

Improving Teacher Empathy to Improve Student Behavior

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This is my last website article until September. I continue to be very appreciative of the feedback I have received about my monthly articles from my readers. As I have expressed in the past, my main goal in writing these columns has been to share information and ideas that might serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-change.

My first website article appeared in February, 1999 with a focus on the concept of empathy. It represented part one of a two-part series. Since that time several people have inquired why, of all of the topics I might have selected, did I choose empathy for my initial article. My response was that for many years prior to 1999 I perceived empathy as a basic skill and foundation for developing meaningful connections with others as well as for leading a more fulfilling, resilient life. The importance of empathy was reinforced when I read the books of several renowned individuals, such as Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence (EQ)*; Goleman included empathy as a key component of EQ.

Simply defined, empathy is the capacity to place oneself in the shoes of another person and to perceive the world through that person's eyes. Empathy does not imply that you agree with other people but rather that you attempt to appreciate and validate their point of view. My interest in the importance of empathy dates back to the 1970s when in my clinical practice and consultations I saw the negative consequences in many areas of our lives when empathy was weakened. I also witnessed how easily empathy could be compromised, especially when we are upset, angry, disappointed, or frustrated with another person, whether that person be our child, our spouse, our student, our colleague, our employee or anyone else.

Questions to Promote Empathy

To help to reinforce a person's capacity for empathy, I introduced a number of questions for consideration, questions that I elaborated upon in the books I co-authored with my colleague Sam Goldstein. Examples of these questions include:

What words do I hope my child (student, spouse, colleague, employee) uses to describe me?

What do I say and do on a regular basis so that my child (or others) is likely to use the words I hope he/she uses?

What words do I think my child (or others) would actually use to describe me?

If the words my child (or others) uses to describe me is different from the words I hope he/she uses, what changes must I make to bring the two descriptions closer together?

Would I want anyone to say or do to me what I have just said to my child (or others)?

In anything I say or do, what do I hope to accomplish?

Am I saying or doing it in a way in which my child (or others) is most likely to listen to what I have to say, not become defensive, and respond in a constructive manner?

I discovered that these and similar kinds of questions evoked much reflection. It was evident that some individuals demonstrated a greater capacity for empathy than others. For instance, a teacher following a workshop I offered said, “I always knew how students perceive me is very important, but after hearing the questions you asked and seeing the drawings you showed (as part of my presentation I showed drawings done by students of their teachers) I realized that I will no longer see my students simply as *students*. Instead, I will now see them as *people*.” What this teacher conveyed was a significant shift in perspective, in appreciating the importance of viewing and understanding each student as an individual.

In contrast, one high school teacher, obviously frustrated and stressed by the many demands being placed on educators in today’s world of high-stakes testing, told me, “To be honest, at this point I don’t care how my students describe me as long as they pass my tests as well as the state-wide tests that they take.”

Students are very perceptive in picking up these kinds of differences in attitude and outlook from adults in their lives, just as employees are about their managers or spouses are about each other. Certain emotions and expectations are not easily hidden or disguised.

Empathy and an “Empathic Mindset”

Empathy may be understood as involving both cognitive and affective skills (e.g., the ability to take the perspective of another person and to experience and identify different emotions). I believe that some individuals, given their inborn temperament and

learning style, will have an easier time, even from birth, developing and displaying empathy than others. However, I also subscribe to the view that one's level of empathy is not limited or fixed but rather open to growth and development. If I did not believe that people are capable of becoming more empathic, I would not have introduced the kinds of questions I listed above as a vehicle through which to encourage people to consider the perspective of others.

The capacity to become more empathic and to enrich our relationships with others has been captured in various studies, including a recent one reported by Clifton Parker in the *Stanford News* (<http://news.stanford.edu/2016/04/26/teacher-empathy-reduces-student-suspensions-stanford-research-shows/>). The title of the article as well as the brief summary under the title immediately caught my attention: “Teacher empathy reduces student suspensions, Stanford research shows. When teachers think empathically, and not punitively, about misbehaving students, they cultivate better relationships and help reduce discipline problems.”

The research, which was conducted by Jason Okonofua, David Paunesku, and Gregory Walton in the Department of Psychology at Stanford, focused on helping middle school teachers develop what these researchers labeled an “empathic mindset” (the use of the word “mindset” also drew my attention given how much of my strength-based approach is rooted in the concept of mindsets).

Parker, citing the authors of the study, wrote, “A central tenet of the teaching profession is to build positive relationships with students, especially struggling students. But some teachers are exposed to a ‘default punitive mindset’ in school settings due to zero-tolerance policies on student behavior.”

As I read the words “building positive relationships with students,” I was immediately reminded of the work of the late psychologist Julius Segal who coined the term “charismatic adult” when examining factors that help children to become increasingly resilient. In an article I often cite that appeared in the Brown University Child Behavior and Development Newsletter in 1988, Segal stated, “From studies conducted around the world, researchers have distilled a number of factors that enable children of misfortune to beat the heavy odds against them. One factor turns out to be the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult—an adult from whom they can identify and

they gather strength. And in a surprising number of cases, that person turns out to be a teacher.”

Walton echoed the primacy of the relationship when he observed, “It is heartbreaking. Teachers are caught between two models, a punitive model that says you have to punish kids to get them to behave and an older model that goes to the heart of the profession, which says that teaching is all about building strong relationships with children, especially when they struggle. . . . Punitive policies can lead teachers astray. That makes kids feel disrespected and ultimately contributes to worse behavior.”

Walton’s comments parallel my reply to a question I am frequently asked when I speak about disciplinary practices, namely, “What is the most effective form of discipline?” My answer, which is rooted in great part in my experiences as the principal of a school in a locked door unit of the child and adolescent program at McLean Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital, continues to be: “Discipline is most effective in the context of a good relationship.” As principal I began to appreciate that empathy displayed by teachers and other staff in an attempt to understand the world and perception of these challenging students was of paramount importance in reaching and teaching them.

Studies Demonstrating the Impact of Empathy

The Stanford researchers wondered what interventions might assist teachers who were trapped in a “default punitive mindset” to break free and adopt an “empathic mindset” that would lead to more positive teacher-student interactions and fewer disciplinary problems.

These researchers conducted three studies. In the first, they examined whether “teachers could be encouraged to adopt an empathic rather than punitive mindset about discipline.” Teachers were requested either to write about how “good teacher-student relationships are critical for students to learn self-control or how punishment is critical for teachers to take control of the classroom.”

The findings were very clear. The teachers who were requested to assume an empathic position by understanding the perspective of students maintained positive relations with their students even when the latter misbehaved; in addition, the change in mindset and accompanying teacher behaviors resulted in a decrease in discipline problems. Remarkably similar to the teacher who told me that the empathy exercises I introduced helped her to see students as “people,” Okonofua observed, “A focus on

relationships helps humanize students. Then you see them as not just a label but as growing people who can change, who can learn to behave more appropriately, with help.”

A second study involved 302 college students who were asked to imagine themselves as middle schoolers who had disrupted class. They were then requested to imagine being disciplined in either of the two ways the teachers in the first study were described—punitive or empathic. The results indicated that the college students reacted much more favorably when the teacher’s approach was more empathic. Interestingly, they said they “would respect the teacher much more, and would be more motivated to behave well in class in the future.”

The third study questioned whether an empathic mindset would create more positive relationships between teachers and students and lead to a reduction in student suspensions. This research involved 31 math teachers and 1,682 students in five ethnically diverse middle schools in three school districts in California.

To enhance empathy, teachers were asked to review articles that reported how negative emotions could prompt students to misbehave. The articles also emphasized the importance of being empathic by understanding the students and maintaining positive relationships with them even in the face of misbehavior.

Next, teachers were requested to describe the strategies they use to maintain positive relations when students misbehave, being told that their responses to this question could help future teachers who encounter disciplinary problems. This exercise is similar to another question I ask, “What do I say and do on a regular basis so that the other person is likely to use the words I hope he/she uses to describe me?” This question may be seen as encouraging the development and implementation of specific strategies built upon a more empathic position.

Once again, the findings were noteworthy. “Students whose teachers completed the empathic mindset exercise—as compared with those who completed a control exercise—were half as likely to get suspended over the school year, from 9.6 percent to 4.8 percent.” Very importantly, the students with the greatest history of suspensions “reported feeling more respected by their teachers several months after the intervention.”

This third study was accomplished on-line, prompting the researchers to assert, “This exercise can be delivered at near-zero marginal cost to large samples of teachers

and students. These findings could mark a paradigm shift in society's understanding of the origins of and remedies for discipline problems.”

As noted earlier, in this study teachers were asked to describe what they actually do to nurture positive relationships with students. One teacher wrote, “I never hold grudges. I try to remember that they are all the son or daughter of someone who loves them more than anything in the world. They are the light of someone's life.”

I believe that publishing a book based on these kinds of insights provided by the teachers as well as the observations of many of the students would make for a very rich document for promoting empathy in the school setting—empathy that is then translated into actions for enhancing the teacher-student relationship, promoting learning, and lessening disruptive behaviors.

Beyond the Educational Setting

While these three studies examined teacher empathy and its impact on students, the findings can be applied to a multitude of settings. As an example, I have used empathy exercises not only in my consultations with and presentations for schools but also when working with law firms, financial advisors, business organizations, mental health and healthcare agencies, and parent groups. The power of empathy is not confined to one particular setting or group but to all human interactions. Empathy is a significant component of social-emotional learning programs offered in schools, and I am pleased to report that an increasing number of medical schools now require specific training experiences to enhance empathy in future doctors.

Okonofua subscribes to a similar view about the far-reaching influence of empathy, noting, “There are cases in which one person's mindset can have a disproportionate impact on others—like doctors with patients, supervisors with employees, and police with civilians.” This list can be extended into the home environment in terms of parents with children and spouses with each other.

I hope the ideas and research described in this article prompt you to reflect upon your relationships with different people in different settings. I also hope that the months ahead prove peaceful and satisfying during these very challenging times.

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