Radical Empathy as Wheels on the Road to Equity

Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. After these three words, Derek Chauvin was handcuffed and disappeared behind a closed door to await sentencing for his role in the death of George Floyd. The whole world was watching as the verdicts were read. And now, we have the opportunity to watch for ways to care for and support our students and the adults who serve them.

Schools exist for students to learn; teaching and learning is, of course, our core business. Yet, learning to be even better human beings is our glam - and that is a good thing, because while the road to academic achievement is paved with good curriculums, the learning process on the road to academic achievement is greased by the WD-40 of human relationships. We are, first and foremost, human beings: all of us, no matter our political bent, our cultural or linguistic background, our gender, our socio-economic status, or our age. We are human first before we are students, before we are teachers, and before we fill roles that support students and teachers. We are human.

Because we are human, we know the stress of the Chauvin trial and the verdicts, as well as the trauma of the videos of George Floyd, weighs heavily upon many and disproportionately so upon our students of color. Clinical therapist Paul Bashea says Black males carry the heaviest burden of all because they may “see themselves in George Floyd.” For those reasons, we send both messages and strategies of support, because, though the verdicts have come in, the burden of stress won’t disappear as fast as Mr. Chauvin did behind that closed courthouse door. Additionally, four more trials currently await; three connected to the death of George Floyd and one to the death of Daunte Wright. How might we care for all our students and staff, particularly for our students and staff of color, all the while?

Part of the answer lies not just in empathy but in radical empathy. Humans, bigs or littles, in our environment may say (or behave in a manner that is saying), “I don’t know if I can think today. I am going to implode or explode.” An empathetic adult may respond with, “Hang in there. This, too, shall pass.” That statement, while well intended, leaves the student or colleague in a lonely spot. Here is a three-part technique that offers small steps to go from empathy to radical empathy as we support students and colleagues in emotional pain:

- First, it is important to let the other person know you see them as a human being by validating their humanness:
  - “I can see you are having a difficult time today.”
  - “I hear you saying you are not able to focus.”
“I sense you may be feeling overwhelmed/frustrated.”
Note, we would not say, “I know exactly how you are feeling,” because we simply cannot know.

Next, acknowledge your own limitations and, if appropriate, allow the other person to see they are impacting you:

“I wish I knew what to do and say to take your pain away.”
“Your struggle reminds me there are times when I need help from others, too.”
“It hurts to see you in pain, and I want to help care for you, like others have cared for me when I am in pain.”

Finally, offer to provide support as you are able:

“Do you need some quiet time?”
“Would you like to meet with your counselor/PBIT/etc.?”
“Is there someone you would like to talk to about this? (In school or call home?)
“Would it help if I or someone walked with you to the counselor/main office/case manager?”

What does this radical empathy stuff have to do with learning? Someone said, “An empire isn’t built in a day. It is built every day.” Substitute “an empire” for “school equity” and you have, “School equity isn’t built in a day. It is built every day.” Practicing empathy daily and radical empathy when it feels right is a good way to show up daily in our very human environment.

I learned more about radical empathy in Radical Empathy in Teaching (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Whereas conventional empathy is a sense of what the person opposite of you is feeling, radical empathy goes deeper. Radical empathy involves the student sensing that the adult has been “touched, impacted, or influenced, even slightly, by the student’s situation (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).” Can radical empathy really make relationships stronger, which in turn makes learning deeper, which in turn builds even better people on both sides of the relationship? In a word, yup.

Research (Jordan & Schwartz) finds students feel less alone when they get a sense that they matter to the other person. Radical empathy produces changes and growth in both the student and in the adult. That is where the word “radical” fits in; it is radical to deepen the connection “of intellectual mattering (Schwartz 2013).” Intellectual mattering happens when we let others know “their thinking or their questions have sparked our interest, deepened our learning, inspired us, or, in some other way, contributed to our lives .... (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).” In turn, telling students they impact us adults tends to make students more motivated, hungry to learn, and more confident as true partners in the learning process (Schwartz & Holloway, 2012, 2014).
Radical empathy is challenging and does not happen within each student-adult interaction. In addition, as adults, we need boundaries around when it is helpful to the student to see our vulnerability and when it is not. Further, there are times when students truly need deeper care of counselors or mental health professionals.

My hopes are that each of us applies genuine empathy, particularly toward our BIPOC community, right now, and that we at least learn about radical empathy. My gratitude is for all of you who are committed to building equitable schooling for every human being who enters our doors. Thank you.