encouraged to model them at home. With this support in place, consistent positive behavioral expectations are more likely to occur in each classroom, on the school yard and at home.

### **Seeing it for yourself**

As part of my doctoral research, I studied an elementary school that had been using the Tribes process for four years.<sup>8</sup> This school posts the Tribes agreements as “school rules” and has them hanging in every classroom and hallway. All parents receive a newsletter at the beginning of each school year that explains the Tribes agreements. Children and parents sign a portion of the form indicating they have carefully read and discussed the Tribes agreements, and they return the signed portion to the child’s teacher. The Tribes agreements are also incorporated into the student handbook and on the school’s website.

Observations and interview data from staff and students at this school—which indicate the Tribes agreements—are often referred to throughout a typical school day and frequently referred to as a guide to behavior in classrooms, on the school yard and at assemblies.

There is a token incentive system in place to promote pro-social behavior, including compliance with Tribes agreements, outside and inside the classroom: Students receive colored popsicle sticks on the school yard and colored tags in classrooms for behaviors that comply with the Tribes agreements. Each Tribes agreement is represented by a different color. A group reward—for example, an afternoon trip to a local park or a movie—is delivered after the school accomplishes an agreement, which is symbolized by filling a container full of popsicle sticks. An individual reward (such as a Tribes star with a student’s name on it) is given when a child receives one of each color. This star goes up in the hallway on a bulletin board called the “Tribes Wall of Fame.”

Additionally, a longer-term incentive was recently created at this school: After students collect seven Tribes stars each, they will be able to paint their names on a ceiling tile in the school hallway.



I also observed other incentive systems. For example, the principal gives individual awards—such as a certificate—to those students identified by classroom teachers as having put in an extra effort in school work or behavior. These principal's awards are distributed at assemblies. At the assemblies I attended, several students received awards for putting forth a special effort in following the Tribes agreements.

There are also incentive systems for good behavior in assemblies: Classes earn points on a thermometer chart for following the Tribes agreements. When a class reaches the top of the thermometer, the principal visits the classroom, and there is a drawing for small prizes. Several students and staff who were interviewed said they thought this incentive was making a positive difference in student behavior in assemblies.

Tribes agreements are also emphasized on special occasions. For example, Halloween and Christmas plays written and performed by staff members each had a clear Tribes message. For the school's Tribes activity day, a newsletter informed parents that awards would be given to tribes (groups of students) that had the most points—not only for activities, but also for showing the best listening skills, mutual respect, appreciations, participation and enthusiasm.

### **Additional support**

Support from the school board was also important in making Tribes a success at this school. The principal applied for and received funding from the school board to implement Tribes. These grants allowed all teachers to be trained, provided manuals and other resources for teachers, and allowed some teachers to visit other school boards to observe Tribes in action and learn new ideas.

Teacher buy-in to the Tribes philosophy was identified as an important factor for successful implementation of the program. This school has an active Tribes committee, which consists of 10 teachers and the principal. The committee meets on a regular basis to plan strategies to facilitate Tribes implementation at its school. A grant helped to fund four school days, one at the beginning of each term, during which the Tribes Committee could meet to plan learning activities they share with the rest of the teachers. As a result of each of these special professional development days, the Tribes Committee was able to provide the rest of the teachers with lesson plans and activity ideas linked to the provincial curriculum.

Teachers indicated that linking Tribes activities to the provincial curriculum was an important factor that increased implementation. On regular professional development days



when all teachers are available to meet, Tribes committee members take turns volunteering to model to the rest of the teachers how they actually used specific Tribes activities in their classroom. Members of the Tribes committee model the Tribes' way of learning and being together for the rest of the teachers. Tribes processes, such as community circles and following the Tribes agreements, also are used during staff meetings.

### **Implementing the Tribes way**

The principal uses several methods of motivating and supporting staff members in the implementation of Tribes. At the beginning of the school year, a schedule of Tribes activities and examples of energizers are given to teachers for a six-week period. A number of whole-school activities, including assemblies, are planned for the first week of school. During the second week, teachers are asked to focus on teaching their students a specific Tribes agreement on each of four consecutive days.

For the remainder of the six weeks, teachers are encouraged to implement the Tribes activities outlined on the schedule. Teachers are provided with all of the resources necessary to undertake these activities, as well as links to the provincial curriculum. The links to the curriculum are given to justify their inclusion in the school day as something valuable and mandated, and not just something extra.

Throughout the school year, teachers are provided with resources they can use in implementing the Tribes philosophy. Whenever there is a schoolwide event, such as Tribes day, many staff members on the Tribes committee are involved in planning it. The Tribes committee consults the rest of the staff and provides teachers with information and resources.

The Tribes philosophy includes promoting teaching methods that aim to meet the needs of all learners. In the classes I observed at this school, teachers were using a wide variety of teaching techniques to engage learners. I saw a variety of instructional methods, such as individual seat work, pair work, small-group work and whole-class instruction, including community circles and a mixture of teacher-led and student-led instruction.

In the lessons I observed, the level of student engagement was moderate to high, and most students seemed to have fun while learning. The teachers I observed tended to manage student behavior by referring to the agreements and praising students for following them. Teacher-student and student-student interactions I observed were rated as neutral to pleasant—no hostile or aggressive interactions were observed in any of the classrooms.



A few barriers to conducting Tribes activities, such as energizers or community circles, include difficulties in student behavior management, teacher stress, workload, lack of time, characteristics of students and the classroom lay out. The most powerful facilitating factors seem to be strong pedagogical leadership from the principal, links to the provincial curriculum and parental support.

For more information on how schools around the world have used Tribes, visit the Tribes' website at [www.tribes.com/tlc-schools](http://www.tribes.com/tlc-schools).

## References

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