

Ep #158: The Blessing of 2020



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 158.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. A not-so-typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello, my empowered leaders and Happy New Year. Happy 2021. Are you thrilled? Here we are. We are on the other side of 2020. Happy New Year. I hope your break was amazing. I'm recording this podcast on December 14th. So, for me, it's still a little bit before the actual break. But I know that I personally am going to have an amazing time because I've already decided to.

I've been working really hard to wrap up my work for 2020 so that I can be present with my husband and my son over the holidays and I've planned how I'm going to spend that time off so I am not tempted to let work creep into my calendar.

We're in full shutdown here in California through January 4th. So, our plans are going to include lots of baking and playing games, watching movies. We have this whole thing; we have a whole checklist of movies that we watch every single year. We're just holiday movie buffs, I guess, that way.

So, Alex brings his movie ideas and we have ours and we try to search for new movies every year. So, we love, love doing that. And we love to take walks and get out, get some fresh air, or we go out and just do a drive and look for the holiday lights. It's so much fun.

So, I promised myself that I was going to get back into playing piano over the holidays. I haven't practiced my piano for years; I'm going to be really

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honest. So, I feel like I'm starting from scratch, I'm starting over. But that's okay.

I want to expose myself to the work of learning something new, to always be in a state of learning something new. So, one of the things we're going to try and tackle this season is learning to make homemade croissants. Because I'm not big into baking bread type things. I don't really even eat flour or sugar. But for fun, I want to try and tackle some kind of bread-making. I don't know why. Just because. Because it's fun and I want to try and learn something new and I want to fail at it and try again.

I like exposing myself to having to learn something new because I like observing how my brain gets fussy when it's not good at something and it wants to throw a tantrum, it wants to quit, it wants it to be easy right away. And doing this and actively putting myself into, like, learning mode and new situations, it helps me coach myself through it so it practices the art of being new, the art of things being hard, the art of wanting – the urge of wanting to do it right the first time. And the not doing it, totally failing and falling on my face.

But I really get to experience all of the emotions that come with learning and practicing and not being good and failing and avoiding, all the things, all the emotions. So, I am promising myself to practice 20 minutes a day on the piano and I'm going to just focus on one song. If I can practice one song for 20 minutes, something simple, something that's challenging enough but that I can conquer in a couple of weeks' time. I'm just playing around with it.

So, notice if you are having some fun with trying things just for the fun of it, not because you need to be perfect at it, not because you need to be the content expert on it, but just because you want to for fun. Give it a try.

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I want to start off the year by discussing what I believe has been a real blessing of 2020. I'm going to share a true story with you, basically the whole podcast is this story that actually took place a few weeks ago and how it inspired a conversation on what we've been sold in education as the vision of education, as the goal of education. And how that belief in that goal not only prevents us from achieving it, it actually perpetuates what we view as the problem, or the obstacle that's in the way of the goal.

So, just to break that down, what I've been noticing and what I've noticed through this experience I had was that what we think the goal of education is isn't serving us. When we believe that this is the goal of education and we're striving for that goal, we're actually creating more obstacles and we're actually perpetuating the belief of what the problems in education are and ultimately it prevents us from actually achieving what we think the goal is.

So, let me just tell you the story. This will all make sense in a minute. I was on social media and I read a post that had been shared on the social media platform by an educator. So, she or he was sharing this post, you know. You can click share and send it to your post and then other people see it.

So, this person shared this post and I saw it and I'm going to read the post to you verbatim. This is what the post that she shared – I think it was a female that shared it, to be honest I can't remember.

But the quote said, "The fact that we keep buying the "kids are falling behind academically" narrative of this pandemic is the grossest example of how we have allowed a corrupt version of capitalism to alter our basic moral compass. Kids are only falling behind on a scale the adults are defining for them, a scale determined by test scores and achievement measures that were designed decades ago to sort kids by their potential future impact on the economy. This is a system designed to uplift the white

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and the wealthy, and when applied in a pandemic, it achieves its purpose with terrifying precision, filtering those with the most resources straight to the top.

“Kids are only falling behind if we choose to measure them on scales that have been broken for decades and we refuse to change them even during a pandemic in which thousands of their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles are dying every day. Kids aren’t falling behind. Kids are adapting. They are learning new skills. They are overcoming. Kids are surviving a pandemic that has shaken their world before they fully understood it. Adults who say they care about them need to put away their measurement tools and show them some love and compassion.”

So, the author of this post, I don’t even know. And, to be fair, the person who shared it, I don’t personally know. So, I just saw this in a feed and, of course, because I’m an educator and I’m in education, education comments are in my feed quite often.

Now, for those of you who have followed me for a while know that I believe that behind is a myth. It’s a mental construct that we humans have created with milestones that were invented by people, or those in a position of power, status, influence, and wealth.

Grade levels and standards and curriculums and tests were invented so we could say who is ahead and who is behind. The goal of creating standards and curriculums and tests are for the purpose of labeling students as ahead, on point, on grade level, or behind, or far below. We used to have this above basic, below basic, on grade level, whatever they were.

But the reason we do that is to categorize and label children. And I understand, we did this with the intent of knowing for ourselves, having some kind of measurement so that kids understood where they were in

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relation to other people and that teachers understood where they were in relation to other people and that it helped us define how we navigate our instruction.

However, what we've made the term behind mean has gravely impacted student psyche, how students think about themselves, what they believe about themselves, who they think they are and what they're capable of. And the same is true for teachers.

We've created this system where if you're not ahead, you're behind. And if you're behind, that's a bad thing. You do not want to be behind. And if you are behind, you better figure out how not to be behind. We have created a system where grade levels and standards and testing and all of that has created this construct of behind.

But if you strip all of that away, what does being behind mean? What does it actually mean for me as a human, for you as a teacher, for you as a school leader, for that student? What does behind do? How does thinking, "I'm behind," help a child learn? How does feeling that you're behind as a teacher or a school or a district, how does it help us not be behind? What does behind really mean? What are we behind? Who are we behind?

When you strip down education from all of its structures and systems and measurements, we simply get down to a bunch of young humans learning to navigate the world and a group of veteran humans trying to help them figure it out. That's it.

But what the human brain does is that it adds layers and layers of meaning and measurements to prove our thoughts true. When we believe that we're behind or we believe that students are behind, we generate systems to collect information and evidence that prove that, yes indeed, we are in fact behind. See, the evidence proves it. We're behind.

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Kids are behind, teachers are behind, schools are behind. Our brains are constantly looking to confirm our belief that children and education is behind. So, with that in mind, with the intention of that thought in mind, I replied to that shared post with this message. This is quoting myself.

“Absolutely. I’ve been saying this for years. We change this mindset by deciding as educators to proactively change how we’re thinking about teaching and learning. The false narrative that students are behind, teachers are behind, and schools are behind serves nobody. Behind is a myth. Behind what? The behind myth was created by adults for adults. Now that we see how it’s not serving students, staff, or families, we must have the courage to choose a more evolved mindset.

“The good news is that we also have the power to create the new story. If we created the old story, we can create the new story; a belief system that isn’t based on what kids aren’t doing, but instead on what they are doing. One that encourages lots of failures, because failure is the path to success. One that focuses on individual progress instead of comparing and despairing.

“If we helped students focus on their future instead of always looking at the past, perhaps they would be more inspired to continue moving themselves forward, even when things are hard. There is so much possibility in our industry and it begins with deciding to challenge what we currently believe about education and level up what we believe is possible.”

That’s what I wrote. I posted this in agreement with the original post and with the idea that kids falling behind is based on an evaluation system that doesn’t serve students. It doesn’t improve test scores. And it doesn’t improve lives. The good news is, since humans created the whole behind concept, we can un-create it.

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We can stop focusing on what kids aren't doing and what's not working and how they're behind and focus on what they are accomplishing. And the way that we do this is by questioning what we believe is absolute truth in education and by exploring what we believe is possible.

Now, another person responded to my post with a statement. I want to preface this by saying, when I posted it, I anticipated some feedback and I openly welcome constructive feedback, criticism, questioning. I'm in for all of it. Let's have a debate. Let's have a discussion. Let's have a conversation. That's what I want. I want us to open our thoughts and expose the ideas that we currently believe and perhaps question that they might not serve us or be true, as true as we think they are.

So, with that in mind, another person responded to my post with this statement. And I quote, "You have not been saying this for years..." insert emoji with tears streaming down in laughter, "Anyways... they are falling behind. Millions of other students, especially wealthy students in private schools that are OPEN are bypassing public school students in knowledge and future earnings. We've known this for years with loads of data that online learning is the absolute worst method available.

"Now that we've been forced to do it, we're trying to find reasons to say kids aren't falling behind, compared to their learning curve of the years that they were in class..." emoji with eyes rolling.

Now, I have to be honest here, I was a little taken aback at first by the emojis. But in fact, I really did appreciate this person's comment, aside from him telling me that I haven't thought about this for years, because the person doesn't know me at all, and rolling his eyes at me.

But that's the human response, is to be like, "Hey, wait a minute, you don't know me. What are you saying this for?" But when I thought about it, I

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quickly came to appreciate his comments because it made me think more deeply about what falling behind actually means and where am I not seeing something, where could I be wrong? What thoughts could I be thinking that are preventing me from seeing a bigger picture here.

So, I started wondering, what really is the goal of education? What is the goal? Do we even know the goal? Is the goal that all students achieve at or above grade level? Is it that 100% of students graduate from high school? Is it the number of college acceptance letters that are sent out? Is it college graduation? Is it getting kids to have a degree or work degrees? Or do we get into income levels or work titles or work status?

How do we measure our educational system's success? And how do we measure our own success as educators? What is the goal? What's the end goal here?

What I have come to notice is that different people have different opinions on the ed goal, on the actual goal of education. No wonder we feel confused and overwhelmed when we don't know the goal we're trying to reach.

Some educators, and I think many educators – and I think I even believed this at one point. Some educators do believe that the goal of education is to close the achievement gap. So, is the goal for all children to pass the test and score proficient, regardless of race, religion, location, community, school resources, all of the variables that take place in life? Is that the goal that we create a system where there is no gap?

Because my understanding of the gap is the kids who are proficient versus the kids who aren't, and wanting to get the kids who aren't up to proficiency. So, if we were to get all kids to proficiency per this test, or this proficiency level, will we have accomplished the goal of education?

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The achievement gap and closing the achievement gap is one of the primary ways that we are evaluated and judged as educators. We think that if we accomplish his goal, all students are going to have equal access to the career and the lifestyle they desire. This is kind of the goal behind the goal, right?

So, the goal is to close the achievement gap and the reason we want to close the achievement gap is because we think that students will then finally all have equal access to the career and lifestyle that they desire because we make it mean that if they're proficient and if they pass the test, they will have the necessary skills and knowledge to go on to either go to college and get a degree or go to trade school, basically land the job they want, make the money they want, and that these milestones are what equate to success.

So, what we're doing is we're equating closing the gap, the achievement gap, with equal opportunity and equal success for students and us as educators. Believing this has us, as educators, focused on closing that gap. We focus on the gap. And there's lots of pressure and an urge as educators to bring up those scores and inspire students to achieve more and work harder so we can close the gap, they can close the gap.

So, all those students who we label behind grade level, we push them harder so that they can achieve scores at grade level, which will make us feel successful, like we're doing our job correctly, and that students are achieving, so they're going to feel better if they're on grade level. Then, if that happens, then we think, "Okay, then there will no longer be behind students. There won't be anybody behind. Because everybody will be achieving at or above grade level, which means everybody has equal access."

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But meanwhile, think about this. The students that we label as ahead, so the ones who are already proficient and above, those students, what happens with them? Well, they're expected to maintain their progress. Or better yet, score even higher. Because we know what that means. It's funny. We don't want to have an achievement gap, but we want our at and above grade level students to keep performing because the higher their scores, the better our school looks, the more we feel successful as educators when our students are achieving higher and higher.

Do you see what's happening here? So, this makes the district and the school look amazing because this would all mean everybody's performing proficiently. We're all doing our job. Great work, teachers. Great work, school leaders. Great work, students. Everybody is on or above grade level.

But it leaves us chasing our tail because what's the reality of what happens? Because now the kids who worked their buns off and labeled as behind, even though they made significant progress, and maybe they even scored proficient on the test, they're still behind the kids who are ahead because those kids had to maintain or grow in order for us to be considered proficient and to maintain progress. Those kids need to advance as well.

So, we've got this chronic game of catch-up because somebody's got to be behind and somebody's got to be ahead. Now, hear me out. I am not saying that we shouldn't want to close the gap because, for education, the gap means so much more than just test scores or proficiency or getting a California Distinguished School award, right, for having this whatever percentage of proficient children.

What we know as educators, the deeper meaning behind the achievement gap and test scores and proficiency and college and all of that, is about breaking cycles of poverty and prejudice and inequity. What I want to point

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out here is that closing the gap for just the sake of closing the gap is not what guarantees students with less resources a better life.

It is a part of the equation, but it isn't the only part of the equation. It's not the full solution. What I am saying is that continuing to believe that the label of being ahead equates to success also means that someone will always have to be behind. Because in order to be ahead of somebody, someone must be behind you.

This is an all or none mentality. It's a win-lose situation. The ahead student wins. The behind student fails. Our job as educators to evolve education requires us to reframe how we measure students and, more importantly, what we make that measurement mean.

If we have multiple measures of success, then kids have more opportunities to experience wins and educators have more input and information to help support those students in achieving not just one type of result, but a culmination of different results that ultimately can create the success that that student desires for themselves.

Here's another thought about ahead and behind, is that there's no end to it. In the ahead-behind game of life, someone is always ahead of us and someone is always behind us. We're looking at professional and personal success as a rank order. But if you think about life, as adults, there's always somebody with more money or more fame or a bigger title or more power or a bigger house or more success.

There's always somebody with less money and less fame and less fortune and less status and less things. The way that our society views ahead and behind puts us in a rank order, like, in a line, one, two, three, four, five, all the way up to millions in terms of what people have and what people don't.

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I invite us, as school leaders, to challenge the notion of ahead and behind and what we make that mean. There is no one way to measure success. And yes, there will always be competition and comparison in the world. It's a part of the human mind to compete and to compare.

And we can acknowledge that our brain's default mode is to slip into fight or flight and to push ourselves to evolve this default mode into expanding beyond the belief that being ahead is better than being behind.

I think of it this way. My parents had less money than me, had less title, had less community status. They had blue collar jobs. They lived kind of a blue-collar middle-class life in the middle of Iowa. I have on the other hand gone to college. I'm the first person in my family to go to college. I have my Bachelor's degree. I have my Master's degree. I have my administrative credential. I have made more money than they have ever made in their life. I've had more experiences. But does it mean I'm more successful? Does it mean my life is more important or more valuable or more worthy than theirs? Absolutely not.

So, when we label students and we believe that when they're behind life is bad, and when you're ahead, life is all good, do you see the all or none mentality thinking there?

Every single child, every single student we serve is going to experience 50-50. Yes, we want to look at racial disparities, social injustices, poverty cycles, prejudice, and inequities across the board. Believe me, I am fully aware, to the best of my knowledge I'm aware that we have a lot of work to do in that area. But when we label those things and kind of hide behind this myth of behind and ahead is going to make all the difference, that is where I want us to question ourselves as teachers and educators.

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Is one kid better because he gets all As? Is another kid's life behind because he gets all Bs? We walk a fine line between helping students achieve the goals they want and predetermining for them what we want for them or what we think they want. And then we place judgment on them if they don't cross the finish line that we, as the adults in their lives, believe that they should cross.

What I want to offer is that the blessing of 2020 has been to shed light on the imperfections of an imperfect educational system. Of course it's imperfect. It was created by humans, and we are imperfect.

And I love that 2020 has invited us to acknowledge our belief in the myth of behind and see how it is not serving those that we label as behind. Yes, for some kids, telling them that they're behind does motivate them into actions that result in higher achievement. But for the most part, as we've seen, most kids who get labeled as behind, where do they stay? Behind.

The imperfections and inequalities in education have always been there. And we've been allowed to avoid them, avoid looking at them as part of our mission of closing the gap. Because closing the gap sufficed as the solution to the imperfections and the inequalities.

If closing the gap – and what I mean by that is closing test scores and other academic measurement gaps, if there wasn't a gap, if everybody was on the same playing field, if we created that result and it was no longer the goal and we couldn't continue to profess that students shouldn't be ahead or behind some data curve, then what would the goal of education become?

And also, I want to say that I don't believe the goal is to extinguish competition and comparison. That would be like saying extinguish the human brain. We are wired for competition and comparison. I don't say this

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to buffer children or protect them from ever feeling that they're in competition or that they're being compared.

I'm saying, we need to question and evolve what we make competition and comparison mean about ourselves, our worthiness, our capability in our own possibility and in our own dreams, on our own goals. When we look at competition and we make it mean that losing or being behind or being compared is the worst-case scenario for a student, we don't allow for students to be behind without pressure or judgment.

We have a very low tolerance as adults for allowing students to fail, especially fail multiple times until they can figure something out, and allowing ourselves and our students to feel behind. We don't like the feeling of behind because we've made it mean that it's something so bad and that we should get out of it as quickly as possible.

We don't let people just be behind and not make that mean something has gone terribly wrong. Behind is not a fact. It's a thought that we think and an emotion that we feel based on what we believe that being behind means about us and about our students.

If we can work to adjust the perception of what behind means and neutralize it, it's not bad, it's not good, it just is and we're progressing forward and we're going to fail along the way and that's okay, that's what learning is, when we just neutralize the learning process and not make it mean something so dramatic, then we can change the self-doubt and the discouragement that comes when a test score is lower than another test score.

We personally feel like we are failures when we fail to achieve something, versus saying to ourselves, "We're still learning. We're still trying to figure this out. We're still working on it. We're not there yet. That's okay."

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We all learn at different paces. We all learn different types of content in different ways at different times and at different capacities and in different amounts of time. We all know this. So, pretending that we should cross the line all at the same time and space is not serving students. And I say, why not let 2021 be the year that we finally ask the question and start to answer, what is the true goal of education? And how do we get there?

It's more than closing the gap. And it's more than test scores and curriculum and college entrance exams. And in closing, if you're curious to know how I responded to the fine gentleman who shared his insight with me, I will share the response in my weekly email.

So, if you're not signed up for the Empo-WORD, and you can find that, sign up on my website, and I'll also drop a link in the show notes, I will share the response with you in the newsletter, just for fun.

Alright, guys. This was a big one. This was full of intensity and I hope it has a lot of impact on you because I do believe these conversations need to be had. And I look forward to having them with you. Please, share your thoughts with me. I want to be open. I want to have a conversation. I want to have discourse about this topic.

2020 has been a blessing. It's opened our eyes to so much in education and I value what you think and feel and what you have to contribute to the conversation. So, be sure to reach out and share with me your thoughts about the blessing of 2020. Have an amazing week. I'll talk to you next week. Take care, bye-bye.

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