Empathy, Education and a True Growth Mindset

by Rick on January 19, 2016

> *Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing. Instead of offering empathy, we often have a strong urge to give advice and to explain our own position of feeling. Empathy, however, calls upon us to empty our mind and listen to others with our whole being.* – Marshall Rosenberg

Bobby's music class in the Montessori school was going very well. The lower elementary class was dancing to a clavé rhythm and enthusiastically singing, "Shave. Hair cut. Shampoo" in time. It seemed that all the students were engaged, but on closer inspection one boy was not. Marco wasn't doing anything.

Since the other students were doing fine on their own, Bobby went over to Marco and asked, "What's going on?"

"I don't learn as fast as the others," he replied.

Bobby felt like helping him out with his problem, but his scientific instincts and Montessori training told him not to react. Marco's theory was a mere hypothesis, and it might be counter-productive to turn it into a firm diagnosis. He simply said, "Oh," and went back to the front of the class.

Ten minutes later Bobby introduced a different rhythm and the kids caught on right away. Bobby looked at Marco and noticed that this time he was just as engaged as all the others.

What's the take-away here?

It's natural for children to label themselves—"I'm a slow learner," "I'm not one of those creative types," "I'm bad at math," "I always strike out," etc. It's also natural for the adults to pile on—"He's not very musical," "She's a right-brain kid," "She's a verbal learner," "He's not athletic," etc,—thus reinforcing these attributions. The human brain was designed to generalize. Turning infinitely complex reality into a useful simplicity has had great survival value for our species. But this great strength is also an equally great disability. These generalizations are always distortions of reality, and in education, especially, they are often worse than useless.

When we try to help other people, especially when parents and teachers try to help children, there is a natural pattern: see a challenge, try to help, label it a problem, diagnose the problem, and intervene to fix it. This pattern is just as likely to turn a challenge into a pathology as it is to fix a disability.

Carol Dweck and her colleagues have become famous for showing the negative impact of a "fixed mindset." Many educators and parents now know that saying "You're so

smart," can undercut success, and yet many still keep trying to build a "growth mindset" in children by saying things like "You're a hard worker." This kind of change misses the point. The take-away of mindset research is this: in order to break the cycle of:

Challenge ➔ problem ➔ diagnosis ➔ intervention ➔ ➔ avoiding challenges

we have to break our habit of labeling, altogether.

One of the few situations where children and adults do not engage in this pattern is when a child learns to ride a bike—and children almost always learn to ride bikes. Why?

1)   No one turns the challenge into a problem.

2)   No one could label it, anyway.

3)   No measuring up because there are no "metrics." You either stay up on the bike, or you don't.

4)   There is no diagnosis in the DSM IV for "vehicularly challenged."

And most importantly,

5)   Children continue to own the challenge and therefore keep at it until the skill is mastered—despite skinned knees and bumped heads.

So good educators don't ape the medical profession. There is a better way:

1)   Let go of our mindsets

2)   Respect the other's challenges

3)   Be with them as they struggle, and

4)   Have confidence in their ability to learn from struggle.

These are the disciplines of an educator. Central to these disciplines is empathy, i.e. *a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing.* For best results educators *empty their minds and open them to others*, as Marshall Rosenberg so nicely articulates. That's what Bobby did right.

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