

LEADING A SCHOOL COMMUNITY THROUGH A PANDEMIC

with Dr. Jerome Cranston Ph.D

Wednesdays @ 2 pm MDT (Saskatchewan)
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Episode 9: Covid-19's Emotional Impact on Teachers - May 27, 2020

In this week's episode Dr. Cranston spoke with Dr. Nathalie Reid, PhD, a former teacher and now the Director of Child Trauma Research Centre at the University of Regina to discuss the emotional impact of Covid-19 on teachers. Below is a summary of their conversation.

Dr. Cranston: We've talked a lot throughout this web series about the needs of students and of course they will always be the main priority, but we need to actually focus some of our attention on teachers and the traumatic effect that Covid-19 and making these adjustments has had on them. Based on your research and expertise, what is the need for us to focus on teachers and why is this an important time to do so?

Dr. Reid: While I was in the midst of my PhD, the forest fires in Fort McMurray occurred. I was living in Edmonton at the time but I had lived and taught in Fort McMurray for four years, and as the evacuation was happening many of my former colleagues came over to our house, and our backyard became this space of community and stories. Early on from several of my former colleagues I heard "I don't know how I'm going to go back to teaching" and that really niggled at me and it stayed as a little pebble in my shoe. About two weeks later the school board announced that the school would remain closed and when they reopened they would be "trauma sensitive". A colleague called and asked me what that means and I didn't have an answer. So I started inquiring and looking, and what I found was "trauma sensitive" meant there were toolboxes and checklists created so teachers could be trauma sensitive for students. In that, trauma was being positioned as something students have for which teachers needed to be prepared to deal with, through things such as professional development opportunities. That felt very far from what my colleagues were experiencing and I wanted to inquire a little more into it, hence the beginning of my doctorate research. Of course being trauma sensitive for students is important and that will always be so, but not to the detriment of the teachers. As I began my inquiry I came across three teachers, all at different stages in their careers, and throughout my research each one of them at some point said "I can't be human at school" and to me that

became something very critical and it is important to think about now as we push to reopen schools in the fall. A lot of the conversations I have been following have been about physical health safety, and my worry is that we may lose the importance of the people who make schools whole, so why not draw on the vast experiences and knowledge of teachers in this larger conversation about school reopening.

Dr. Cranston: A few weeks back, one of the discussions we had was about lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and the trauma school members felt in its aftermath. From your experience and research, take us through some of the lessons learned from Fort McMurray in terms of the trauma for teachers who in the education system essentially become front line workers, as we begin to prepare to return to school in the fall.

Dr. Reid: Interestingly, in Fort McMurray after the schools reopened in the fall, it was about November, I asked some of my colleagues what was the most valuable or important professional development opportunity they had received in the post-fire reality. They said, bar none, the most valuable session they had was when they had the opportunity to sit down with their colleagues and share their trauma story. There was no moderator in their group, it was just them sitting down and sharing their unique “fire story”. The first lesson is that there has to be spaces and places made to acknowledge teachers experiences in and around the trauma, whatever it may be.

Dr. Cranston: As a researcher, if an administrator wants to take that lead, I’m of the mind that you may want some kind of trauma counsellor present depending on where that conversation goes. Would that also be a part of your recommendation that along with the spaces made available that you also arrange for some professional help?

Dr. Reid: Absolutely and actually I would say from my experience having counsellors who don’t just leave after one or two days, but someone who relationships can really be built with, particularly around these professional development opportunities would be really critical, because some of these stories are gonna be hard. The other thing is that right now we are quite isolated and so even the teachers in your own school, you wouldn’t necessarily know if they had a family member pass away or something else happen in their personal life. There needs to be an understanding of the landscape at all levels. Everyone I’ve come across in the school system understands and has a sense of how important it is to build relationships with students but sometimes we don’t really know so much about our colleagues because work and extracurricular activities get in the way. Another conversation regarding schools reopening that I was privy to talked about that there needs to be some time, maybe a week, before school starts for professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators, and aids to all come together and to understand the sense of the landscape so that we are starting from a place of care and then moving from that. People are living in the midst of all kinds of tension so that would be an invaluable resource.

Dr. Cranston: As a scholar, educator, and parent, what are the glimmers of hope and opportunity that you see as we move forward to reopening schools in the fall?

Dr. Reid: There's an entire section in my dissertation where I wrote about my tension with "back to" statements. One of the biggest opportunities is that back to "normal" is quite impossible and because of that we must turn to creative alternatives. So many minds are thinking about the alternatives and opportunities that this might present in terms of rethinking education. One of the ideas I get goosebumps about is the idea of decentralizing school as the place of learning. Of course wonderful things happen in the physical building but they also happen in communities, that lead to different kinds of relationships and mentorship opportunities in different places of learning. Another opportunity that I really am gravitating towards is really thinking about issues like equity and responsiveness with our most marginalized humans in a school landscape. Like students, some teachers don't have the technology at home to allow them success with education from a distance and so this idea of foregrounding issues of accessibility, equity, marginalization and vulnerability is at the forefront of conversation right now. If there is a silver lining that comes from this situation it's that we can really think in creative and powerful ways of how to do what we do better to serve and support more people that we are privileged to be alongside every day. A final thing that is near to my heart is that this situation allows us to see the humanity of those who lead and the fact that they are possibly struggling too. The kind of vulnerability we are seeing now is something we may not have seen in the past but it's something to remember as we move forwards.

Dr. Cranston: I like the way you framed that over a number of dimensions. Thank you for joining us today Nathalie, your insight was very valuable and we look forward to seeing what opportunities lie ahead as we move forwards.