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Chapter 4-3

Enacting Compassion in the Classroom

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Docendo discimus: to teach is to learn. The two are intertwined. Teaching is a calling, a vocation. Teaching is how I earn my living and who I am as a person. Effective teaching requires continuous learning. I have learned from every class I have taught. Sometimes, those lessons have been simple: a new way to think about a problem or concept. Other times those lessons have changed me at a deeper level. These more profound lessons have made me the teacher I am today. Three such lessons stand out as pivotal moments in my development as an educator.

Each of these lessons is associated with a specific person(s) whose experiences triggered a paradigm shift in my thinking about learning and teaching. In the following sections, I tell those stories to frame my work as a teacher. I present these experiences as stories because stories are at the very heart of our existence, connecting us with one another. "The call of stories… inspires us to find language that is adequate to the darkness and obscurity of experience. We narrate to make sense of ourselves and our experiences over the course of time" (Bochner, 2001, p. 154-155). These stories make sense of my pedagogical beliefs and actions.

In the telling of these stories, I have responsibilities to the reader, to myself, and to the participants in those stories. To the reader, I must disclose the possibly triggering content of one or more of the stories. As they are based on the story of my life and have been painful to me, I recognize they may be equally painful to others. I included them, however, because despite their upsetting content, these experiences have taught me invaluable lessons and will also hopefully have value for the reader.

To the reader, to myself, and to the participants who have taught me much, I also have the responsibility of portraying stories truthfully, even when a story is not portrayed literally (word-for-word) (Clough, 2002). In telling these stories, I cannot seek objectivity, and so I must seek authenticity. I must recognize story ownership

and, when possible, gain agreement about the veracity of the story told. "One of the key questions about research is the political one: Who owns the knowledge, and thus who can define the reality?" (Reason, 1994, p. 325). To honor the ownership of the stories and the anonymity of their owners, I have used pseudonyms for the first two stories, both of which occurred more than 25 years ago and whose participants no longer have any connection to me. The last story (about my own children) required me to gain agreement from my participants, not only for the telling of the story, but the veracity of its content. Even if I were not a participant in the story, my attempt to tell it introduces my own bias (Bochner, 2001). After writing my first draft, I sent the story to my sons to read and asked if they were comfortable with its content and with it being shared under my name. Both agreed freely and agreed that it was truthful.

MATTHEW

Early in my career, I began working as a mentor for a university office that provided services to students with disabilities. In that role, I began to understand that all students need educators who think deeply about instruction, modifications, and accommodations. Later, I worked as an academic mentor to Matthew, a student with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Though labels such as ADD or ADHD are often used to explain the behavioral and academic challenges of students of all ages, I learned through my work with Matthew just how severe that particular disorder can be. For Matthew, his all-encompassing attention to everything caused him to be unable to filter out unneeded or distracting information and stimuli to focus on the essential elements of academic work. Though there are medications to help manage this condition, those medications often have unwanted side effects like the dulling of one's thinking and creativity. Matthew was unwilling to take medication that would dampen such abilities. Instead, I was assigned as his mentor to help him meet deadlines, coordinate his schedule, and generally assist him in meeting his academic goals.

One year, an arsonist started a fire just down the hall from Matthew's dorm room. The other boys on his floor looked out into the hall, saw the smoke, and retreated to their windows, where the fire department rescued them. Matthew, however, was unable to filter out all the stimuli, fear, and anxiety and proceeded into the hallway. Unable to see through the dense, black smoke, he could find neither the stairwell door nor his bedroom door and collapsed in the hallway, overwhelmed by the smoke. Matthew died in the hospital later that day. I know I am not to blame. The authorities ruled the fire as arson and prosecuted the perpetrator. Still, I have often wondered whether he would have survived if we had been able to focus more on the life skills he needed to filter stimuli and focus on the critical information rather than only working to catch up on the work he inevitably missed due to all the distractions. That year, I learned that academic work is not the most important. I also learned that every student deserves a teacher who can look beyond her subject and see her students as people.

MÙCHÉN

After graduating with my bachelor's degree, I began a master's program in Special Education, not necessarily to be a special educator, but because I believed all teachers should have a grounding in the different ways students think and learn. My work experience with disability services showed me how destructive it can be to students' confidence, motivation, and life skills when teachers lack the training to empathize and implement needed accommodations and modifications. While pursuing that degree, I worked as a middle school mathematics teacher. During that year, I had a student from Asia, Mùchén, who had moved to the U.S. only weeks before. My heart went out to Mùchén. He had changed countries, cultures, languages, and parents (transitioning from life with one parent to another), and, as if life were not confusing enough, his birth name, which would likely be difficult for many Americans to pronounce easily, was changed to an American name. I could not imagine how it must feel for a young boy to undergo all these changes simultaneously. Even as a bystander, I was overwhelmed. I arranged to meet with him and his mother outside of school hours. I began by asking him what he would prefer to be called. When he indicated a preference for Mùchén, I asked him to teach me how to say it correctly and invited him to use his native language to write his name on his papers. I also asked him to help me create some multilingual posters for our classroom that included the notation and vocabulary for the mathematics we would do that year. I do not know whether my efforts made a difference in Mùchén's life. I do know that he was never teased or ridiculed in my classroom. I also know that other students asked him intelligent questions about the posters and symbols we hung on the walls. For those reasons, I am glad I took the time to work with him.

My time as Mùchén's teacher taught me that many students need accommodations, not only students who qualify under special education labels. Even as I was studying learning and behavioral disorders in my graduate program, I was learning from Mùchén that students' difficulties in school originate from more than labeled disorders. I learned that students who are hurting, anxious, or afraid will often be unable to advocate for themselves. Every student deserves a teacher who is also an advocate open to ways she can create a safer space for all students. Through my graduate program and my work as Mùchén's teacher, I became more aware of the individual needs of each student, regardless of labels assigned by counselors or special educators.

MY BOYS

About five years ago, I undertook a new role in my personal life. I became a foster parent. I have always wanted to be a parent. Because my life has not led to a traditional route in becoming one, I decided to take on the role of temporary parent for adolescents who are no longer living with their biological families. In caring for–and eventually adopting–these young men, I have learned a lot about how they interact with their world and the many obstacles they face due to how the world interacts with them. Though it came as no surprise that victims of abuse and neglect have behavioral and mental health problems, I learned that they are also more susceptible to physical

illness, especially in their digestive tracts and nervous systems. As a foster/adoptive mother, I spent a lot of time in school administrative offices, hospitals, doctor's offices, and pharmacies.

There are many stories I could tell to illustrate how my kids interacted differently with the educational sphere, but one in particular always comes to mind. I was called to the principal's office of my oldest son's high school. Finishing work a little earlier than I intended (and somewhat frustrated about that), I drove to the school and checked in at the front office. My son sat in the reception area, so I sat beside him. I asked him what happened, but he would not talk to me. This response was not unusual for him, so I left it alone and waited quietly with him. When the principal called us to his office, I listened as the principal told me what happened. My son had been called to his office earlier that day for a verbal altercation with another student. When the principal tried to confront him, my son called him an inappropriate name and left the office. When the principal called him back, he would not return, and instead, he kept walking through the halls. The principal informed me that this type of behavior could not be tolerated in their school.

What I heard in his telling of the story was that my son chose distance over violence. He decided to walk away. I knew his gut response would be to strike out physically, as his early experience had taught him. I knew that he experienced extreme anxiety and paranoia in educational settings due to the multitude of disciplinary experiences he had in past schools. I also knew that he had not yet developed the words to explain himself rationally and calmly, so walking away was remarkable progress for him. I told the principal, "What I just heard you say was that he chose to gain distance rather than reacting violently. I'm really proud of him." The principal was not impressed, nor was he empathetic. My son did not last much longer in that school. Regardless, I hope (then and now) that my son heard me stand up for him, even if I did not have the power to change things for him at that moment.

What I learned (and am still learning) through this part of my life is that everyone has a story—sometimes a hard, painful, or harrowing story–that I cannot possibly fully understand.

Indeed, I still do not know all of my sons' stories. These stories are not mine to know, just as my sons' backgrounds and traumas could not (and should not) be told to everyone they encountered.

Every student deserves the dignity of their own story and the right to tell that story or not. Further, every student's story alters their reactions, social interactions, and academic behavior. When I encounter a behavior or reaction in an academic setting that seems outside the norms I am familiar with, I need to zoom out from my own experience and consider that this student's perspective may be one I cannot understand.

LESSONS LEARNED, COMPASSION ENACTED

Through all three of these pivotal lessons in my life, I have learned that teaching transcends subject matter. As a teacher, it is my job to be compassionate and not allow bias, stereotyping, or discomfort to affect how I work

with the students I encounter. I do not need to know every story, but I need to recognize that there is always more to a student than what I can see in a classroom. Though my subject is mathematics, my pedagogical beliefs and actions move beyond mathematical study. As such, I design instruction and assessments carefully and compassionately.

Because I believe every student has a unique set of experiences that endow them with meaningful and useful ideas, mentalities, and knowledge, I do not lecture. Lecturing creates a classroom hierarchy that "labels students as successful or unsuccessful and provides little room for change" (Boaler & Staples, 2008, p. 629). When the only voice heard in the classroom is my own, I become the central mathematical figure. Likewise, when my understanding becomes the only acceptable understanding, students whose thinking or organization differ from mine can feel unsuccessful or incorrect. Instead of setting myself as the central mathematical mind in my classroom through lecture, I carefully choose mathematical problems that students can access from multiple points of view and levels of experience. I also seat students in groups so that their diverse intellects and experiences can complement one another in solving those problems. In doing so, I acknowledge the understanding and problem-solving skills students have already developed through previous experience. By becoming a class moderator—rather than a lecturer—I also recognize the disparate ways students organize information in their minds and use that thinking to build our whole-class discussions.

Every student also has a personal level of comfort in social and academic settings and a need to express themselves mathematically within our learning community (McKeachie, 2011). When teaching a class that included Mùchén, I needed to recognize that he was mathematically able and socially limited because English was not his first language. Though my son struggled with classroom norms, I have seen at home that he is intelligent, curious, and willing to work. For both boys, multiple modalities are needed in the classroom to gather information about their understanding.

To accommodate the bold, extroverted student and the anxious, quiet student, and all those in between, I collect students' thinking using multiple platforms. I invite students to contribute to whole-class work on an interactive screen or whiteboard in our classroom. They can also contribute information anonymously through a collaborative electronic platform. Other students may be more comfortable sharing only within their groups and allowing others to speak for them. I consider these contributions equally when assessing students' participation and understanding during instruction. Outside class, students also have in-person, electronic, and anonymous means of communicating with me to ask questions, make suggestions, or lodge complaints.

University life in 2024 differs greatly from university life when I was a student. In the current educational climate, it is common for students to work full-time jobs, support their families, struggle with mental health issues, and grapple with their physical health. As a society, we have made university degrees a necessary part of many jobs, so students who might have chosen another path often find themselves working towards a degree amid many other responsibilities or challenges. This type of divide between the personal and the academic was

evident when working with Matthew. Though he did not work or have responsibility for a family, his mind would not allow him to focus only on academics, and he missed deadlines and classes, even when he worked hard to dedicate himself to school. Because I cannot (and should not) know the needs and stressors of every student, I work to balance grading policies that make missing a few classes or assignments less impactful and stressful. In this way, I strive to help students achieve a healthy work, life, and school balance.

In all of my pedagogical decisions, I work to be compassionate, fair, and willing to work with all students, honoring the complexities and vagaries of their lives. The stories of Matthew, Mùchén, and my boys shaped how I view my students and vocation. I will be ever grateful to them. It is my job, and my dearest hope, to continue teaching compassionately, actively learning about my students and my subject, and seeking ways to make my classroom a safer, more accessible space.

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