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Introduction

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“To be able to understand people and be present for them in their experience—that’s the most important thing in the world.”

—Mary Pipher (Clinical Psychologist and Author)

Excellence in teaching is critical for student success. Empathy for students and being present *with* them in their learning experience are the most important things a teacher can do. Affirming a student’s thinking and adapting the learning in the moment to support and advance their understanding is the greatest act of compassion. This act of compassion is called *expert teacher noticing*.

Noticing – etymology tracing back to Latin words *noticia* (being known) and *notus* (known)

The Case for Compassion

Teaching is hard. Teaching really well is profoundly difficult. How can you balance compassion for your students with effective pedagogy? A global pandemic, economic disadvantages, academic gaps, chronic absenteeism, increasing demands, new initiatives, and lack of administrative support can make it feel like the profession, as we know, needs more career sustainability. Now more than ever, it is imperative for teachers to demonstrate compassion.

Of course, empathy is vital for good teaching. Feeling *with* your students can be substantial. Nevertheless, too much of it can be a problem, weighing you down. Instead of carrying the burden of empathy, you can learn to experience compassion. This is a massive shift in how teachers engage with their students, dramatically benefiting everyone in the classroom, including the teacher. It starts with understanding the difference between empathy and compassion.

Empathy and Compassion: *What Is the Difference?*

The words *empathy*, *compassion*, and *sympathy* are sometimes used interchangeably. Sympathy means feeling *for* another, while empathy means feeling *with* another. Even though they all represent positive, altruistic traits, they do not refer to the same phenomenon. There are two distinct qualities of compassion: understanding another's feelings and the willingness to act and support those feelings. Compassion goes beyond empathy.

Teaching with *just* empathy makes it impossible to consider the greater good. Empathy can not only help us do the right thing but also motivate us to do the wrong thing. It can distort or cloud our judgment, encourage bias, and make us less effective at making pedagogical decisions. However, empathy should be considered. A teacher without empathy is like a car without gas—it simply will not engage. Empathy is vital for connecting with our students; then, we can leverage the gas to teach with compassion.

Even with empathy's many benefits, it can be a poor guide for teachers. Research by Paul Bloom, professor of cognitive science and psychology at Yale University, sheds light on how empathy can distort our judgment. Through logic and clinical studies, Bloom concludes that empathy can result in biased decision-making and hyper-focus on an individual versus a group of individuals. For example, through empathy, I might be willing to help someone handsome but not somebody who is repulsive, frightening, or lacks personal hygiene. Also, empathy zooms in on one individual but does not attend to the difference between one student and 30 students. In other words, empathy makes us often care more about a single student versus 30 students or one and 100.

How do you tap into your students' possibility of growth and transformation? Avoid the trap of empathy and teach with compassion. Shifting from empathy does not make you less kind; it makes you better able to support students during the challenges they may endure in and out of school.

There are five key strategies for using empathy as fuel for teaching with more compassion.

1. **Take an emotional step away.** Instead of getting emotionally drained when one of your students struggles, try taking a step back. You can gain a clearer perspective

by taking an emotional and mental step away. With this perspective, you can better help, support, or advance learning. It may seem like you are being unkind, but you are stepping away to help solve the problem.

2. **Ask what your students need.** When you ask your students the simple question, “What do you need?” you initiate a solution to their challenge by allowing them to reflect. This will better inform your next pedagogical moves. Also, this will help your students feel heard and seen and increase a sense of belonging in the diverse classroom.
3. **Know the power of non-action.** Teachers are generally good at getting things done. However, when it comes to students with academic or social-emotional challenges, it is important to remember that you only need to give students some solutions. Instead of always providing solutions, students need your clarity, ear, and caring presence. Many challenges just need to be heard and acknowledged. In this way, taking “non-action” and allowing students to drive can often be the most powerful means of supporting and advancing students.
4. **Coach your students so they can find their own solutions.** Teaching is not about solving problems for your students. It is about growing and developing young minds, empowering them to solve their problems. Coach your students and mentor them. Show them how to find their pathway and their own answers.
5. **Show self-compassion.** Self-compassion happens by practicing self-care. We know that putting all our energy into managing our students’ emotions comes with the cost of mismanaging our own feelings. It’s called emotional labor—when we absorb, reflect, and redirect other people’s feelings so much that we become overwhelmed. Hence, as teachers, we must practice self-care: take breaks, do not work on the weekends, sleep, exercise, eat healthy foods, cultivate meaningful relationships, and practice mindfulness and gratitude. We must consistently find ways of staying grounded, in tune with ourselves, and resilient. When we show up to teach with these qualities, students can lean on us and find support and comfort in our presence.

Compassion is the underlying thread for efficacious teaching. A student's brain responds more positively to teachers who show compassion. Creating a compassionate culture in the classroom can lead to lower emotional exhaustion, lower student absenteeism from school, and greater academic success.

"Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge."

—Simon Sinek

Like Simon Sinek's philosophy on leadership, schooling aims to take care of students in our charge so that they become their own leaders and self-directed learners. This does not mean focusing solely on curriculum and

test scores. Instead, the purpose of schooling is to create, through compassion, a village of scholars who learn sufficient foundational skills to be well-rounded, collaborative critical thinkers and make decisions for personal endeavors and contributions to the larger society.

Teacher Efficacy

The way teachers THINK matters. A teacher must believe that all students can learn and bring assets to the classroom, that she has the efficacy to facilitate student success, and that reflection and refinement of teaching practices are necessary. A teacher's mindset and ways of thinking, interpreting, and evaluating are fundamental to their students' academic success. It is this thinking that leads to instructional decision-making. This thinking determines lesson planning, choice of interventions, creation and explanation of learning objectives and success criteria, noticing when students have sufficient understanding and when they do not, deciding when and how to scaffold, and choosing when and how to advance learning. It is not an exhaustive list, but you get the point.

Teacher Noticing

Noticing things is a common and essential part of teaching. The simple definition of noticing is *observing or paying attention to something*. There is no debate that teachers observe and pay attention to things (e.g., Tommy is consistently seven minutes late, Myra looks more tired than usual, Michael wears the same sweatshirt daily, Natalie made an error in doing order of operations while evaluating the expression, and I NEED coffee).

However, most teachers do not notice a great deal, either because they are not attuned, their attention is preoccupied elsewhere, or they realize they need to pay attention to some other features in the classroom. Effectively noticing is complex and challenging.

Clarity Is Crucial, Clarity Is Kind

Teacher clarity is fundamental for effectively noticing in the classroom. Students need to be able to answer the following questions for clarity to be achieved: “*What am I learning today?*” “*Why am I learning this?*” and “*How will I know when I am successful?*” Teachers must have a clear goal extracted from a standard and written in a student-friendly way. Students must have access to this goal. In addition, teachers and students must clearly understand what success looks like regarding a given learning goal. Criteria for success can take different forms, but some examples are *I can* statements, rubrics, exemplars, models, and teacher think-aloud. For teachers to notice students’ understanding with precision, there must be a goal and success criteria to reference that understanding. Without this reference, you do not have something viable to notice.

Clarity is kindness. Things are clear when students know what they are expected to learn, how to successfully achieve the learning goal, and who their teacher really is. When there is a lack of clarity in the classroom, this creates a culture of confusion and distrust. Students are left in the dark when the teacher does not share the details. Thus, clarity is a trust builder. Trust is essential for students to share their thinking; transparency of thought is fundamental for accurate teacher noticing.

The Target

This book came to fruition because noticing, a critical component of teaching expertise, has been overlooked and underdiscussed. Teachers with a high level of expertise in noticing promote student engagement and learning more effectively. Therefore, a deeper understanding of teacher noticing is necessary for improving teaching and learning. The following chapters define the characteristics and components of teacher noticing and provide reliable guidance for teachers seeking to go from good to great and become

expert noticers. They shed light on the skills, knowledge, and dispositions it takes to be an expert noticer.

What is happening during those high-quality, in-the-moment adaptations in the lesson? The discipline of teacher noticing is a collection of techniques for preparing to notice in the moment and reflecting on recent instruction to refine for future teaching experiences. Understanding the following components of expert noticing will help answer this question:

- Going from a novice to an expert noticer: the continuum of noticing (Chapter 1)
- Checking for thinking (Chapter 2)
- Creating a Village of Scholars (Chapter 2.5)
- Anticipating student thinking and being proactive and responsive (Chapter 3)
- Scaffolding (Chapter 4)
- Feedback (Chapter 5)
- Advancing beyond the learning goal (Chapter 6)

This book aims to help teachers adopt compassion and a posture toward their students, a different way of being present with them, and a different way of having more meaningful conversations that lead their students to successful learning experiences. Teaching this way can yield the most profound sense of fulfillment.