

A Journey From Tragedy to Healing

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“A Journey From Tragedy to Healing” transcends one administrator’s narrative about how her students and teachers were thrust into a culture of fear during the most tragic event the school had ever experienced. The author’s story is about how negative experiences can lead schools through journeys of growth and healing to develop a culture of safety. Lessons for teachers and administrators are threaded through rich personal experiences and include reflections on daily school operations designed to promote emotional and physical safety, growing situational awareness of students’ wellbeing, learning new approaches to student interactions through the integration of their funds of knowledge, a critical re-examination of instructional and curriculum pedagogy, and the importance of taking care of one’s self. The author concludes by reminding teachers not to forget that their mission should be to educate the whole child by meeting their safety, emotional, and academic needs.

INTRODUCTION

...we human beings have a wonderful capacity for good. We can be very good. That is what fills me with hope for even the most intractable situations.

—(Desmond Tutu, 1999, p. 253)

I am ashamed to say that as an assistant principal I could not have picked Jared out of a classroom full of students if you had asked me. That is, until one day near the end of September when I learned about him under the most devastating of circumstances. I suppose it is common for administrators from large schools to not know all the students at the start of the year, especially five weeks into the new school year. I admit that unless students had already established themselves as frequent flyers to my office for

discipline issues, then it was usually December before I remembered most of their names. Up until this year, getting the school year off to a smooth start was the only priority the other two administrators and I were focused on achieving, so during any other school year, it would have taken me months to get to know a student like Jared.

However, my perspective changed the day I met Jared. Jared taught me an invaluable lesson– that getting to know the children entrusted into my care to teach and keep safe should have been my number one priority from the beginning of the school year. Jared also reminded our school family of several important things that we realized we had been neglecting; that in our calling to educate children, their needs must always come first.

Many teachers were taught in their preparation programs about Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Block, 2011) and the importance of meeting one's basic needs before for academic learning can occur. As teachers have learned, Maslow's pyramid of needs demonstrates that certain physical and psychological needs must be met before an individual is able to move up the pyramid towards personal fulfillment. Second after the most fundamental prerequisites like food and shelter, is the need to feel safe and secure among one's position within family or community space (Block, 2011). Many teachers learned from their pre-service programs that they maintain a critical responsibility to help students feel safe at school; most notably by protecting them from physical harm. However, Maslow contends that education can sometimes hinder students from transferring through the stages of needs, such as the safety stage because institutional systems prioritize academic standards over students' personal growth (Block, 2011). The drive to prioritize student academic achievement have caused growing concerns as to whether some institutions are taking enough proactive approaches to address a critical hierarchy of need; the need to feel safe and protected (Thompkins, 2000; Levin, 1994). Does the push for achievement cause schools to ignore students' needs to feel safe, thus perpetuating a culture of fear? Jacobs (2013) describes a culture of fear in schools as behaviors and beliefs that transcend uncertainty, imbalance, and distrust, which motivates the potential for violence. Hence, educators are challenged to reflect upon their students and their own negative behaviors and beliefs so that they can transform their schools into to a place of fearlessness and peace (Jacobs, 2013). While I do not believe that our school upheld the practice of overemphasizing achievement over safety, what I do believe is that our experience with Jared forced us to take a good look what we were doing to ensure our students felt safe.

My story that I wish to share with you is about how a shocking event forced a school to examine its school culture and challenge the fear caused by that event in order to work towards peace and healing. I have rarely spoken about that day, and this will be the first time I have ever written about it. Truthfully, I am not sure how I will feel about watching that day unfold into print from my fingertips. However, as I heartfully pondered on which of my many experiences during 20 years in education should I choose to tell, I eventually settled myself to share about one that we rarely speak enough about in school– building relationships and educational spaces that challenge the culture of fear and promotes peace and nonviolence in education (Wang, 2014; Jacobs, 2013). This story illustrates the passion, strength, and courage of teachers “learning to embrace fearlessness” in a time of tragedy (Jacobs, 2013, p. 248). It is about how teachers shepherded students to a place of healing, acceptance, and love. I changed the names of the individuals I have mentioned in this story to protect their identities and respect the sensitive nature of this experience.

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