Creating a Community of Care: A Holistic Approach to Teacher Wellness

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On December 2, 2014 my trusty commuter bicycle and a truck collided, propelling me 20 feet through the air, head first into the pavement. Riding those 18 miles home after a long day of teaching had been central to my wellness, so when I woke up in a heap on the side of the road I thought, "This changes things." And it did, profoundly—but not in the expected ways. It was expected that I could no longer work full time with the challenging youth I had grown to love. My altered brain could not manage the many, unpredictable inputs of the therapeutic school environment. It was expected that I would suffer from significant concussion symptoms for a long time, and I did. But what was unexpected was how the experience would lead to greater personal wellness.

The year after my crash, I took a quarter time job teaching English at a local high school. On the outside it looked like I was back to normal, but a wide array of stimuli could trigger symptoms such as tinnitus, disorientation, and brain fatigue. I had no choice but to include my students in my self-care. Anyone stepping into my classroom might have heard me say, "I just need to close my eyes and take ten breaths. You can join me if you like." Other times, I gathered kids in a circle for a slow down and check-in. Often I reported a "bad brain day." Inadvertently, I had discovered the most important, underutilized approach to self-care—admitting when you need it and practicing it with your students. What do I know for sure? When we share leadership and problem solving with our students—whether it's about creating a classroom environment that supports our brain health or working together to resolve conflict or —everyone's wellness and resilience increases.

When someone bounces back after a traumatic experience like mine stronger than they were before, we call them resilient. Much is written about it— how to build it, what factors undermine it, what protective factors strengthen it. I had a fair amount of resilience going into that accident but came to understand three important lessons: resilience is not a fixed trait; personal self-care activities are only one part of wellness; and the power of both resilience and self-care is amplified by the intentional development of a community of care to hold us.

Today I am a consultant who works with educators, other consultants, and school leaders with the goal of creating communities of care, dignity and accountability In this chapter, I seek to:

- Highlight the mental health crisis that calls for this close examination and reformation of wellness in schools;

- Shift the way many of us think about teacher wellness—from a set of "add-on" self-care activities to a whole school culture built on Holistic Restorative principles and approaches that impact wellness throughout the school day;

- Discuss how this approach evolved out of my own and others' experience and is informed by the intersecting fields of social neuroscience, mindfulness, trauma-informed practices, equity, and restorative practices;

- Offer an exploration of the four pillars of a Holistic Restorative approach to wellness along with ideas you can implement right away to create immediate shifts in how your school or classroom feels.

If I've made it sound like I've discovered a simple path to whole school wellness, I've unintentionally misled you. Upending the embedded cultural beliefs that celebrate productivity and "busyness" and exalt the ideal educator as a tirelessly selfless giver is a complex and slow task. It requires that we look at the well-researched causes of burn-out and use backwards design principles[1] to intentionally, systematically attend to the lack of wellness at its roots. It would be easier to offer teachers gift certificates to Starbucks and after school yoga sessions, and offer students some community-building opportunities and field trips. But in these increasingly challenging times we are charged with developing human-centered approaches that weave true wellness into the very fabric of the school—from the way students and staff are greeted in the morning to the way organizational systems, policies, and leadership expectations all prioritize care and connection over speed and productivity.

My intention for this chapter is to inspire and embolden you. My hope is that after reading this chapter you assemble a team of diverse stakeholders—teachers, students, families, leaders, and board members—and get to work. And by work I mean: slow down, create a brave space and explore together your beliefs about wellness and lack of wellness in your school and the impact of our productivity focused culture and wellness and learning. Have the team try the practices found in this chapter first, listen to each other's experiences, and then find ways to introduce them as "change ideas"[2] to the larger community. For each change idea, collect data on its impact, adjust your change ideas to improve the impact or try a different practice altogether if it's not beneficial. Approach your goal of creating a community of care with rigor, attention, and collaboration and you will succeed. My advice: hold off on calling in consultants and experts—start with the wisdom and experiences among you. As Margaret Wheatley writes, "Very great change starts from very small conversations, held among people who care." From this grassroots exploration, this team of colleagues will uncover your school's unique path to building a robust community of care.

The State of Wellness

As I write this in the Spring of 2022, students and educators as a group are not doing well. It would be convenient to believe that the decline of mental health in youth and adults began the day COVID-19 arrived, but the numbers paint a different picture. According to the National Institutes of Health, anxiety disorders in children and teens went up 20 percent between 2007 and 2012 and hospitalizations for suicide attempts for teenagers doubled from 2009 to 2019.[3] In 2019, one in three high school students and half of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40 percent from 2009.[4] And according to the 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey, "58 percent of [teacher] respondents described their mental health as

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[1] "Backward Design: The Basics | Cult of Pedagogy." 21 Jun. 2020, https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/backward-design-basics/. Accessed 25 Apr. 2022.

[2] "Change Idea - Carnegie Foundation." https://carnegienetworks.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/115001233708-Change-Idea. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.

[3] "Anxiety in Teens is Rising: What's Going On? - HealthyChildren.org." 20 Nov. 2019, https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Anxiety-Disorders.aspx. Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.

[4] "FACT SHEET: President Biden to Announce Strategy to Address Our ...." 1 Mar. 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/01/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-announce-strategy-to-address-our-national-mental-health-crisis-as-part-of-unity-agenda-in-his-first-state-of-the-union/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.

'not good' for at least seven of the previous 30 days. Just two years ago, that number was 34 percent."[5]

The pandemic, racially fueled violence, and political polarization simply accelerated these disturbing trends. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "suicide attempts among adolescents jumped 31 percent in 2020, compared with 2019." And in February and March of 2022 "suspected suicide attempts were 51 percent higher among girls aged 12–17 than during the same period in 2019."[6] The situation for our youth has become so dire that the "the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association declared that the pandemic-related decline in child and adolescent mental health has become a national emergency."[7] Adults are faring better than youth, but in 2021 "a much higher proportion of teachers reported frequent job-related stress and symptoms of depression than the general adult population."[8]

This news is hard to digest, but it is not the end of the story. While history shows the profound ability of humans to survive great hardship, it is our work to chart the course beyond survival to healing and deep wellness. It begins with looking at self-care and wellness not as an idealized notion or "touchy-feely" add-on, but as a professional responsibility. It is unethical to ignore the writing on the wall and proceed as if getting back to "normal" is what we really need.

The Four Pillars of a Community of Care

In the summer of 2019 I was 54 and living in a camper with my husband and dog while we built a house. My father had a few more months to live, the pandemic was in full tilt, and I was working hard to pivot my business to meet the emerging needs of schools. On top of it all, I was struggling with some chronic infections. I began experiencing anxiety attacks, sleeplessness, and digestive problems all the while presenting to teachers about self-care as a trauma and mindfulness expert. Ironic, right? Because of my training I enlisted my strong set of self-care skills, but the symptoms persisted. Strange, I thought, Why aren't my well-informed efforts working? On a 20 degree November day, as a kidney infection brought me to my knees, it finally hit me—these extra-stressful times required extra self-care. As is my way, I consulted research and experts and came up with a self-care plan. I would log four self-care rituals every day:

N: time in nature

L: opportunities to laugh

S: connection with Spirit

M: meditation

[5] "61% of Teachers Stressed Out, 58% Say Mental Health Is Not Good ...." 31 Oct. 2017, https://www.the74million.org/61-of-teachers-stressed-out-58-say-mental-health-is-not-good-in-new-national-survey/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.
[6] Vahratian A, Blumberg SJ, Terlizzi EP, Schiller JS. Symptoms of Anxiety or Depressive Disorder and Use of Mental Health Care Among Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, August 2020–February 2021. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2021;70:490–494. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7013e2external icon.
[7] "COVID Harmed Kids' Mental Health—And Schools Are Feeling It." 8 Nov. 2021, https://www.pewtrusts.org/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/11/08/covid-harmed-kids-mental-health-and-schools-are-feeling-it. Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.
[8] "Job-Related Stress Threatens the Teacher Supply - RAND ...." 15 Jun. 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-1.html. Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.

I also experimented with tree-hugging, tapping, cold water bathing, and vibrational vocalizations. I became my own self-care research laboratory. When I reflect on that time now and track my journey from surviving to thriving, what anchored my success was an increased sense of connection and belonging. Our camper was sitting on the property of a local retreat center, and I found taking time to connect with the staff and young people there to be the most important factor in getting my nervous system back in the "window of tolerance."[9] Turns out that self-care is not a solo job. The funny thing is that I knew this—my whole career as a restorative approaches consultant is built upon communicating and creating experiences that demonstrate the healing and energizing power of belonging and connection.

As I talked to more and more teachers in the field, I came to the same conclusion: educators are actually really good at self-care—they have to be—but the stressors in their lives had outpaced their ability to deal with them. Research, conversations, and reflection have led me to believe that if a school community is to become a life-giving place to teach and learn, it must build care into the fabric of every day for everyone. We must build a community of care from the ground up with these four pillars as a foundation.

1. **Connection and Belonging**: Build structured and unstructured opportunities for making connections across differences into every day. Develop rituals that strengthen identity for the whole school community and the smaller communities and embed relational processes for developing a shared ethos and for repairing harm to relationships.

2. **Self-Efficacy**: Equip each member with the knowledge, skills, and autonomy support needed to regulate emotions and communicate feelings and needs constructively.

3. **Respect:** Create opportunities for each member to develop and feel respected for their unique contribution as well as restorative processes that focus on growth, dignity, and learning instead of punishment. Do things with others instead of to them or for them.

4. **Safety**: Revise systems and pedagogy to center the importance of safety through predictable structures and routines, flexibility through choice, and empowerment through inclusive opportunities to have a voice.

By intentionally building these four pillars, we are creating an environment in which students and educators not only experience more resilience, but are more likely to take the positive risks necessary in real learning and in naming, acknowledging, and repairing harm.

Improving Everyone's Wellness: Connection and Belonging

> *I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is to be totally and nonselectively present to the student-to each student-as he (sic) addresses me. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total.*
>   Nel Noddings, Ph.D, from Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education

When I arrived at boarding school as a student in 1980, I felt like I had won the lottery. I loved how my advisor invited her advisees to her apartment and fed us milkshakes and asked about our boyfriends. I loved the academic challenge and sports. But two things happened to make me question how relationships between teachers and students were formed and operated. The first was when I confided to my advisor that I was thinking about breaking up with my boyfriend because I felt

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[9] "How to Help Your Clients Understand Their Window of Tolerance."
https://www.nicabm.com/trauma-how-to-help-your-clients-understand-their-window-of-tolerance/. Accessed 25 Apr. 2022.

mistreated and misunderstood. Her response was, "But he is so cute." The power of her words led me to stay in an unhealthy relationship. Second was when we were assigned a ten-page paper comparing two poems, "The Second Coming" and "Ode to a Grecian Urn." I was completely lost but was intimidated by the ring of students who gathered in the English teacher's apartment at night to talk poetry. I was a scholarship student and didn't feel like I belonged. So I got a D instead. Despite being a captain of two varsity sports, a prefect, and well-regarded by many, and despite the school being filled with caring and wonderful teachers, this sense of exclusion and confusion around teacher-student relationships had a negative impact on my time there and beyond.

Research has shown how positive teacher-student relationships[10] and having one caring, trusted adult can make a significant significant positive difference in a child's or young adult's life.[11] Therefore, asking educators to "build relationships" with students seems like a no-brainer. You could say that there is nothing my school could have done differently to change my experience. But I contend that making this request of teachers without clear expectations and skill building can have a negative impact on teacher and community wellness by: causing teachers to feel they need to be everything to all their students; creating experiences of exclusion and inequity for some youth; and increasing the opportunities for the blurring or crossing of boundaries between student and teacher.

Therefore, I invite you and your team to take these steps:

1. Do primary source research about the importance of relationship versus connection. The research cited above was intended to justify the need for one-on-one mentoring programs, not, for example, to pressure a high school teacher to have strong relationships with all 80+ of their students.

2. Explore what is really meant by the mantra "build relationships with students." The Search Institute[12] has done its own research to better define "relationship" and provides these five main points as part of a larger framework:

    - Express Care
    - Challenge Growth
    - Provide Support
    - Share Power
    - Expand Possibilities

3. Brainstorm ways teachers can build the expertise needed to inform healthy relationships with students, including education on compassion fatigue, transference and countertransference, and boundary setting.

4. Empower staff with the communication skills and encouragement to question teacher/student boundary blurring when they see it.

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[10] "The Influence of Affective Teacher–Student Relationships on ...." 1 Dec. 2011, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0034654311421793. Accessed 23 Apr. 2022.

[11] "Caring Adults: - Child Trends." https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2013-54CaringAdults.pdf. Accessed 23 Apr. 2022.

[12] "Developmental Relationships Framework | Search Institute." https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/. Accessed 24 Apr. 2022.

5. Include "healthy student relationships" as part of supervision discussions and teacher self-assessments.

6. Develop or assemble tools and approaches teachers can use to build connectedness and belonging in their classrooms in a boundaried, caring way—as part of or outside of curriculum instruction.

Eighty percent of my work with schools is working together on the last point. Based on my own experience as a teacher and witnessing its impact on the schools I work with, I can say that doing this one piece skillfully improves wellness, learning, and behavior. "Connectedness and belonging" rise to the top again and again in research as the strongest protective factor against a long list of adverse behaviors and outcomes for youth[13] and adults. This is not news. "One landmark study showed that lack of social connection is a greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure." And "there is widespread consensus in the public health and epidemiology literature that social connectedness causally protects and promotes mental health."[14] I emphasize in my work that "connectedness" is not about building deep relationships; it is building a web of connections across the school and in the classrooms that allows everyone to feel a part of a larger whole. "Connectedness and belonging" essentially de-centers the teacher, shifting the onus to the youth to maintain the community that the teacher helped build. In making themselves dispensable, teachers increase their own wellness and the students' resilience.

Social neuroscientists tell us that the need to belong is part of the genetic inheritance passed down from our primitive ancestors, because to be alone 300,000 years ago was certain death. One such scientist, Dr. Louis Cozolini, author of The Social Neuroscience of Education: Optimizing Attachment and Learning in the Classroom claims that our need to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging is so powerful that to not have it interferes with proper functioning of the neo-cortices and impacts learning. "Close supportive relationships stimulate positive emotions, neuroplasticity, and learning."[15] It's no wonder that the pandemic has had such a significant impact on learning and developmental growth.

Step One of our journey towards a community of care is to build into every day intentional and equitable opportunities for youth and adults to develop connections and build a sense of belonging. Reading this you might say to yourself: "We already do this! Our teachers are very relational. We have a strong community." To this I reply: "Yes? Every human on campus feels a sense of belonging and value? Equitably? So no one has kids they like and kids they don't like?" To these questions I usually get awkward silence. Educators aren't supposed to show "favorites" or have biases. Unfortunately, we are human and humans are as hardwired for bias as they are for connection.[16] If we accept the research-based ideas that connectedness and belonging are critical to mental and physical health and learning, AND that we are by nature biased, it follows that we should be baking connectedness into everything we do! We need to build structures, rituals, and routines that ensure equitable,

[13] "Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth - CDC."
https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/connectedness.pdf. Accessed 24 Apr. 2022.
[14] "Connectedness & Health: The Science of Social Connection." 8 May. 2014,
http://ccare.stanford.edu/uncategorized/connectedness-health-the-science-of-social-connection-infographic/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
[15] "Nine Things Educators Need to Know About the Brain." 19 Mar. 2013,
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/nine_things_educators_need_to_know_about_the_brain. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
[16] "The Cognitive Biases Tricking Your Brain - The Atlantic." 15 Sep. 2018,
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/09/cognitive-bias/565775/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.

universally designed opportunities to connect, to be seen and heard. The circle check-in described below is one of those processes

Step Two is to explore how your school talks about, sets expectations for, and offers support around teacher-student relationships. Begin with the resources at the Search Institute, research more, consult experts in equity, diversity, and inclusion and the trauma-informed fields, and develop your own "guide" for faculty. Set aside a day before school starts to bring new teachers up to speed and reset norms and expectations for all staff. Finally, survey your youth and teachers annually to see how you are doing.

Practices

1. **Circles:** I have participated in or led "circles" since 1995. For 20 years a small group of women and I simply followed our instincts and drive for connection and equal voice by making a fire, gathering around it, and passing a rock around the circle to indicate whose turn it was to talk. It was the best way we could think of so that each woman's journey could be heard and held by the others. This time of being deeply seen and heard created a strong foundation in our lives from which to weather many storms.

   Your first and central practice of a community of care is to apply this "Balance in the Process" to everything you do as a team and eventually as a school—staff meetings, school gatherings, conversations, and classrooms. This process can feel like we are "wasting time," but in reality it is priming our brain for full engagement and creative contribution.

   BALANCE IN THE PROCESS
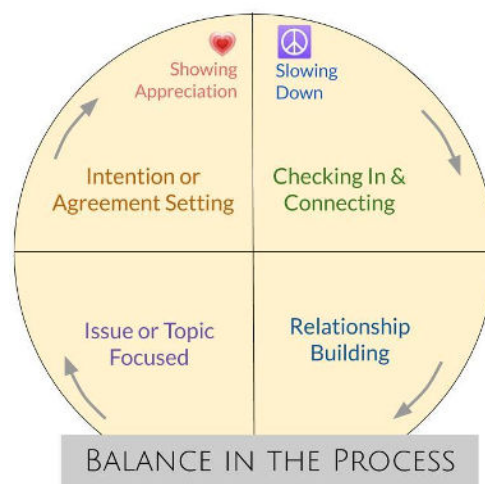
   Beginning with an intentional **slowing down** and self-regulation with a mindful pause, the framework asks us to take time to check-in and connect. This pause happens through low stakes inclusive questions. In a group/organizational/circle process, this would also initially include a collaborative process for developing a group ethos, or norms—the way you want to be together.

   Next, we move to r**elationship building** marked by prompts that invite storytelling—"share a time when…" or "tell us when you first learned about…" In a classroom circle focused on content, this is the part of the learning process where context and shared understandings are established and might be represented by students sharing what they already know about a topic or their experience with a particular piece of content. In a conflict resolution process, this is the point when empathy is developed. "Please share what happened…" Describe the hardest part…" For a whole class circle looking to explore harm that can happen from bigger issues like bullying, for example, a teacher might ask everyone to "share a time when you felt the desire to tease someone."

   Having moved through these parts of the process we arrive at the **issue** or **topic-focused** quadrant ready to learn—where "touchy-feely" meets social neuroscience. Experts in the field of trauma share that before we can reason we need to regulate and relate.[17] For groups who are

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[17] "The Three R's: Reaching The Learning Brain - Beacon House." https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Three-Rs.pdf. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.

together over a long period of time, time spent in the first two quadrants shrinks and expands based on the needs of the group and the challenges they are facing. Sometimes we are really thriving as a group, and all we need for a check-in is a thumbs up or down. Other times the group might struggle due to outside events or internal conflict and needs to spend longer reconnecting to their shared humanity. Attuning to the needs of the group and responding in kind will result in more effective learning, just as slowing down and connecting before jumping into our reason for talking will make hallway conversations more meaningful and productive.

Following up our time spent exploring an issue or topic, we pause to reflect on our work/conversation and name the takeaways, intentions, or agreements we have identified. This moment is also when we ask ourselves how we did as a group or whether there is anything to follow up on. Finally, we come full circle by pausing to offer appreciations or things we noticed about the process.

2. **Games:** Choosing the right game to bring energy up can be a game changer at the end of a tiring day. A silent game can bring connection with low risk and low chance of dysregulation. Get a copy of the game manual for *Heart of Play* or bring a play specialist like Howard Moody to your school to teach your whole team how to change up the energy, build trust, and connect through laughter and positive risk-taking. Consider tapping Howard or another cooperative play expert to change how recess looks. (https://howardmoody.com/)

3. **3 Signature Practices:** Use CASEL's 3 Signature Practices to not only strengthen connectedness but build social-emotional learning and strengthen a sense of safety through predictable and structured, relational routines. *Inclusive Welcomes, Engagement Strategies,* and *Optimistic Closures.* (https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/three-signature-sel-practices-for-the-classroom/)

4. Read and discuss as staff the opinion piece "I Don't Need to Love My Students to be a Good Teacher,"[18] as a way of normalizing and inspiring discussion about what it means to be a "good" teacher. Be sure to use the circle process or another process that enables equal voice.

Improving Everyone's Wellness: Self-Efficacy and Empowerment

A child is fearful and agitated because their parents were fighting so much before school that no one ate breakfast. When they walk into the classroom they are asked to join the morning meeting, a normally agreeable activity. But the young person feels overwhelmed as the students mingle around them and offer the morning greeting, so they push through their classmates roughly and sit down in the corner. Their teacher calls to them, "You know that it's not ok to push people. Come back to the group to apologize and join the morning meeting." A power struggle ensues. The child throws a pencil and leaves the room. The teacher has to call the office to ask someone to come watch the class or search for the child. The stressful ripple effect of this one event stretches out.

If Dr. Albert Bandura, a child psychologist and researcher had witnessed this, one thing he might say is that the child lacked self-efficacy, explaining that people with high self-efficacy are able to "effectively experience challenging emotions, regulate their emotions through healthy coping, and express their values through their actions."[19] In other words, people with high self-efficacy feel a strong internal locus of control. In order for a community of care to support its members, those

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[18] "I Don't Have to Love My Students to Be a Good Teacher - Education ...." 4 Mar. 2022, https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-i-dont-have-to-love-my-students-to-be-a-good-teacher/2022/03. Accessed 24 Apr. 2022.
[19] "Self-efficacy defined." https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Bandura/BanEncy.html. Accessed 23 Apr. 2022.

members need to learn these skills and be empowered to use them—to know what they need, be able to ask for it, and have a prosocial way to meet their needs. Something else less obvious is required: teachers need to model this for kids. They need to be vulnerable enough to admit when their emotions—stress, sadness, anger—are rising and model how to successfully work to regulate those emotions.

In a community of care, that child and teacher have learned together about the brain under stress, what dysregulation of our nervous systems can look like and feel like, and what to do when stress gets the better of them. In many schools, youth and adults are taught the Zones of Regulation,[20] providing them with a shame-free starting place to meet their needs. How might the example I started with shift if these practices were in place? Here's one possibility: After the child leaves the activity the teacher would sit next to the child to provide them coregulation, acknowledge their experience with "Seems like you are having a hard time today," and then ask, "Would you share with me what zone you are in right now?" And when the child answers, "Near the red zone," the teacher might reply, "Nice self-awareness. Why don't you use those strategies we learned by going to the reset space and rejoin us when you feel able? Then I can help you repair your relationships with your classmates." This is called "autonomy support" and is only possible when space, time, and knowledge are provided for youth and adults to check in with how they are doing and take the steps they need to get in the "green zone."[21] As a community of care strengthens and grows, the teacher might step back and allow one of the child's classmates to check in on their peer and remind them of what they can do to feel better, repair relationships, and rejoin.

When a classroom or school culture is developed with self-efficacy as a goal, both adults and youth feel empowered to meet their needs and motivated to take care of themselves for the betterment of the group as a whole. This is wellness. But the current punitive, hierarchical system in most schools is designed to breed compliance not agency, productivity not wellness. We love the idea of youth and adults having a voice and meeting their needs, but the reality is that both those things are messy and time consuming, two things most educational systems cannot tolerate.

By focusing on building self-efficacy we naturally increase a feeling of empowerment and competence. But schools need to do more—building self-efficacy and resilience in youth and adults without dealing with the systems, processes, and cultures that stress them is counter to equity and anti-racist efforts. For school-wide wellness efforts to be more than band-aid fixes, they need to empower the people whose wellness is impacted by the systems that govern them. Case in point: At Holyoke High School, a sign hung by the front door. It read, in Spanish only, "No loitering." Every time the minority Puerto Rican students entered the building their wellness was impacted by the sign created for them. There was no equivalent sign in English. From a few students finding the courage to bring their feelings about the sign to a caring teaching, a transformational Youth Participatory Action Research[22] (YPAR) movement was born in that school. Today the student group who call themselves Pa'Lante runs a conference at their school to share their work of empowering young people with other schools.[23]
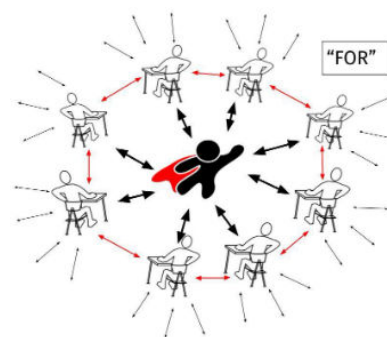
[20] "THE ZONES OF REGULATION: A SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING ...." https://www.zonesofregulation.com/index.html. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
[21] "Alfie Kohn: Out of Control: Taking Liberties with Autonomy During a ...." 2 Jun. 2020, https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/out-control. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
[22] "YPAR Hub | YPAR Hub." http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2022.
[23] Check out Pa'Lante here: https://palanteholyoke.org/

Empowering others to lead, create change, and build and maintain a community of care is the only sustainable way teachers and leaders can do this work. When I present on this critical skill of empowering others, I offer two diagrams. One shows the Super Teacher at the center of a circle of students. Donning a bright red cape, Super Teacher is the hub of their thriving learning community, arrows extend from teacher out to students, and beyond to parents and administrators. I then ask the audience a few questions. "What happens when this teacher is out for the day?" "Is super teacher lauded in your school culture?" "What is the price the teacher pays for this model?" The next slide shows another circle of students gathered around the words "content or issue." This time the teacher is sitting as part of the circle, still donning the cape, and still has arrows extending out to all students, families, and administrators, but the lines are lighter. What is stronger are the lines connecting each student to the other. "This," I say, "is a restorative classroom. What do you think the impact is of this model?" The teachers smile. They breathe sighs of relief and may be thinking, "You mean I don't have to be everything to everyone to be a good teacher?"
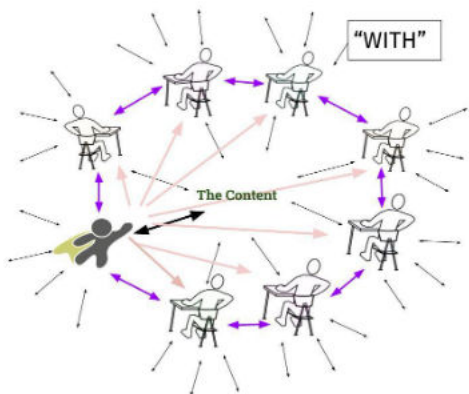
Practices

1. **Exploring Needs:** Gather in a circle so that everyone can see each other's faces. Share with a partner the story of a time when you were part of a thriving learning community. It could be a team, a workshop, a class. Now find something you can use as a talking piece and send it around for the following rounds. Let folks know that they can always pass; only the person with the talking piece can talk; and speak from your own experience instead of responding to others.

   Round 1: What top three needs were being met for that learning experience to be so enlivening? (Consult https://baynvc.org/list-of-needs/.) Share those needs with the group by writing them on index cards and, one at a time around the circle, placing them in the middle of the circle as you share your needs.

   Round 2: How does our school already meet those needs and how can we strengthen those ways? Use chart paper to record what you are already doing.

   Round 3: How can we intentionally build the policy, systems, processes, and mindset to meet those needs every day in our school community? Record the group's ideas.

   Round 4: What is one word to describe how you feel having done this process? Each in turn around the circle shares one word.

   From the ideas generated, decide on a few change ideas for small test groups. Create surveys and other ways to measure whether the change idea meets the identified need. Try the change idea in the larger community.

2. **Routine Check-ins:** Normalize naming emotions by exploring the different tools available to talk about stress. Check in often and quickly. This is not therapy; this is simply naming how we are doing and accessing available tools to feel ready to learn. Research shows that simply naming our feeling state with others can decrease the intensity of our emotions and our anxiety related to them.[24] Developing a way of talking about how we are doing that is non-shaming and low stakes is central to a community of care. Here are just a few.

    a. "Thumb-o-meter." Ask students to point their thumb up, down, or somewhere in between to represent how they are feeling.

    b. Scale of 1-10.

    c. The "if you…" prompts. "If you were a weather pattern…" "If you were a color…" "If you were a spice…" "If you were a body of water…" (a good opportunity to relate to curriculum topics).

    d. Pop culture related. "What one movie best describes your life right now?" "What cartoon character represents your mood?" "What movie or book character do you relate to the most right now?"

    e. Music related. "What instrument is playing inside you right now?" "What music or song best represents your feelings right now?" "If your mood could be represented by music right now, what would it be?"

    f. Choosing from a selection. Laminate a bunch of photos and have students choose the one they like the best and have them explain why. Another idea, have a basket full of talking pieces, beanie babies, and nicknacks. Have students choose the one they connect to and share why they chose it.

    g. Emotion Continuum. During the first few weeks have students brainstorm all the words they can that describe a continuum of emotion from enraged or despondent on one end to blissed out on the other. Post the continuum on the wall or ceiling and have students point to where they are on the continuum during check-in.

    h. Chiji Cards. This is a set of cards picturing all sorts of symbols and images. They are great for check-ins. Just lay them all out in the center and ask people to choose the one that represents how they are feeling. Grok Cards from GroktheWorld.com are also great!

    i. Rose and Thorn. Ask students to share one "rose" and one "thorn" from their life.

    j. Silent check-in. Have students make a gesture that represents how they are feeling and then have everyone repeat the gesture as an affirmation.

    k. Drawing check-in. Give students 60 seconds to draw how they feel, encouraging them to be as messy and free as they can.

3. **Reset Space:** One of the biggest challenges I've seen in schools this year is youth leaving classrooms and just wandering around the halls. When I was asked what could be done, I asked a question in reply, "What tools are kids given in their classrooms to deal with anxiety?" A community of care has semi-private places where youth can reset. Often the space has tools to

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[24] "Putting Feelings Into Words Produces Therapeutic Effects In The Brain." 22 Jun. 2007, https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/06/070622090727.htm. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.

help with emotional regulation. One third grade teacher I know has each student learn one of six strategies to self-regulate and posts visual cues in the reset space. Youth are encouraged to invite a fellow student to the space as a way to show support and care. Is there a reset space for staff?

Improving Everyone's Wellness: Respect

Before I design a seminar with a school, I send out a survey to find out what the participants already know, what they want to know, what change they'd like to experience as a result, how they like to learn, and anything else they'd like me to know so I can make their time as meaningful as possible.[25] It's a powerful way to show respect to the people spending their precious time with me. Over and over again I receive comments like this one: "Thank you so much for asking us what we already know. We get experts coming to talk every year and no one ever asks us what we know. And we know a lot!" My seminars purposefully build in protocols and small group activities that elevate the existing knowledge in the room. The result? Educators feel respected. engaged, and energized and less pressure is on me to know all the answers—more wellness for all.

This kind of respect is embedded in a central assumption of the restorative approach: "All humans have gifts; everyone is needed for what they bring." and "Everything we need to make positive change is already here." This approach, of course, requires that we give up the notion that educators or consultants need to be in charge and have all the answers. Not only does this kind of expression of respect play a large role in engaging and energizing learning, the lack of it from the organization's leadership is a key factor in burnout. "Organizational respect influence[s] burnout above and beyond the effects of job demands."[26] Compounding the stressor of organizational disrespect, disrespect and other challenging behaviors from students have been on the rise for the last decade and recently spiked during the last year.[27] What can be done to ameliorate this significant factor impacting wellness?

First, because respect is a social construct and looks and sounds different for everyone, a community needs to dedicate time to the exploration of its meaning and how to operationalize a shared understanding of respect at all levels of the school community. As part of a personal inquiry, I ask teachers to reflect on a time when they felt respected at school. Turns out respect lives in the little things. Some examples:

- When meetings are ended on time.

- When we are asked what we think about a new initiative or curriculum approach before it is implemented.

- When we are given the time in our day to prep effectively.

- When we are asked to share our expertise.

- When handouts are easy for us to read.

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[25] Respect is one of the six core principles of Dialogue Education, a highly effective approach to adult learning. (https://www.globallearningpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/migrated/resources/Six_Core_DE_Principles_Revised.pdf)

[26] "What makes the job tough? The influence of organizational respect ...." https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/WHAT-MAKES-THE-JOB-TOUGH-THE-INFLUENCE-OF-RESPECT-Ramarajan-Barsade/70e7ffdff17a903fc175d026f2c4a883ccf70a74. Accessed 23 Apr. 2022.

[27] "Schools Confront a Wave of Student ... - Wall Street Journal." 9 Dec. 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-student-misbehavior-remote-learning-covid-11639061247. Accessed 23 Apr. 2022.

- When leaders get back to us.

Since "respect" is such a huge factor in teacher wellness, it follows that any wellness initiative should survey staff to uncover the small and large ways to increase it.

Second, whatever way a community of care chooses to explore the concept of respect, the process should interrupt the institutionalized habit of aligning the word respect with some rigid culturally informed definition. Simply demanding respect from students or adults is an outmoded, ineffective, and incendiary approach to improving someone's behavior or school culture. In fact, naming a certain behavior "disrespectful" when it might be a respected and acceptable behavior in the student's culture or family is disrespectful itself. From my personal experience in the classroom, when a community takes the time to explore respect, a pretty significant increase in respect occurs.

Second, we need to learn better ways to express ourselves when we feel disrespected. When my students and I explored respect in the circle process described below, we agreed to be more specific when talking about it and not to assume the person intended to disrespect us. For example, I might say to students: "When you choose to talk to your friends instead of listening to the instructions, I feel frustrated and disrespected. I know you might not be intending for me to feel that way, but I do. Would you wait until after class to catch up with your friends?" I can't claim that we always did great at this, but I noticed students used the word respect much more carefully and seemed to express greater empathy.

Examining the ways you show respect for the humans in your schools might feel like a strange way to increase wellness. Ask yourself and your team: "Is feeling respected central to my wellness? If so, why?" In those answers you should find a place to start.

Practices for Adults and/or Youth

1. **Respect Circle 1:** In my classroom I gathered the youth in a circle, and as we passed a talking piece, asked them these questions in rounds:

    a. Name one person that you respect and why.

    b. Share a time when you felt respected.

    c. What is your definition of respect?

    d. What are some ways we can respond constructively when we feel someone does not show respect?

    e. What is one thing you respect about someone in this class?

2. **Respect Circle 2:** From the Center for Restorative Practices[28] comes some circle prompts that get folks digging into the complexity of the word respect. Notice how the prompts move towards higher stakes questions. The facilitator's job is to discern when the group is ready for more risk.

    a. Who deserves more respect, a dog or a cat? Why?

    b. Who has more self-respect, a dog or a cat?

    c. Teachers or Police?

    d. Old or young?

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[28] "A Circle on the Topic of Respect - Center for Restorative Process." 23 Mar. 2016, http://www.centerforrestorativeprocess.com/blog/a-circle-on-the-topic-of-respect. Accessed 29 Apr. 2022.

3. **Respect Circle 3:** Have the group read Dominic Barter's article, "Respect Means to Look Again" at https://tinyurl.com/2p8pxpcr and pass the talking stick around twice with the prompt, "What do you think about Mr. Barter's ideas?" Then open the circle for discussion on how your school could create more ways to look again.

4. **Guest Speaker Project:** To build respect for differences within the classroom I went outside my classroom to find people to come speak about their lives and to share things that went beyond appearances. My hope was that by having students reflect on the assumptions they make about people based on their slim knowledge or appearance, they will "look again" as the word re-spect asks us to do. I brought in a female welder, a dreadlocked musician, a maple sugar producer, and more. One of the most memorable was Capt Phillips of Hollywood movie fame. After he told his story of being kidnapped by pirates and thanked the kids for listening, one of my students asked: "Did you see the sweat stains under his arms? Why was he sweating so much?" I answered, "Maybe public speaking is scarier to him than fighting pirates," to which he gasped, "No way! That's just like me."

Improving Everyone's Wellness: Safety

Every semester in my high school classroom I asked students to complete an anonymous survey to rate on Likert Scales how much "safety, respect, belonging, and voice" they experienced in my classroom. I also invited them to add comments if they wanted to explain their rating. To my surprise, a few of them rated "safety" a bit lower than the other three. I thought I was quite skilled in creating a safe space where students could voice their feelings and needs. When I dug into the comments I discovered that it was my tendency to change or abandon the planned lesson that was at the core of their decreased sense of safety. I brought these findings to the class, and through a circle process, they came up with some ideas of how I could increase their sense of safety in our classroom.

A community cannot experience the wellness created by the other three pillars if its members do not feel a consistent sense of safety. For that reason, I saved this pillar for last. Safety can be defined simply as what our nervous systems feel when there are no threats nearby. Defining "threat," however, is where things get tricky. Our amygdala, hippocampus, and autonomic nervous system (ANS) are an efficient neurological trifecta designed to bolster our chances of survival when in a life threatening situation. However, this "defense system" cannot discern between real threats to life and perceived ones. Therefore, the modern humans' ANS is frequently triggered by non-life threatening stimuli causing a cascade of physiological responses that decrease wellness over the long term.

Even before the pandemic, students today experience increased "threat" just through the fear of being shamed on social media, exposure to violent images on the internet, or even increased academic pressures. As the students in my classroom expressed, a threat could be as simple as an unexpected change in plans. It could also arise out of a sense of vulnerability in the face of strong emotion. For a lot of students and adults, the pandemic and related restrictions registered in our bodies as a threat due to our experiences of powerlessness. And as restrictions lifted and schools opened up and took off masks, threats registered via sensory overwhelm and renewed social interaction.

While you can't fend off pandemics or get rid of social media, you can create a sense of relative safety in your school so the nervous systems of both students and teachers can stay within the

"window of tolerance." Developed by Dan Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry, the Window of Tolerance describes "the best state of 'arousal' or stimulation in which we are able to function and thrive in everyday life. When we exist within this window, we are able to learn effectively, play, and relate well to ourselves and others."[29]

Practices

1. To begin the work of adding more safety to your community of care, explore the principles listed here as a team and identify a few change ideas that have the lowest cost and highest gain.

   Predictability: What rituals and routines can be added to the school day to create pockets of safety and calm? One fifth grade classroom I observed started every class with ten minutes of silent reading. Students were not even greeted when they came in so that they could settle in class comfortably. In my classroom we started every week with a check-in circle and other days with a short mindfulness moment and quick check-in with gestures or thumbs up or down. Other ideas include a daily quote, greeting, check-in. Consider weekly routines such as Fun Fridays, Mastery Mondays, etc.

   Flexibility: Lack of control or power is a common triggering experience for people, especially those with trauma histories or chronic stress. Meeting students and staff "where they are" is essential work in a community of care. Many teachers I know experience intense stress when their need to leave school early to attend to a personal matter is met with inflexibility from the school leaders.

   Environment: Attend to the sights, sounds, feel of the school and classroom environment. Are loud school bells used to signal class change? Are classrooms disorderly and cluttered? Are lights overly bright or flickering? Does the class schedule require fast, rushed transitions? Make a list of things that would make the school and classrooms more calming.

   Structure: How are meetings and classes structured to provide equal voice, connection, and a slower pace? The Balance in the Process described on page 7, when applied to every school gathering, has a powerful impact on a sense of safety and calm for both students and adults.

2. Use data to learn, connect and create change.

   a. As a team, create a survey to measure the school community's experiences of the four pillars above.

   b. Do a Trauma-Sensitive School Audit: A trauma-sensitive school is good for everyone! As a team, dedicate time to auditing your school's trauma sensitivity by using this excellent resource.[30]
   (http://safeschoolsnola.tulane.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/121/2020/07/TIS-LC-Walk-Through-Checklist-Updated-July-2020.pdf)

   c. Gather as a school and use a data sharing protocol in circles (https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/tag/feedback/) to debrief the resulting feelings, thoughts and insights.

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[29] "The Window of Tolerance:."
https://www.gov.je/SiteCollectionDocuments/Education/ID%20The%20Window%20of%20Tolerance%2020%2006%2016.pdf. Accessed 24 Apr. 2022.
[30] Trauma-Informed Schools Walk-Through Checklist. (2017). New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative

d. Create small student and staff work groups to come up with ideas to improve the data. Do this annually and celebrate the gains!

Conclusion

The world has changed. We can no longer rely on old ways of "building community"—special activities done in the first few days and sprinkled throughout the school year. We can no longer expect our caring, dedicated teachers and leaders to support the well-being of all students while maintaining their own. We have to do better. And by better, I don't mean care more. I mean create the structures, systems, policies, and professional learning that ensures a community of care for all members, not just a few. In a community of care, the need for "self-care" shrinks as the collective-care grows. Schools can and should offer the knowledge, tools, and opportunities to be well together. I hope this chapter has inspired and emboldened you. Remember Margaret Wheatley's words: "Very great change starts from very small conversations, held among people who care." Be well.