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Michelle Cotrelle-Williams

“Feeling like they can never be trusted from the student perspective really kind of chops away their feelings of self-worth”

The Ten-minute Teacher podcast with Vicki Davis. Every week day you'll learn powerful practical ways to be a more remarkable teacher today.

VICKI: Happy Motivational Monday, today we're talking to Michelle Cottrell-Williams @WakeHistory an educator from Virginia. Now, Michelle, you are passionate about vulnerability in the classroom. Okay, that kind of scares me, explain.

MICHELLE: Well, I like to start off the year teaching my students that vulnerability actually feels really scary, looks really brave to everyone else. And so we practice vulnerability with each other. So that throughout the year we could have courageous conversations and feel safe in the classroom together as we're trying to learn about ourselves and the world around us.

VICKI: There's so much to unpack here. Now, first of all, how do you define vulnerability with your student?

MICHELLE: Vulnerability, I think, is anything that makes you feel like you're kind of taking of the layers, like you're exposing yourself to get hurt, which of course sounds really scary. The way that we start every year – I introduced Brené Brown to them who I love and her work has definitely improved my teaching and my philosophy towards my students a lot.

Editor's Note: Three of the most important works of Brene Brown include:

- Ted Talk, The power of Vulnerability - https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability
- The Gifts of Imperfection (her first book, while not as popular introduces the concepts of vulnerability) <http://amzn.to/2osZDTh>
- Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead <http://amzn.to/2nw6feK>

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All right, so I introduced her to them and we talked about the differences between the feelings of guilt, the feeling of embarrassment, feeling humiliated and then shame. And we discuss ways – because these are high school students so they've had a lot of experience with teachers and lot of different kind of teachers. And we talk about way that sometimes their teachers use humiliation

and shame as kind of a classroom management tool and how that doesn't work the way that they want it to.

And the students love that I recognize this and I'm willing to talk about it. So that kind of opens them up right from the beginning.

VICKI: Does this cause any consternation or problems with colleagues?

MICHELLE: I have found in my experience that in my classroom we're talking about things that they feel like really, really matters, they don't tell other adults. So no, I've never seen it. We don't use names. I mean, sometimes students will tell me, "Miss, so and so said this" and "What do you think that means?"

But I always to talk to the students also about how their teachers are trying to do what's best for their kids that were all coming from a really good place. And we feel like we're doing everything that we can to make them better. So it's not on purpose, teachers aren't trying to shame their students, they're not trying to manipulate their emotions.

And so we talk about those perspectives as well.

VICKI: Okay, Michelle, since it is Motivational Monday, what do you think the biggest thing teachers do to humiliate or shame kids?

MICHELLE: Oh gosh. I think one of the big things that we don't really think about is not believing a student, not giving them the benefit of the doubt. They come in 30 seconds late or they say they have to go to the clinic or they forgot their homework.

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That we immediately jump to kind of accusing them of being up to something and not just believing them. I think that happens because of past experiences with other students but feeling like they can never be trusted from the student perspective really kind of chips away their feelings of self-worth.

VICKI: You know that's so hard because – I mean, and when I mess up I will admit to kids, "Okay, I messed up or I misjudged you" because sometimes we're so rushed and we make snap judgments and we're just totally wrong. But, you know, sometimes – my friend Kevin Honeycutt <http://www.coolcatteacher.com/kevin-honeycutt-inspires-us-reach-troubled-kids-poverty-mondaymotivation/> says you have to re-believe in a child because they have let you down so many times.

MICHELLE: Yes, that's a tough one to respond to. I really try for my own side to begin the year talking openly about this stuff with the students. So when we are defining these terms and talking about what is shame, how does that feel, I also tell them about how the best way to combat shame is by being vulnerable? And we practice that in the classroom, I teach them this poetry method called *Just Because Poems*. http://writingfix.com/Literature_Prompts/Lord_of_Flies4.htm Some YouTube videos, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kj6_qBWM3w

there plenty online that you can look up. But basically we identify our own identities, things that matter to us. And then stereotypes that are often associated with parts of our identity and we used those stereotypes to write poetry.

So let's say I'm a woman and there are plenty of stereotypes that go with being a girl. So my poem might be just because I'm a girl doesn't mean – and then you identify some other stereotypes. Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I cry all the time, it doesn't mean I love wearing pink, it doesn't mean I go gaga over every boy I see. I am strong.

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And we write three to four of these stanzas and then we stand up and we share them with each other. And this is in the first two weeks of school. And I write my own as well and stand up with them and share. And it's so powerful for breaking down those walls between us. And the rest of the year they don't seem to want to lose my trust, if that makes sense.

VICKI: So Michelle, if you were writing a *Just Because* right now, just because I'm an older teacher doesn't mean I'm what?

MICHELLE: Doesn't mean I know everything,
Doesn't mean I think I'm better than you,
Doesn't mean I've got it all together.
I am still learning.

VICKI: I love that. Is that one you've already written or did you just write it on the spot?

MICHELLE: It's kind of a compilation of ones I've written before, I guess. But it was kind of on the spot. *VICKI DAVIS @COOLCATTEACHER*

VICKI: Awesome. So Michelle, as we wrap up, how can we as teachers be vulnerable in front our students without losing credibility?

MICHELLE: I think this is especially hard for new teachers because you already feel like you're faking it. And so you want to put forward this image of having it all together and being in control. And I think that self-awareness and that reminder that it's okay if we don't always have it all together and being able to share that with the students because it teaches them that they don't have to be perfect either. So self-awareness is a huge piece. And on those days, when you feel like I don't have a lesson plan ready, I spilled coffee all over myself, whatever.

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When you don't have it together tell them, "Hey guys, I'm having a really bad day, can you help me out?" The kids eat that up, they totally respond to that because when they feel that you care about them and respect them when they

come in with a tough day they give that back to you tenfold. So I think just remembering that and being willing to not fake it when you feel like you can't.

And when you do mess up, because we do, we yell at a kid, we pushed them aside or whatever, apologize, go back. Don't pretend like it didn't happen.

VICKI: Well, remarkable teachers, there's so many things that we've learned and I just want to tell you

Just because I host the show does not mean I'm a perfect teacher.

It does not mean that I don't have bad days when I wonder why on earth am I teaching.

It does not mean that I have it all together either.

But I never ever want to stop trying to be remarkable and trying to give students remarkable experiences that are game-changers for their life.

And I do think that vulnerability and what Michelle has taught us today is an important part of not just being a good teacher but being a remarkable teacher.

MICHELLE: I love it. Thank you for sharing that poem. That was really, really nice.

VICKI: Hello remarkable teachers, I have a bi-weekly newsletter just for you. You'll get lesson plans, ideas and lot of freebies I don't share anywhere else. You can sign up by text message if you're here in the United States by texting Coolcat to 444999. That's C-O-O-L-C-A-T, all one word, 444999 and you'll but put on my email list. Now, if you're not in the U.S, you can go to coolcatteacher.com/newsletter. Now, when you sign up I have a super handout of my 200-plus favorite Ed tech tools that you can download and start exploring.

VICKI DAVIS @COOLCATTEACHER

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