



Now on Teacher Voice

Compassion

In this episode of *Teacher Voice: The Podcast*, we contemplate compassion: for our students, for our classrooms, for each other and for ourselves.

(0:00) **Dan:** At home is where I struggle to keep it together. It's that, like, you have to be so professional and calm and collected [at work] that, you know, what would normally probably not be a big deal would be a trigger, and then, you know, it's just transferring energy. So that's been my challenge, I'm able to hold it together quite well, professionally.

Narrator: But you get home at the end of the day,

Dan: And you just have no patience,

Narrator: And you have nothing left.

Narrator: We all know things have been difficult. We know that kindness and compassion from others can make a huge difference to our sense of well-being. Welcome to Teacher Voice, the podcast that brings you stories by teachers about teaching. In this episode of Teacher Voice, we hear from three teachers about what compassion looks like. The first story comes from Jamie Melton, a teacher from Utah.

(0:51) **Jamie:** I'm sitting here alone in a Zoom call because no one else showed up 20 minutes after it started, and this isn't even class. It's a book club that made me feel like I had friends and I know I'm really insecure about friendships but all the same, I'm feeling pretty lonely. I stare at myself on the screen, wondering when my husband will get home. Right now, it's just me and the cat.

Jamie: Well, me and the cat and my phone, which has a text from a friend from college. She texted me to ask about my Grandpa's cabin, which likely burned down in a wildfire last night and I cried about it this morning and getting that text felt like getting a hug. She remembered me, remembered that cabin was special to me, and sat with me while I was sad. That's compassion.

Jamie: So too is the moment when my husband bakes me brownies because I am more than frustrated with school and he wants to acknowledge it but doesn't know how to make it better. And these acts of compassion are important and I would not be functioning without them, but he's not here right now and honestly, they're only part of what I need, as I look at the empty Zoom call, 30 minutes in. I meet my own eyes through the camera and I can't hide anymore.

(2:14) **Jamie:** Compassion, it strikes me in this moment, is sitting still. It's knowing my blood clots more than normal and that puts me at risk for complications from a virus that has higher rates in this state now than ever and we're going back to in-person school next week after having an outbreak in my building and I don't want to go back to being scared and wanting to take deep breaths to steady myself and not knowing if it's safe for me to take deep breaths. It's knowing I'm tired and parents and students want more from me because they have every right to a good education and yet I'm still smarting over the SPED teacher who just wanted to work together with me to figure out why our online SPED kids are failing and it's because I'm failing them through no fault of my own and we are ALL SO TIRED and no one can make it better. After a point, I am the only one who can sit with myself through all of this.

Jamie: Compassion is sitting still while I knit, my hands making the same motion thousands of times while I let my mind try to catch up with everything, so I can pause between stepping out of one dumpster fire and

into another one. Because my life isn't actually a total howling wildfire; it's a series of dumpster fires and that's no fun but they do have walls and hopefully lids and I need to remember that there are spaces in between the loneliness of this book club and grief over my cabin and fear of getting more clots and exhaustion from teaching in a whole new way, because when I'm in these things I feel like I have to move, to do something, and I can't see out. Knitting makes me sit still long enough to remember to step out.

Rick: Yeah, we laughed, we cried, multiple times.

(4:00) **Narrator:** Just as Jamie needs to sit still and remember to step out, so, too, do our students. Our next teacher, Dan Bianchini, who you heard in the intro, is a special education teacher in New Haven, Connecticut. We sat down to talk about what compassion looks like in his teaching and how he steps out with students.

(4:16) **Dan:** I think as a high school teacher, in particular, you have this extra hurdle to kind of combat and that typically, most of our kids have some sort of trauma associated with the classroom. I think even as adults, we can always think back to those moments in high school or younger years where we weren't heard or we were misunderstood. Some teachers were having a bad day and came at us and said something that was awful. I remember in my junior year of high school, [when I was] struggling with writing, a teacher told me I was committing academic suicide. And I didn't really care about my future, without knowing complex history that was going on outside of school. And that didn't help, I just doubled down and told her I'm not coming to your class anymore and failed the course.

(5:00) But to my point, there's so much trauma associated with being in a classroom with someone up front, telling you what to do, and those four white walls. But there's so much research showing that if you want to change behavior, we have to change our environment. And I don't care how good of a teacher you are, unless you're getting outside of those walls, those are going to be that trigger for the kids. So that's also informed a lot of my work is like. We have a small conference room that's been turned into a classroom and we call it the anxiety cube in one of my classes because the kids are so triggered by this room. It's noisy. It's right next to the main office, it's kind of claustrophobic.

(5:48) Take that same group of kids who are kind of anxious and disruptive and dysregulated but take them out in the woods for a campfire and a conversation. It's just a completely different group of kids that show up and they know it, they are very aware of the differences. But again, it's kind of it's not what we were trained in, it's not what is expected, I can't imagine a principal ever say

ever saying to staff members, make sure you get your kids out in the woods and circle up and talk about your feelings. It just seems so counterintuitive. But I really believe that investment up front has great dividends down the road.

Narrator: Having the compassion to step out with students, to go off-script, opens up ways to see our students in new ways. It's a compassionate act to step outside of the norm, and especially stepping out into nature. We heard this many times from teachers. Here's more from Jamie:

(6:48) **Jamie:** Compassion is holding on to those moments of pause, remembering when I stood between glowing red thousand-foot high sandstone cliffs, blue sky above and magically bright green willows along the bottom of the canyon and darker green pines proving the resiliency of life as they gripped cracks in the vertical walls. It's accepting everything I feel, letting it be big and noisy and important inside of me, and then letting it all pour out into the vastness of this wilderness so I can be in this moment too. This is the in-between space, where I can take a deep breath and not be scared, where I can hug myself and not be alone. It's a place on my couch where I can smile at the purring furball in my lap, at the frothy length of lace I've painstakingly created, at the glow of light off the wood floor. Where maybe, if I sit still long enough, I can still find gratitude and joy.

Narrator: Pausing in these moments of joy and gratitude can bring us back to the present moment. Kirstin Milks, a teacher in Bloomington, Indiana, explains more:

(8:00) **Kirstin:** Yesterday, as per our arrangement, my spouse loaded our two big dogs and our two small kids into our tiny car. And then he came and got me after school at the comprehensive public high school where I work in the Midwest. And he drove us all to a research and teaching preserve that's not too far from here. And we went on a very small, easy hike. And the leaves were yellow, and red and orange, and the light slanted through the trees, and the air was soft. And my children who had been screaming, as I left the house earlier, to go to work in the morning were holding hands and walking ahead of us on the path. And I realized it was the most like me, that I have felt in months. Even though the things that define my identity and who I am, I've been doing, right, I've been teaching online only still with some kids remote hybrid face to face five days a week, all those things, and parenting my own two small people and partnering with my amazing spouse. And I'm still not finding enough space for me.

(9:22) So what does that mean with respect to

compassion? I've been so focused on showing my students compassion, that I have forgotten this year, to show myself grace, to treat myself with care. And I know that's all over everybody's social media feed and the news. But it took this walk in the woods, for me to remember why it matters so much. And it's because it's like an inoculation. Right now, it's not like an inoculation and the way that vaccines work, but it's a way of making it so that when stressful things are again in front of you that you are a little bit buffered, you're a little bit protected. And I think that's really important right now to find ways that we can be buffered or protected from stress. It also reminded me that I'm sitting in front of my computer too much, so I'm trying to make things for my students to do and for me to do so that we're not just sitting in front of our computer. That's how I'm trying to show compassion.

(10:29) **Narrator:** So often, when we are encouraged to take care of ourselves, it's a superficial practice, promoted by the same systems that created the conditions that require us to so desperately need self care. What I hear in Kirstin's story is that we have to have lives in which we pause, and we are ourselves. Compassion toward oneself isn't a bubble bath or a mental health day, although those things have their place, it is stopping the things that consume too much of us, and making space for the things that let us be ourselves. Dan highlights for us that for our students, it's not so much self-care that they need, but that we need to address their basic needs before we can expect them to learn. Here's Dan.

(11:06) **Dan:** So that when a kid comes in, you know, having a bad day, has their head down, the first thing I'm gonna ask them is, have you eaten today? Have you rested? And like, so I think that, okay, if you didn't sleep, well, I'm gonna get more out of you academically, if I allow you to sleep for 15 minutes to recharge yourself. Get that quick, you know, mini sleep cycle and then, okay, now you're up. Have you eaten? Okay, have a granola bar, and boom, two basic needs are met. And now we have capacity for climbing that hierarchy of needs, I guess, yeah. But again, it's not something, I recognize not all systems are set up for that. And people aren't. It's also not natural to improvise. If you've been trained a certain way, you have a certain curriculum you're following and to now suddenly pause and turn, turn on or turn on a dime is really hard.

(11:56) **Narrator:** We hope you can find the space to be still, to pause, to make the choices that feel right for the humans around us each day. Thanks for listening to Teacher Voice, we'll give Jamie the final word:

(12:08) **Jamie:** Compassion is sitting still. It is meeting my own eyes in an empty Zoom call and seeing the me

who feels one breath away from breaking while also seeing the me who ran wild through that canyon and felt like she could do anything. That second me is going to close my laptop now and put me to bed, because tomorrow all of me is going to get up and fight these dumpster fires again. The people around me deserve more space between those fires. And so do I. Without it, we have nowhere to sit still with each other, or with ourselves.



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