

Rebecca Barry
Pedagogy Component: Podcast Transcript
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Show Notes & Works Cited

Teaser:

In **Episode 1: The Problem with Empathy**, Rebecca revisits three interviews from Oct. 2019 with teachers who share what they've seen change since the early days of their career. They discuss the ways in which teacher-student relationships have changed, both for the better (more compassion), and for the worse (higher anxiety), and Rebecca unpacks the role of empathy, care, and the notion of "disruptive compassion" in today's classrooms.

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Interview Credits:

All personal interviews took place Oct. – Nov. 2019 with faculty members at Robert E. Fitch High School in Groton, CT, conducted by Rebecca Barry.

Names in the podcast have been changed to protect individuals’ privacy.

Empath+ Episode 1 Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Rebecca Barry, Cheryl, Roger, Steph, Andrea, Melissa, Sarah

Jenn White, Agnes Walton, Prince Ea, Richard Lavoie, Teachers on 1A and New York Times

Cheryl 00:00

I have always felt that teaching was a calling. Some people are born and they just know they're going to be a minister or a nun or a priest or a doctor, or I'm going to be a... You just know, I always knew I was going to be a teacher.

Rebecca Barry 00:18

So in the fall of 2019, I was trying to decide if staying in the profession of teaching was the right choice for me. I was seeing a lot of behaviors and classrooms that were chronically upsetting. Teaching had been a dream of mine since the age of 16. Ever since I became a junior in high school, I did everything I could to get into classrooms as teaching assistants and tutors and mentors. I was a teacher for seven years. It's not nothing. It's not 38 years, like some of the people you're going to hear from today. The reason I sat down and talked with them is because I wanted to know if they were experiencing some of the same things I was. Students, and the act of teaching and schooling itself... something had changed since the time that I was a student. And I wanted to know if it was me, or if it was something on a larger scale. So, these recordings in a way, were about me trying to figure out if I had fallen out of love with teaching. What came out of them was this dialogue I hadn't expected around what it means to relate to your students as a teacher. My work has ended up centered around this topic of empathy. How do we relate to other people? What are the potential benefits of it? And what are the obvious limits that people have been transgressing? Because relating to somebody in a way that you would classify as empathy, you are trying to understand somebody, trying to bridge a gap between you. But there are also ways it's been used transgressively, exploitatively, extractively. And I knew that I couldn't leave without thinking about the ways that we apply that same thinking as teachers.

You're listening to Empath+. I'm your host, Rebecca Barry. Thanks for joining.

So if you follow education news, you've probably been hearing things like this:

Jenn White 02:20

The pandemic has taken an emotional and social toll on America's children. Since returning to in-person schooling, educators say behavior in the classroom has gotten worse.

Agnes Walton 02:29

Educators are quitting their jobs in alarming numbers. Schools are missing hundreds of thousands of staff and more than half of educators say they're thinking of leaving.

Jenn White 02:39

And you're noticing it, too.

[Teachers in New York Times Video] 02:42

And I resigned my position as teacher. I submitted my resignation last week, I will be leaving Gwinnett County Schools,

[Teacher on 1A] 02:46

There are several disruptive students inside of my classroom.

Rebecca Barry 02:50

Yeah, so basically, it sounds pretty rough out there. And the answer seems obvious on its face. Surely, it's got to be the pandemic? Time in quarantine, time home from school, away from social events, and from friends. That has to be the answer, right? Well, not exactly. These interviews I did in fall 2019. They spoke to a crisis that was happening in education even before then.

Cheryl 03:13

I mean, kids I've seen and I've looked at my class and that kids going to jail, no way in hell, they're gonna do anything else because they cannot be told what to do.

Roger 03:22

We have ratcheted down the academic requirements. And part of it I think, is parents don't want their kids to fail.

Melissa 03:29

You taught English, you made connections with kids, it was easier to teach and you got more done. It wasn't like this 12 years ago.

Cheryl 03:37

I feel more and more that I wear the mother hat a lot.

Rebecca Barry 03:42

This is a teacher I'm calling Cheryl. She has been teaching social studies and civics for 38 years at the time that I talked to her. And what I think she means by this in part: We are not just a teacher who

assigns work and gives a grade. We are also counselors, social workers, job coaches, disciplinarians, parental figures, there's a lot of societal pressure for teachers to provide all of these kinds of services as a mentor, even almost as sort of a regulator of their behavior that is overwhelming, and is a large part of the reason that we're seeing a massive burnout among teachers today.

Something a lot of teachers say in response to number two is they say, I feel like I have to wear a lot of different hats as a teacher. Do you identify with that?

Cheryl 04:26

Yes, yeah.

Sarah 04:28

I jokingly say to my friends, I teach how to be a human with English on the side. Because, honestly, especially with ninth graders, we're doing a lot of that.

Rebecca Barry 04:38

I learned that when you ask teachers, what do they think has changed over the course of their career, a lot of them are going to talk about technology.

Roger 04:45

It seems like they can relate to their phone, but they can't relate to the students sitting next to them. Many of them that I fear don't know how to have a conversation with somebody they don't know.

Rebecca Barry 04:56

It's not a surprise. I mean, cell phones in classrooms has become a larger issue over the years.

Melissa 05:01

Well, it's so bizarre because all we we all just said like we're being human and empathetic more than we're being teachers even, but yet that kid still doesn't feel like his teachers are being human and empathetic.

Rebecca Barry 05:16

Empathy was a major buzzword in the field of education back when I was taking classes. The psychologist C. Daniel Batson, you might know him as a researcher who made a case for the link between empathy and altruism. He compiled a helpful list back in 2009, of the eight most common definitions for empathy that he was seeing in the field of psychology, it helps to highlight the fact that this is a contentious term, and one with a history of being used imprecisely. For the sake of today's episode, I'll be paraphrasing Benson's terminology, because some of the nuances between definitions are going to arise in the interviews as reasons there are problems with empathy when a teacher is trying to extend it towards student definition number one is one that I'm paraphrasing, as, "Name it," as in, put into words what the other person is feeling based on what you observe of their words or actions. Number two is "Do it," which means imitating or embodying the experience of another person, then there's one I suspect most people's minds go to first. Number three, "Feel it," coming to experience the same emotions as another person. I think the vast majority of us can say we've experienced these first

three. The problem is, though, that first, I don't think these three things are enough to really help you understand what another person is going through. These three alone doesn't really constitute what we're looking for when it comes to knowing another person's experience of the world, on a level deep enough to sensitively respond to their needs. You might have noticed that all three of them focus on the immediate surface emotions. The other person has to be performing their emotional experience in some way in order for you to pick up on it. But what about the emotions that aren't evident? The ones that in traversing the passage between you and the other are crossing language, culture, race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and any number of factors that complicate your reception of them. What if you're a teacher with more than 100 students to relate to, each with their own histories, fears, and dreams?

Teachers, I feel, inherently understand that Name it, Do it and Feel it are not enough to do their job well. So they do what they can to reach out to their students on a level that's deeper than that. The problem with teachers trying to extend empathy toward their students is that it's incredibly easy to slide into one of two extremes. And that's where Baton's definitions four through eight come into play. The more you try to understand your students, the more likely you are to risk going down one of these two roads. The first one is definition number six, "Imagine self": picture yourself in the other person's shoes reacting as you would with your cumulative knowledge and experience. If you've been on the receiving end of this from a teacher, you might have heard it as, "I know exactly what you're going through." Except that, of course, they don't. Not really. There's an implication on their part, that if they were really in your shoes, they could be doing it better, that you should be doing it better. And sometimes, I think teachers that fall into this camp, end up defaulting to thinking, My job at this point is to get them ready for a world are not prepared for, and that means having to up the stakes having to up the urgency having to up the pressure, if they're going to rise to the challenge and meet the world at the level it needs. Teachers who slide too far into this mindset start to exhibit definition number four, "Inhabit": blurring of lines between yourself and the other person, a place where you kind of start to forget where you end and the other person begins. "I faced adversity and I made it so what's their excuse? We as a society should be asking them to do much more than what they're doing right now." And perhaps one of the most insidious aspects of slipping into the mindset of Inhabit is that subsequent to that decision, every one of a student's failures becomes an indictment of their entire generation and by extrapolation, the whole of the human race. I know that sounds pretty melodramatic, but trust me, there are conversations between teachers happening on this level. Then at the other end of the scale, I see some teachers relating to their students by definition number five, Imagine other. This is one where you're not picturing yourself in the students shoes, picture them in their own shoes, and what it looks like and feels like, say, when a student gets home from school. When they have to juggle chores and watching their siblings and doing their homework. The risk with embodying this mindset too deeply. Is that taken too far, you come to the conclusion that the other is totally unreachable. The chasm between you is unbreachable, they are perpetually unfathomable. "All I can do is try to remove some of the pressure on them." Take this too far, and you get into definition number seven, "Feel distress," something I feel strongly is at the root of teacher burnout. You do what you can to relieve the stress of students to mitigate the past traumas and present fears, and you grow disheartened when you see them continue to struggle. Unlike with the Imagined self teachers, with the Imagine other teachers, every one of the students failures becomes an indictment of the teachers generation and an indictment of the teachers themselves. You might hear teachers start to express views like these: "Students these days are up against so many challenges, from social media, to mental health to student loans to climate change the

job market to international wars of political polarization to mass shootings... How can we be expected to get anything done for school? We should be grateful they even come to school! We as a society should be asking students to do much *less* than what they are doing right now." Either way, whether you're the kind of teacher who gravitates toward imagined self or imagined other, the end result is the same, you set out with high expectations, only to find them continually dashed. So that leads just one more of Batson's eight definitions of empathy. Number eight, Feel compassion. It's a little bit of a misnomer on my part, maybe, because it's really more about action than it is about feeling. This is about feeling compassion in response to another person's emotions and experience, not to the point of becoming paralyzed or incapacitated, but to the contrary, being moved to action which will relieve them of that distress. By responding with specificity and sensitivity to what they in that particular moment, in that particular stage of their life need the most. Teachers in the Imagined self and Inhabit camp probably think they're achieving this through tough love. "They'll thank me someday for going so hard on them. I made them pull themselves up, that taught them independence and grit." Teachers in the Imagine other, Feel distress camp, probably think they're doing this right, too: "The best thing I can do for this kid right now is just help them get through it has to be the most stressful, anxiety producing portion of their life. They'll thank me someday for being the only one who really cared." But neither of these perspective is quite compassion, though, at least not in the way Batson means it, I think it's time to talk about care.

So if all that empathy is hopefully leading to action, action on the part of a teacher which relieves the distress of their students, then surely it should be leading to actions of care. The teachers I spoke with had an abundance of ideas about how to show students care, without outright endorsing or condemning any of them, here are some of the methods I heard about: parenting the students, teaching students to be a good human, giving students affirmation through friendly physical contact, preparing students for the world after high school, helping students manage their emotions, and helping students to unplug or find a healthy relationship between technology and real life. So what I'd really like to do is play a couple clips for you of these teachers and what it sounds like when they talk about relating to their students after an entire career's worth of teaching.

Cheryl 13:28

It's still my calling, I'm not really sure that teaching is what it used to be. It's sad to me, because I see trends in education that are frightening.

Rebecca Barry 13:39

This is a teacher I'm calling Cheryl. At the time I spoke with her she had been teaching history, social studies Civics for 38 years. And something she takes very seriously is the responsibility of making sure that students know their right when it comes to voting, when it comes to being politically informed, and when it comes to knowing what their options are for the future that lies ahead.

Cheryl 14:01

There's a lot more than just standing up and reciting knowledge or asking questions or giving papers to do. It's about helping students be the best person they can be.

Rebecca Barry 14:12

And herein lies the first question, what does it mean to help students be the best that they can be? If he's not talking about it in a purely academic sense? How do we make sense of teachers as a person whose role it is to help mold a student's ethical, social, physical and mental well being as they go forth in the world?

What would you say is the biggest ways in which teaching has changed over the course of your career?

Cheryl 14:37

I think a lot of it I just touched on, that the students themselves have changed, in that they're much less prepared, and they're less dedicated.

Rebecca Barry 14:48

And this for me was what I was here to listen to .What's her experience of the way that things have changed in the decades since she began teaching? And... what was it going to mean for my career?

Cheryl 14:59

Part of that is the teaching has changed. We don't expect it. These textbooks are written that I'm teaching 10th and 11th graders in, that they cannot read. They're on a fifth grade reading level. They're so used to this instant success. Everything's got to be in 30 seconds or less, soundbites. They go the internet and they click and the first night comes up, they take it, they don't even know if it's accurate or not. They never check because it's easy. It's too fast. It's too easy. Everything comes too easy. They need to learn how to work, and they need to learn several different ways to come up with an answer. And I think students now are lazier than they've ever been. They've never had to have to work. They've never been pushed to it, or they found a shortcut. And shortcuts are good, if you know that, okay, there is a better way to do this, and I'm still getting the right answer. Okay. But if you're not getting the right answer, and you're not learning anything, as you've done it, that bothers me, that bothers me.

Rebecca Barry 15:55

Let's unpack one in particular: this role of teachers *in loco parentis* in the place of parents, while students are at school, is an idea which carries over from as long ago as the English common law. It's meant to be a foundation of trust, and responsibility, but sometimes I can't help but wonder what students and some parents might think about teachers making comments like these,

Cheryl 16:18

These kids, it just seems more so now at the end of my career than it did at the beginning. There are so many children that we have that just don't have parents. They are offsprings, they have been produced and are in the world, but they don't have parents that are guiding them through and helping them make good decisions and, and helping them to grow and to test the waters and to, to learn what they need to do just to be a decent human being much less a good student, I feel like we're raising children more than we used to have to.

Rebecca Barry 16:50

Is it a form of empathy, compassion, care, for a teacher to relate to their student as their parent figure? So one thing I think this means for the legacy of pedagogy is that we have this understanding of the

pandemic as exposing all of these issues with education that hadn't come up previously. And what I'm here to say is, the crisis had already begun. I felt it, and these teachers did, too.

Cheryl 17:18

failure without an option, not doing something not an option. And mommy calling up and crying because well, I hear that you're being mean to my child, what do you mean, you're charging him a penalty or taking points off written not being legible or that it's wrong? What do you mean calling it... No! That never happened. Parents knew this was your job, you've been trying to do this, you're the professional, and this is what we do. And they might call the school and complain, but the school said, I'm sorry, these are our rules. This is what we do. And you're free to take your child somewhere else if you want to. But this is what happens at school. And now I think kids seem to be much more entitled, and much more... babied. Coddled. They have no resilience. Kids don't know how to cope with any kind of negativity in their life.

Rebecca Barry 18:15

And this time capsule of a group of interviews from fall of 2019 is evidence that there were a lot of issues in education that weren't being faced, and that it's only since the pandemic-imposed quarantine that parents and the media have been forced to reckon with the fact that education in the US has been in dire straits for a long time.

Cheryl 18:36

They're getting a lot of negativity, some of it self-induced, some of it societal, but there's so much that happens in anybody's life. These kids don't know how to deal with that. They don't know how to handle any kind of bump in the road.

Rebecca Barry 18:52

One of the interesting things about listening to people like Cheryl and Roger and the other teachers talk about their role of teacher blending with the role of parent is the fact that in both cases, there have been some infringements upon either ground. For instance, in 2021, there was a Supreme Court case in which a student upset that she didn't make the varsity cheerleading squad made a profane Snapchat and send it to a few students. A classmate took a screenshot, shared it around the school, and the student ended up suspended. But the Supreme Court's ruling in that case was to say that she could not rightly be suspended from the squad for doing something on her parents' watch outside of school on a social media platform that had no connection to the school curriculum. And so this bleeding of how much authority the school has during other hours is mirrored by what Cheryl and Roger and others are attesting to: parents taking a more active role in trying to enforce their own authority on what is happening on school campuses, during school hours. I think a really good example of this actually comes from a younger teacher Andrea who speaks about what it was like when Power School, which is an online grade reporting app that parents can access at any point in the day came into effect while she was still a student, because it really changed the way that she related to her grades, and her parents, and her teachers.

Andrea 20:19

The end of my high school careers when Power School was a thing, where you could like log on and stuff. I will say that it be no excuses in terms of, went real close to not passing my math class my senior year, because it was hard. So it kind of held me accountable in that way, which was good. But for then for every other class, I was super stressed that I was going to get a grade at any moment that my mother could see. And then it could be a “thing” when I got home. So there was a fear in a good way within a fear in a bad way.

Rebecca Barry 20:48

A constant low level anxiety.

Andrea 20:50

Yeah, there was no like room for really messing up.

Rebecca Barry 20:53

Something that really interested me was the fact that sometimes these teachers just needed to get something off their chest.

Roger 21:00

I don't think parents hold their kids accountable for you know, when they say something they shouldn't just having people say thank you and please is hard. I still am appalled that kids will just open a door to a classroom and walk in. Now that we're locking them that makes that harder. But before we locked the classroom doors, kids would just open a door and walk in. They wouldn't knock, they wouldn't say excuse me, you know, stuff like that. It's this sort of the basics of respect and manners. We need to bring back Miss Manners. Where did she go to?

Rebecca Barry 21:31

So there's a quote that one of my education professors put on the board on the first day of class, and it goes like this: “The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.” The teacher who posted this quote and asked us, when do we think this quote came from? And some of us made guesses for the 20th century, the 19th century? The answer is that it's most commonly attributed to Socrates. And the point of this exercise was to impress upon us that teachers, parents and elders have complained about the behavior of young people since time immemorial. And so when I look back on these interviews and see moments that teachers are complaining about the youth these days, I take it with a grain of salt, as I think we all should.

What do you think these students will be like when they become teachers?

Cheryl 22:38

Oh dear heavens please no.

Rebecca Barry 22:39

And more importantly than that, pretty much every time one of these teachers went on a rant about something that really gets their goat, they then turned it on their head, and used it as an opportunity to express some kind of relationality, some form of empathy, for their students. I want you to hear this example right here.

Cheryl 22:59

They don't know how to handle any kind of bump in the road. And the saddest part to me is, that's not the kid's fault. That's parents fault. That's society's fault. It's our fault for allowing it to happen. We're not standing strong and going, "No." You didn't learn to walk. The first time you tried to stand up as a baby, you fell. You busted your bottom you cried, you got up, you skinned your knee, you kept going. Same with riding a bicycle, roller skates, all of it! You have to fail to understand, "Oh, okay, that's not how you do it. Let's try it this way." And you keep going, and we don't let them. Everybody gets a trophy, everybody gets a prize. And everybody bashes this generation and goes, "Well, they all get a trophy for showing up." They didn't ask the stupid trophy. But we've given it to them, because we think that helps them, when in actuality, I think that has hurt them more than it's ever helped them.

Rebecca Barry 23:52

Here's another example I find particularly meaningful. This is a conversation between four different English teachers, all of them within the first 15 years or so of their teaching careers. And they're talking about how the emphasis of professional development has changed.

Steph 24:05

I mean, we weren't receiving, 10 years ago, professional development on how to help the kids' social-emotional well-being, we never had professional development on that. That would have been just like, absolute nonsense. And that was only nine or 10 years ago. So, now that half of our professional development is how can we help these kids emotionally... Obviously, like the students need has grown, and, just like with everything that happens in schools, it's like we're gonna go far, one way and then we're gonna come back a little bit. It's just the ebb and flow of the education system.

Melissa 24:37

Well, and the how to be a good human thing. Nobody ever had those conversations with us when we were in high school.

Sarah 24:43

I asked my students, I'm like, "Have you ever been explicitly taught, like, how to be caring?"

Melissa 24:49

How to be caring... but why should you have to be? We weren't explicitly taught that, but they actually *do* need to be explicitly taught that, so—

Steph 24:55

Maybe they *don't* need to be explicitly taught but we've created this monster by allowing them to *think* that they need to be taught.

Rebecca Barry 25:03

And here's a layer of relating to students we haven't talked about yet. If one level of the teaching job is about demonstrating empathy, extending care to the students themselves, how do you then get to the next stage where you're able to teach students to show that same kind of care and respect for one another?

Steph 25:21

Finding that balance is another aspect of what we're supposed to do as teachers is teach them how to gain some sort of balance in their life. And the kids, like we've said, are getting more stuff put on them. So like, maybe it's time to just kind of take a breather.

Andrea 25:35

Adults who are supposed to be the role models for the kids are, generally speaking, still figuring out how to manage their own anxiety. And now it's a discussion in the mental health adult world, right? And so if adults can't figure out how to unplug appropriately, how can they then teach the younger generations to do that?

Rebecca Barry 25:56

I want you to hear from Cheryl quickly on the topic of standardized tests, and how she talks about them with her students.

Cheryl 26:02

A test is a picture of who that kid is that particular day. That is not an accurate picture. I tell my kids testing, "First day school, I come in and take your picture. In June, are you still that same kid?" "Well, yeah." "No, are you? Do you look the same, put that picture beside it, have you not changed and grown? So what if I said for the rest of your life, this is who you are. You had a bad hair day, or you had a big zit on your face. That's who you are for the rest of your life." That's what these tests do. That's one day in your life. And I don't care how good you are, how smart you are. Some days you just do better than others. And some kids are crappy test takers. You give me a standardized test, I am a student on a good day. You ask me what I know, let me show you let me explain to you? I'm an A student.

Rebecca Barry 26:50

I think this might actually be a really effective use of imagined self in this case. And notice that Cheryl is using it to pivot to a form of care, a form of care that is pointing out to students, the cracks in the education system. The fact that so much of their future rides on this one day of their life that they take a standardized test, she disagrees with it. There's nothing that Cheryl can do maybe on an institutional level, except to plant the seed in these students' minds, that what they're being subjected to is not fair. And they shouldn't have to put up with it, and they certainly shouldn't have to adjust their mindset to accept it as the necessary reality for the future. Cheryl may have very strong opinions about what it means to be a teacher as parent, but she also has some very strong opinions about what a teacher should not be.

Cheryl 27:34

I'm gonna sound like an old fart when I say this, and I don't mean to be. But I see a lot of the younger teachers, they don't know that boundary between "I'm an adult and a teacher, not your friend." I can be friendly with you. And we can have a good relationship. I'm here to help you be the best person you can be. And sometimes that means I'm going to have to come down hard on you. Sometimes that means I'm going to have to punish you. Sometimes that means I'm going to have to tell you something you don't want to hear. I'm not your friend.

Rebecca Barry 28:04

You've pointed out some really interesting contradictions, how we're in a very test-taking world but also in a world where there's no right answers, and how we're more compassionate than ever, but we can't touch them either.

Cheryl 28:15

Yeah, and it's one of those things, you as a teacher have to be very sure of who you are. If I am crossing that boundary between your buddy and your pal. And then I rub you across the back and go Well, you look so pretty today. That line is blurred. What do you mean by that? Could you mean? Did you mean? Did that? You see what I'm saying? Whatever we do, don't you ever forget? I'm the teacher, you're the student. So if I can be compassionate with you, I'm being compassionate you as a teacher as a motherly figure, not as your compadre, your friend.

Rebecca Barry 28:49

It's interesting to hear that for Cheryl, physical touch as a form of comfort is an imperative at the basic level of human connection.

Cheryl 28:56

I do see I think even of older teachers and younger I think I see more compassion than I used to. Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care. And I think at the elementary level, particularly too... You're mothering, you know? They're little, they're babies and they want to be hugged and they need to be held and they need to be talked to and you've got to be a little bit more compassionate with them. Even high school kids every once will need a hug. Not a gross, creepy old guy hook but a... Hey, a motherly hug, you know, a pat on the back or just a "Hey, you're doing all right." Contact is not bad. It's you know—but now we're all so afraid, "Don't touch don't touch don't touch," and so you have to think about it. And I get that because that's just reality. That's the world, but I think that strains it.

Rebecca Barry 29:44

Okay, coming up is one of these classic examples where Cheryl self interrupts a rant to deliver a poignant understanding of what it is that they're going through. She really walks this line in-between the imagined self and the imagine other in a way that interrupts herself before she becomes too distressed, or too Inhabiting, and finds a way to engage with disruptive compassion toward herself, and then them.

Cheryl 30:08

I was brought up in an age... My parents, when adults started talking kids left the room. grownups are talking, go play outside. Get out. And it was a very strong line between mom and dad and friends and

us. I never called an adult by their first name in my life. I still can't call my parents friends by their first name, because that's just not right. And I think that's why kids behave, the way they do too is... if you know, "This is the line I have to stay in." That gives him so much freedom. And that takes away so much pressure, I don't have to worry about trying this crap over here, because I know I can't cross that line. But I can bounce around with this lane all day long. And when we take those boundaries away, there's too many options to be choices, and they're not ready for that they're not developmentally ready for that yet. And these kids, a lot of times, they're raising themselves. They're raising themselves. So they resent at somebody else, "Who are you to tell me what to do? I got myself up, I fed myself, I took care of my family."

Rebecca Barry 31:08

And what I think is so remarkable about this bit of audio is that Cheryl starts off with an Imagined self personal story from her own past. And then she pivots to this Imagine other spotlight on students who have had to basically raise themselves in order to get where they are. And she finds a way, I think, to walk the line between those two, and to engage with this idea of disruptive compassion toward herself, and then toward her environment. In a moment where she was really ramping up to complain about students, she stops. And she uses imagine other as a sort of swing of the pendulum toward the other side of the spectrum, to spend some time imagining other means of engaging with, relating to, empathizing with students. And I think it makes for a better, more caring teacher for it.

This next clip is an important example, I think of a moment where imagine self slides into Inhabiting, and then slides into assuming that because you've had students who have struggled and have failed, all of society is on the path to failure.

Overall, are you feeling more cautious and more hopeful about the future of education?

Cheryl 32:19

I'm wary of it. I'm scared about I think we're dumbing down. And especially to me as a history teacher, it bothers me that kids, we're not pushing them to understand this. You don't know your history, you're screwed, and our country is screwed. And you don't have to like and all of everybody. Well, we can't talk about that. Because it offends we can't... History is not politically correct! People did some bad things. You learn about it, so you don't let them happen again. But we are sitting ducks, and we're buying everything we've been fed. And all we do is turn on TV and and whatever they say that's what we believe. Is it the truth? Is accurate? And it's not. It scares me we're dumbing down. And they tell you, "Well, it doesn't matter if the answer is right, as long as they're engaged." Pardon me, but bullshit. The right answer always matters.

Rebecca Barry 33:21

Next, you'll be hearing from Roger. He's a math and computer science teacher. At the time I spoke with him, he'd been teaching for 18 years. He'd had 20 years in the Navy prior to that. And you'll hear some overlap with some of the things we've heard from Cheryl.

Roger 33:35

So what does it mean to say I'm a teacher in the year 2019. What that means to me is, sadly, I've become a surrogate parent. It seems like I'm responsible now for a lot more parenting-type decisions and crafting of students and their actions.

Rebecca Barry 33:52

And what's interesting is that he serves as a kind of middle ground between Cheryl and the other four teachers, in speaking to both parenting and to students and their humanity.

Roger 34:02

It seems to me that one of the big changes that's happened since I started teaching in 2001, is that parenting is now a lost art. And many students show up without what I would consider sort of the basics of being a human being like, how to be polite and how to be nice and when to *not* say something.

Rebecca Barry 34:19

An interesting deviation from what I heard in Cheryl's account is that he's not seeing an overlap between the responsibilities of parent and teacher so much as the teacher is being usurped by the need to be a parent. That the two do not harmoniously coexist.

Roger 34:35

It seems to me that these days, it is expected that I make every student successful no matter what. Students now some of them seem to think that success is guaranteed without work, and basically all I have to do is show up and they will be successful.

Rebecca Barry 34:50

If you know anything about me and my obsession with AI, you'll know why I'm pleased with this next answer.

Roger 34:55

Do you have any predictions for what the world teaching will look like when your current students become educators? I'm afraid it's going to become much more technically involved, a lot more of the actual material will be presented by a computer or possibly an AI of some sort. Now, the good news with that is if it's an AI and it can accurately measure a student's strengths and weaknesses, it can work on what those weaknesses are. The only problem is it's not very personable and doesn't take into account anything other than the answers it's given.

Rebecca Barry 35:28

You might have noticed that Roger is a fairly direct and to-the-point person, I think this next bit is the best example of the way that he enjoys demonstrating care for his students.

Roger 35:37

It's clear the ones that actually listen are the ones that generally will come back to me at some point and say, "Can you write me a letter of recommendation?" So that to me is one of one of the more fun things that I can do is, you know, I have a kid who's who's worked hard and wants to do something, I will do what I can in a letter of recommendation to get that for them.

Rebecca Barry 35:56

This next story is a personal one from Roger's upbringing, that helps me understand the language that he uses around teaching. You'll hear him reference his own story of becoming a good human with the kind of teachers that he faced. And I think this helps me to understand where he falls on the Imagine self spectrum.

Roger 36:13

Maybe it's because I went to a parochial school, from the first eight years of my education. And the nuns were like, surrogate parents. I mean, you stepped out of line in the classroom, the nuns put you back in line instantly. I think I probably still have some scars on my knuckles from rulers at some point. But I think they did an excellent job of getting the basics of both education, and how you should act as a human in the world, probably as good as anybody that I've ever run into. And I don't think I don't think parents hold their kids accountable for, you know, when they say something they shouldn't, just having people say thank you and please is hard.

Rebecca Barry 36:54

And the final piece we're going to hear from Roger right now is one that baffles me, because even though a lot of what he's said, has mirrored some of Cheryl's rhetoric, his stance on change, and the ability of a teacher to enact change in society marks him as a very different kind of person that she is, you're going to hear me press him a little bit on the topic of anxiety. I wanted to see if you can empathize with his students and the way that society has changed since he was a student. I think he succeeds in that. I think he also succeeds in really surprising me with the direction he took the question.

I want to run past you a couple things other people said. They said, they get the sense that their students are much more anxious than they used to be several years ago. Have you experienced that?

Roger 37:39

I'd say yeah, I mean, they are anxious and and part of it is the fact that they may have actually caught on to the fact that change is now permanent. What you know, today, and the way things work today is not necessarily how it's going to be in five or 10 years. And that makes anybody anxious. I think they're getting a lot of pressure from parents and other places that, you know, they've got to get their ducks in a row, they got to be successful in high school, so they can get to a good college, come up with a good degree and then get a good job. Although with the way things go, that good job will probably change five or six times before they retire. If they *get* to retire, which is the other thing that's kind of weird. But that that to me could drive a lot of anxiety if I was younger.

Rebecca Barry 38:20

And this interestingly for me, is an example of where he has taken Imagine other and all of the weight now falling on the coming generation and taking a hard left turn into Feel distress, extrapolating out to an impending apocalyptic future.

I've talked to quite a few teachers who feel that they've lowered their academic standards for students since beginning their careers. Have you felt that?

Roger 38:45

I've seen a creep in that. I would have to say in some areas, yeah. I remember the first few algebra one courses I taught, were very demanding. And as soon as we started to see more than about five or 10% of the kids fail, they started to ratchet down the material in that course. I think we're buying a lot of trouble with that right now. Because what we're seeing is that students who are going into the IB track without having completed our Algebra II course, are in dire straits, because it used to be we covered a lot in Algebra I stuff that we now have to we've now pushed to Algebra II. And now our Algebra II course doesn't go as far as it should. So it's kind of a an avalanche effect or cascading effect. I guess, I guess I'd have to agree with that, that we have ratcheted down the academic requirements and in some areas. Part of it, I think, is you know, parents don't want their kids to fail. So I mean, I remember like the first two years I taught, I think, almost half my Algebra I classes failed. I presented all the data and you know, they didn't make me change any grades, but it was clear there was an effect after that. I was teaching the material. They weren't listening. They weren't doing homework. I was providing tests that were appropriate. And we got the result. I think there's probably parents leaning on teachers and students and administrators. And I think the administrators not wanting to deal with lots of failures. So, the way you do doesn't make the course easier, more kids pass... you don't have to deal with failures anymore.

Rebecca Barry 40:33

So, if the first two teachers I spoke with, Cheryl and Roger, have exhibited signs of both Imagined self and Inhabit, Imagine other Feel distress, I wanted to see what would happen if I interviewed a younger group of teachers as well. The next teachers are going to hear from our four English teachers who are all pretty good friends. And they were all between the first seven and 15 years of their teaching careers.

Steph 40:57

I'd like to say what I think it means to be a teacher in 2019. I believe that we are preparing students for the unknown, and that it's terrifying at times.

Melissa 41:07

I think to say I'm a teacher is a lot more than just teaching. And I think it has grown tremendously, the responsibilities we have, or the impact that we have, or the roles that we play in these kids' lives.

Andrea 41:21

I think it's hard to encompass what the word actually means now. It used to be very cut and dry. Now, you're a lot of other things for the students besides just a teacher.

Rebecca Barry 41:32

So interestingly, these guys also acknowledged the idea of parent as teacher, but I think they disagree that this is a natural role that a teacher has to inhabit. You're gonna hear first from Steph and Andrea, and he's opening clips.

Steph 41:45

Some of these students do need an extra, you know, parental figure, because they're not getting that at home. But I mean, even for some of the adults in the building, they found that parental figure in one of their teachers, or a coach or whatever, but it wasn't *all* of their teachers' responsibility.

Andrea 42:03

Well, I think too, like my perspective, because I haven't really been in education that long, and I graduated coming up on 10 years ago from high school... I found my people and my role models are my friends, but it wasn't every single teacher. And I think that it kind of now falls on everybody's lap.

Rebecca Barry 42:20

It's clear to me from the way these four teachers speak that they spend a lot of time thinking about what it must be like for the students living in their own experience. In other words, I think they do a lot of practicing Imagine other. I want you to hear from Melissa about what it's like trying to facilitate a student success in a year like 2019.

Melissa 42:40

So at the start of your career student had to be blank to be successful. You just had to show up and care to be successful. Yeah, they had to show up and care. And now in 2019, a student has to be completely overwhelmed to be successful, it seems like? I don't know. But what is success?

Rebecca Barry 43:57

And then this is Sarah.

Sarah 42:58

Well, and I was gonna bring up the fact up, too, just have different success is just probably from us in the room, nevermind from town to town. I mean, if you asked us to teachers, they might say a student has to be resilient, in order to show success, you know, a lot of their upbringings are way different than our kids in the way of what five miles apart? Half of our kids. [Laughs] Right, half of our kids.

Rebecca Barry 43:20

And one of the interesting things about having four people in the room is that sometimes you get contention, as this moment when Steph takes issue with something that Melissa had brought up.

Steph 43:30

For me, it's not showing up and caring, like I want to do well. And here I am. Like, that's not enough.

Melissa 43:36

That's such a rarity.

Steph 43:37

You need to—but that's not enough to even be successful.

Melissa 43:40

In your classroom?

Steph 43:42

No, as a person, as a human being.

Melissa 43:44

Yeah.

Steph 43:44

I'm not equating my classroom to being successful as a human being. That's not going on. Don't know about you guys, I'm not changing lives that much.

Rebecca Barry 43:51

It's interesting because a number of them have spoken to the importance they see in their role of teaching students to be good human beings. But here Steph is saying that she can't even envision having a classroom that would even begin to be able to facilitate the kind of growth it would take to become a good human being. So the question of empathy and of care in 2019, and the years since has been, what does a classroom for? If it's not purely for content? What else should there be involved in a student's life?

Steph 44:18

You guys know the political cartoon or meme or whatever? Where it's like, there's some animals and they're trying to make them climb a tree. It's like a fish, or whatever?

Rebecca Barry 44:26

Yes, I do know what she's talking about. You might remember it, too. It's from a Mathemate video that went viral in 2016.

Prince Ea 44:35

Albert Einstein once said, Everybody's a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.

Rebecca Barry 44:47

The video features an impassioned young black lawyer speaking on behalf of a neurodiverse and culturally diverse group of students, accusing the personification of Education who appears as a tall, older white man with a gray ponytail and a smug expression on his face, and holding education accountable for treating each student, like a factory worker, it came out about a month before the 2016 election. And I think in the years immediately afterwards, shape a lot of the discourse around equity in education, and the ways in which schools and teachers were said to be failing students, the message of the video was meant to be quite straightforward. Some students are fish. And if you ask a fish to climb a tree, it's not going to be able to perform what you're looking for. You have to meet students where they're at, given the kind of challenges that they can eventually grow into, not ones that are going to be so stymieing that they'll never make it past and be told by society that the worthless. Here's Steph's take on it.

Steph 45:45

It's like everybody can't be the same. But like, haven't we kind of gone full circle where we're expecting everyone to be the same emotionally and like, "Oh, you can do this. It's okay, everybody can do it." And we're like giving hugs and stuff. It's like we've kind of swung in a weird direction of... Haven't we tried to say that not everybody can do the thing? Because somebody's a fish and somebody's a... gerbil?

Rebecca Barry 46:05

And I think I get what she's trying to say here. The video is advocating that we accommodate for and adjust for students, neurodiversity, cultural diversity, language, race, gender, orientation, cognitive ability, physical ability, but that in a way, it's still advocating that we end up in a kind of factory setting standardized version, emotionally. We expect everybody to be cookie cutter when it comes to happiness. What would it be like if we lived in a world that respected a student's emotional diversity? Could we even conceive of that? So aside from this topic, a major one that came up for these teachers was the issue of technology, and how it's impacting students, both academically and socially. So what's interesting about this thread is that the more they talk about it, the more they start to feel the weight of the load that's on student shoulders these days. And it piles on it piles on until stuff comes to the conclusion that we shouldn't be asking anything of students these days, given all the other pressures they have in society.

Steph 47:03

Finding that balance is another aspect of what we're supposed to do as teachers is teach them how to gain some sort of balance in their life. We are trying to do this, but at the same time by saying, here's another thing you got to do... It's putting more stuff on the teacher. And the kids, like we've said, are getting more stuff put on them. So like, maybe it's time to just kind of take a breather. Chill out. Stop assigning homework every night.

Sarah 47:29

Exactly. Even though we're trying to take that over and help make them be better, that more balanced, but knowing that when they get home, it's going to be something entirely different. You know, "Yeah, okay, I will try to not get upset about that. I'll try to be balanced between these two things and not check my phone, so I don't get upset."

Rebecca Barry 47:48

What's interesting about this moment is that Sarah is pointing to the internet and social media and phones as a site where students are deriving most of their anxiety. I think she's right about that. But back when I was getting my teacher education, they placed a lot of emphasis on making sure that your classroom was not the place of intensity that was going to give students these anxiety attacks.

Richard Lavoie 48:08

those people will have the opportunity to walk for a mile in the shoes of the learning disabled child, and see firsthand the frustration, anxiety and tension that those children experience in school every day.

Rebecca Barry 48:19

This is a video featuring educator Richard Lavoie, in which he's attempting to simulate for parents, special education teachers and other stakeholders in the life of learning disabled children, what it's like to be somebody who has a cognitive disability in a modern day classroom. He makes the environment as stressful as possible.

Richard Lavoie 48:37

What's it say on the front of the booklet, uh, Kip? [F.A.T. City.] What's it stand for Carolyn? [Silence] What does it *stand* for, Carolyn? [I don't know.] What does it s—It says at the bottom of the book! What's it stand for, Maria? [Frustration, Anxiety, and Tension.] What does it say in the first page Carol? [Silence] The *first* page, Carol! Earth to Carol, come in please.

Rebecca Barry 48:53

Carol is identified as the parent of a child with a learning disability.

Richard Lavoie 48:56

Raise your hand if you thought that was funny. Yeah, everybody likes that. Except who? Except Carol. Anytime you was a teacher or a parent decide to use sarcasm with kids understand that you created a victim. Now, that little throwaway line that I threw at Carol, I will forget within five minutes, you will forget within five minutes, but it's very likely to stay with Carol for the rest of the day.

Rebecca Barry 49:16

And these days, largely, I think teachers have eradicated this old culture of what the classroom looked like high stress, high intensity could be called in any moment. That was definitely something that was de-emphasized in the way that I was taught to be a teacher. But I think Sarah's point is that this environment—high stress, high intensity, social pressures to be liked—this has moved to the circuit of the social media platform and the Internet, and is unavoidable for students to be bothered by it, to think about it all day, just as they would have thought about being bullied by a teacher in front of their peers. The peer environment that we are meant to be overseeing and meant to be preparing students for is one that's no longer visible to us.

Steph 49:56

We didn't have this whole idea that like somebody was watching us all the time. Because whatever I just posted, somebody's watching it all the time and I need to know what they think about it.

Rebecca Barry 50:06

And so here's where that unbridgeable gap with Imagine other comes into play. How can we really understand what the students are going through? We can't see it. We can't witness it for ourselves. It's not surprising to me that several of these teachers are exhibiting symptoms of Feel distress, not in a way that we feel we know how to help students overcome their own stress, but in a way that simply piles on and snowballs what already exists in our own anxieties about how we're doing as teachers and whether we're able to do our job properly. So at this point, Sarah shared that a student had approached her recently, expressing concern that if he missed a single day of school to attend a grandparent's funeral, it would cause him to fall so far behind in his AP classes that his teachers would not let him catch up. As a group, they try to reconcile: how do they react to this?

Steph 50:51

Well, so like, it's hard to pinpoint. Is this happening because of an outside thing? Are there actually people, adults in this person's life that are saying like, "Oh, you're not doing good enough?" Or "That's not an excuse." Who is saying that to this child? Is anyone saying that is?

Melissa 51:07

Is he just projecting? Yeah, because of the anxiety? And like, Oh, of course, I'm gonna be told that I wasn't doing enough.

Rebecca Barry 51:13

Let's take a moment then to revisit this earlier quote from Melissa.

Melissa 51:17

Well, it's so bizarre because all we we all just said like we're being human, empathetic, more than we're being teachers even. But yet that kids still doesn't feel like his teachers are being human and empathetic.

Rebecca Barry 51:27

I hear what she's saying. Empathy alone, it's not working. Where's the disruption? Where's the part where you shake up the status quo in the student's life?

Sarah 51:37

Education has changed so much, and what we expect of these little children's brains. But what have we changed for their emotional or mental capacity to deal with those things?

Steph 51:46

We are in English class of particular, asking them to have these deep analyses of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example. What do you think that means for society, like their frickin' 14. That's what they probably don't know much about society, because they're just small, tiny, little eighth grade children last year, you know what I mean? They don't care. They're worried about themselves. Puberty's happening, things are gross and weird. And we're trying to ask them like, "Well, how do we think this impacts all of society?"

Rebecca Barry 52:16

Notice that despite Steph's earlier criticism of the "Fish can't climb trees" video, she kind of seems to be subscribing to the idea here. Ninth graders can't analyze society. So why are we even asking them to?

Steph 52:28

It's like they don't even know, example from the other day, they don't even know that frickin' Africa is a continent. So how are they going to discuss all of society and analyze these things, and then put it into a nice academic paragraph for us?

Rebecca Barry 52:42

What she's referencing is a hot topic at our school. A lot of students came in from ninth grade to 10th grade, which I would teach, and they had never written an essay before. So here, she's referencing, how can we ask them to even write a single paragraph for us? And I hear that, and I can't help but think that this is a great example of Imagine other spiraling into a feeling of distress that is paralyzing, inhibiting, incapacitating.

Andrea 53:08

And I think the fact that we're having the conversation means if the kids are looking to us as role models of like, how to live balance and less anxiety and responsibility. I'm sure that their parents are feeling the same way. How do we make it happen as a team?

Rebecca Barry 53:27

It's no secret that we're looking for change and today's education system. Teachers are leaving the profession in droves. A disheartening number of students say they're getting nothing out of the experience. Parents aren't happy with the education their kids are receiving. Well, here's a conclusion I've come to regarding the work of change: Change first. As in, you have to be the one who's first to change. My cohort of English Master's students received a piece of advice in a pedagogy seminar last year, that no one is really open to changing their worldview, until their present experience of life has been disrupted in some way. What this made me think of when I listen back to these interviews is that Cheryl, who after 38 years of teaching still has an upbeat attitude about the profession seems to have internalized this instinct for disruptive compassion that she extends to herself before applying it to others. She changes first, every time. I have a story about Cheryl, by the way. We shared a student in my first two years of the school. The student had been a promising freshman and sophomore interested in the military with knack for computer science. Her grades started to fall off in her junior year and by senior she was really struggling with homework, with sleep, eating properly, making plans for her future. Still, I couldn't help but be amazed when, in an after school tutoring session with absolutely no prompting for me, she proudly rattle off an explanation of all 27 amendments to the United States Constitution, which Cheryl had required her class to learn using Ciceronian memorization techniques. You might have heard of this. The idea is to pick objects around the room where you'll be delivering your oral address—or, if you're not a Roman statesman, taking your civics test—and associate them with different pieces of what it is you're trying to memorize. So maybe desk lamp 19th Amendment right to vote regardless of sex. It was kind of remarkable. And the fact that the student had stepped up in Cheryl's class in that way, after struggling with so many other aspects of being a student, and I guess what people call being a human, it made me really happy. And watching the pride and confidence and sense of accomplishment that the student had and being able to perform this feat... I think she has some things to really be proud of. And it made me think that Cheryl has to be doing something right, not only by her students, but by herself. I'll let today's guests have the final few words. And, in true representation of our conversation today, we've got one that's fairly optimistic, one that's somewhat pessimistic, and one that's somewhere in the middle. A reminder of teachers' everyday needs, if nothing else.

Cheryl 56:10

The more educated you are, the better parent you're going to be. And it's the most important job you will ever do in your life. Because you're responsible for bringing another human being and turning them

loose on the world. turn loose a good kid, a good person. And we've got to teach tolerance, but we've got to show it. You can't just say the words. You can't just say the words.

Roger 56:29

I think it kind of parallels are follows the general coarseness that's kind of developed in our society, the fact that people are nice to each other. I think it all kind of ties together. Somewhere around the turn of the century, we kind of lost the idea of what it is to be a good human to other humans in this country. And I think we're paying for it now.

Rebecca Barry 56:49

Knowing everything that the students have to worry about and everything they've got coming in their lives, what do you think the world of teaching will be like when your current students become teachers themselves?

Melissa 56:59

I think it's going to come back around. I'm not worried. My oral comm class, they're there because they want to talk and communicate with other human beings. I think we're gonna be okay. I think they're tired of going on Instagram all the time. I think they're tired of Snapchats I think they're tired of checking their phone and hoping their friends texted them back. I didn't recognize the difference between privilege and not when I was in high school. I think kids are recognizing it now.

Sarah 57:21

And it might be one of the shifts in education because we're explicitly teaching it.

Melissa 57:25

And I think they will go into the communities and try and help. I do.

Steph 57:28

Sounds like we're fixing the world.

Melissa 57:30

Turns out. Okay, I'm hungry. I don't know about...

Rebecca Barry 57:40

Well, that's all for episode one. As a quick epilogue, Cheryl retired from teaching seven months after speaking with me in the spring of 2020. Roger followed a year later retiring in the spring of 2021. Steph, Sarah and Melissa are all still employed as teachers at the school. Andrea now works as a business development representative for an education organization. Many thanks are in order for today's episode. It's been four years in the making and I'm grateful to everyone who helped me get the resources I needed to make this a reality. Thanks to the six teachers you heard on today's episode for their time and openness, my podcasting mentors Roberto Armengol and Meggan Cashwell, for their guidance, my thesis advisor Marlon Ross and our department's Director of Graduate Studies, Brad Pasanek, for the support, and of course my very patient, loving and helpful husband, family and friends. Music on today's episode includes Wweeter than Dreaming by Yestalgia, Somber by Calismo, A

Contrite Spirit and Renewal by The David Roy Collective, and Rising Tide by C.K. Martin. News clips and other sound bites featured come from NPR's The 1A, The New York Times, and the YouTube channels run by Jennifer Clearwaters, Daniel Simons, Mathemate videos [edit: original credit Prince Ea] and Everywhere Psychology. For episode two, I'll be hoping to cover leveling and the perspective that a math teacher, an English teacher and a special education teacher have on this idea of breaking up students by ability level in classes. I am also looking for student voices to be a part of this project. If you are a current high school or college student and heard this program and have something to say about it. I would love to hear from you. Please check out the show notes for means of contacting me to set up an interview.