

A Mindset Shift to Continue Supporting the Most Frustrating Kids

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By Alex Shevrin

On my best day as a teacher, I will talk passionately about progressive pedagogy, empathy as the core of a classroom and diverse student needs. I will say I care about every child, the whole child, and am committed to their growth.

And then there are those bad days. The days where within the first two hours of my morning, I'm called a b*** three times. The ones where my perfectly planned learning activity falls flat because my brilliant student just refuses to pick her head up off the desk. The days when the differentiated lesson I designed just for that one student goes on perfectly but that one student's chair is empty, missing school again. These are the days that push on my best intentions and idealistic visions. These are the days when reality and philosophy collide, and it feels like my challenging students are behind the steering wheel and I'm just along for the ride.

WHAT'S THE ACTUAL CHALLENGE HERE?

Challenging students aren't that way because they are inherently bad kids or intentionally creating difficulties in the classroom. To borrow a phrase from Ross Greene, "kids do well if they can," and if they aren't doing well, it's because there's something getting in the way. When I step back and consider the obstacles in my students' lives — poverty, trauma, chronic stress — it makes total sense that they are struggling to communicate, regulate their emotions and make progress on learning.

To me, the challenge about challenging kids is the way that I feel working with them. Interacting with these students can bring up all kinds of emotions: sadness because of their pain, defensiveness if a student is criticizing or attacking me, protectiveness over the other students being disrupted, and even annoyance that my day didn't go as I planned. All this is made more challenging by the fast pace of the day, and the fact that even on a good day it can be hard to find time to take care of my own needs. But I know that how I react to students, and my ability to manage my emotions, colors every interaction I have. Left unexamined, these strong emotions can lead to burnout.

How do we really feel about our most challenging students? Most of us will say "frustrated" as a first reaction. But after we dig a little bit under the layer of frustration, what's the next emotion, the truer emotion? I asked a room of educators this question at the Educon conference earlier this year. I heard: Worried. Hopeless. Lost. Powerless. Stuck. Many of us feel a deep sense of responsibility and care for "our kids." When we see a student struggling and believe that we can't help, the powerlessness can feel overwhelming. If we don't do the work to transform that emotion in a healthy way, it can instead become frustration and irritation, and begin to chip away at our empathy.

This frustration infuses all our interactions with and about that student, which in turn communicates a lack of care to the student and family, heightening what may have already felt like an insurmountable wall. We say we believe in every child, care for every child, support every child — but when we let our challenging emotions fester, we struggle to communicate that to others — or even believe it ourselves.

I've gotten stuck in this trap more than once. It was my student who jolted me out of this cycle when she said, "You don't really care about kids, you're just here for the money." My instinct was to laugh, but I quickly realized that what my student was trying to tell me was that she didn't feel like I cared about her. I was able to use that moment to let her know that I did indeed care, and we were able to have a great conversation about how teachers can feel frustrated sometimes and how we're all human. That conversation ended up strengthening our relationship and my work with her.

My most challenging student is not inherently challenging as a human being — but I need to own that it's challenging for me to work with them. Once I take responsibility for my own emotions, I am now in a position to transform them.

WHAT CAN I DO TO CHANGE THIS?

It's not about not feeling hopeless, defeated and powerless in the face of challenging student behaviors. These are normal responses we can expect to have as humans in relationship with other humans who are struggling. Instead, we need to own the emotions and work to make meaning of them. This means taking the time to dig into questions like:

- Why am I feeling this way?
- Could this feeling give me insight into how my student is feeling?
- What does it mean about me that I feel so frustrated, lost or hopeless? Does it change my conception of myself as a teacher, as a person?
- What do my students' challenges bring up for me? How does my own history influence my responses?

What is the venue for these questions? In an ideal world, teachers would make space for grappling with these questions as part of their scheduled job responsibilities. At my school, we take time formally and informally to delve into our own emotional response to the work, to gain perspective, to check our assumptions and stay grounded.

Informally, this looks like maintaining a school culture where the students' strengths are at the center. We have an informal "no venting" policy, preferring instead to problem-solve. It's common to find teachers in each other's classrooms at the end of the day comparing notes and talking through a challenging situation: "Hey, was he upset in your class today, too? What did you do about it? Do you have any sense of what's going on for him?" We encourage this peer consultation and make time for it.

Formally, we have several mandatory and optional group opportunities for staff to focus on wellness and making meaning of the work. Once a month we have wellness groups where staff choose a personal wellness goal for the year and use the group to stay on track and get ideas. We also do periodic case conferences, focusing on one particular student, where we walk through what behaviors are coming up, what we understand to be at the root of those behaviors, how we're feeling working with that student, and what we should do going forward. We make the choice to invest our time as a school doing this rather than focusing staff meetings on other topics, and we see the benefit for students when teachers are on the same page about supporting them.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We will never lose the need for meaning-making, because working with humans will always be inherently complex and bring up emotions. However, there are some proactive things we can do to smooth the path for ourselves.

- Proactively plan for being a person with emotions. Expect that the work will be challenging and that sometimes you will feel awful, and accept that this is a normal part of a human-centered job. What are some ways you do this?
- Build in support systems. Find the people, groups or strategies that will proactively support you and will respond to you with kindness and understanding when the going gets rough. This might be nurturing your personal friendships or relationships, strengthening connections with co-workers, my supervisor or other folks at work, or going to my own counselor or therapist. If I'm worried about respecting my students' confidentiality, I remind myself to turn my focus back to my own emotions: I don't need to share my students' names or stories in order to talk about how frustrated or hopeless I'm feeling, and work through those emotions.
- Develop understanding. We can better make meaning when we better understand the underlying issues at stake. Seek out information about trauma, chronic stress, the impacts of racism and discrimination, and other systems at play with your particular population. I incorporate these topics into my school's ongoing

- professional development (which staff design and facilitate), and also use my own personal learning community online to find these resources.
- Forgive yourself: Above all, we need to be gentle with ourselves. This self-forgiveness serves to remind us that we also must be gentle with our students, offering a fresh start each day and providing opportunities to repair and rebuild our relationships after conflict

When I feel like I just don't have time to slow down and do this emotional work, I remind myself that an investment in this work pays off tenfold in my ability to stay grounded, not to get so stressed out, and most importantly, to be a better help to my students who need it most.

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