

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

Hello, empowered principals. Welcome to episode 167.

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.

Angela: Hello and happy Tuesday. Welcome my empowered leaders, and welcome to today's podcast. And this month, we are talking about the value of connection. And with me today, I have a second-time podcast guest. This is Natalie's second time on the podcast.

Natalie Wilson is a previous school teacher, instructional coach, and academic success coach. After years of working wit students, parents, teachers, and administrators, she developed one of the first ever life centers at an elementary school outside of Atlanta.

She's connected art therapy, yoga and mindfulness, and a mentoring program, community parent development program with the school, and she has a focus on mental health being key to students' academic success. You guys, I've had Natalie on the show before. She's so savvy. She's so smart. And what I love about her now is that she has moved out of the academic world as it relates to education formally and she's transitioned into being a confidence coach for single women who are wanting to overcome self-doubt and find love in their lives.

She brings so much value to the podcast and today she is here to talk with us about the value of connecting with our teachers at a very authentic and deep level. Natalie welcome to the podcast.

Natalie: Hi Angela, so excited to be here, excited to be back. Hello to all the empowered leaders out there. Glad to be here.

Angela: Oh, we're so happy to have you back. You know, Natalie reached out. She was on the podcast. And we were talking about talking about how to support students and staff members of color, and especially how to connect with biracial, as you are, Natalie. And we were talking about how to really connect with one another, regardless of the color of our skin. And I am so appreciative of that conversation that you and I had back in April, was it May? It was last spring sometime wasn't it?

Yeah, so this time, Natalie and I reconnected and we started talking about connection and the value that she's providing to many women out there, helping them build their confidence, helping them build connection with themselves. And it really struck a chord with me how her services really align to what we are doing here as school leaders, which is we are trying to build authentic connection with ourselves, with our staff and students, with our families and greater community.

And Natalie, with the services she offers really aligns to that. So, I wanted to bring her back on the show and talk about this. So, Natalie, as a former teacher, specifically as a biracial teacher who struggled to feel connection and struggled to feel like you fit in when you were a student and then going into that role as a teacher, how does feeling connected with your school leader positively impact you as a teacher? And what do you suggest that school leaders can start in terms of helping all members of the community feel authentically welcomed and connected with one another?

Natalie: Great question, and a needed one to discuss. So, you know, as I was thinking about my experience with my administrators in schools, I had the benefit of being in five different schools and four of them were actually,

I had Black principals. So, my leader was not even half of my biracial. So, I'm half white and I'm half Mexican-American.

So, on top of that, I look Asian, so most people think I'm Asian, you know. I'm half Mexican and I'm white. And here I was in a leader from a completely different culture. And as I was thinking about the greatest amount of connection I had with my administrators, it really stemmed from three things, which I also believe are the three things that I work with my single clients on helping them establish connections with themselves and with others. And that goes to feeling secure, feeling valued, and feeling known or understood.

So, constantly, my clients and I work together because what they're really looking for in a relationship, they want a deep, secure relationship. That's what they're really looking for. And ultimately, that's exactly what our staff in schools want too. They want to feel secure, right? They want to feel supported and safe.

And the other thing was feeling valued, that so many times women, that's what they want. They want to feel valued and special by their significant other. And again, that's what our staff members want in the school. They want to feel valued. They want to feel like, when they're gone, they're missed. They want to feel like they're contributing, that they have an important spot in the school.

And then, the last one is to feel known. We all want to feel seen and we all want to feel heard and that's exactly what my clients I work with, what we help them create in their lives. And that's also what the staff members want from their leaders.

So, the leaders I had who helped me feel secure, who helped me feel valued and known were the ones that I connected the most with. And I

want to mention, there was one of them who did an excellent job of creating a safe environment, an excellent job of creating the feeling of value for all our staff members. And I really felt known by her.

But did I agree with everything she did? Not at all. There were so many things that I thought, "Why is she doing this? Why is she doing this?" Especially, you know, once I grew in leadership, I understood so many times leaders have to make decisions that teachers aren't aware of the inside information on it. But as a teacher, you're just thinking, "I don't agree with any of these... What is she doing?"

And I didn't agree with her at all, but I always felt like I had such respect for her and I connected with her because even though I didn't acre with her decisions, I always felt secure, valued, and known by her. And so, I think those three key characteristics and motions are the things that help people both connect with themselves, connect in significant other relationships, and in the soul system.

Angela: I love this so much because it really does start with our own work in terms of what do each of those things mean for us, what does it look like to show value? There's two things going on here, right? There is how you feel about yourself in those areas and then what it looks like for you as a school leader to provide that for another person, but then also there's that delicate balance of being the leader who is offering connection, and then allowing your teachers to opt into that connection.

And I'm assuming – and this probably happens with your clients as well, Natalie, where they are, in building their confidence, they're learning how to be vulnerable. That's part of the package. And this goes for school leaders. Brand new school leaders, in building up confidence, part of that comes from that openness, that willingness to be vulnerable. And you have to kind of tiptoe towards that as you're growing your confidence and your ability to

be open and authentic with other people and connect with somebody at a deeper level.

But there's also putting yourself out there and then allowing those teachers or the community at large to then do kind of their part. There's your part that you're doing as a school leader and their part they're doing as teachers. And teachers, if there's teachers listening to this as well, it goes both ways where, when we're learning to connect with our supervisor, we have to be open and willing to connect with them and receive that connection. And it's kind of a two-way street.

So, Natalie, when you're working with your women on building that confidence level and opening themselves up to being seen and to feeling safe and valued and that they're contributing, all of those components that you mentioned about connection, what are some specific things that especially new school leaders, but even veterans out there listening, what are some specific tangible steps that they might be able to take to just get started?

Natalie: Yeah, so I think ultimately, in order to – because you said it earlier when you said to be vulnerable. And that's the only way that you can be known, or know someone else, is to offer vulnerability. And so, I think what you have to do is realize that if you are allowing yourself to be known and you're kind of showing the authenticity of yourself, what I have my clients do is show up without overthinking.

So, they show up being present. They show up just wanting to be there in the moment and not be in their head thinking about what they should be saying and what the right thing is to say, but to say it with authenticity and with why they are.

And I know that, as leaders, there are so many times where they feel like they have to filter themselves to protect all the laws and all the rules. But I think, as a new school leader, the number one thing that you can do is to offer that idea of, you know, "I don't know all the answers, I'm figuring this out. And I'm here with you trying to handle all this."

You know, thinking about COVID, it's like, we're all in this together. We're building the plane as we fly it. And it's okay to acknowledge that because ultimately you're saying, "Hey, a good leader is going to say, "I'm aware of what's happening. I'm not ignoring it. I'm not trying to ignore the pink elephant in the room. I'm going to own it and offer that, if anyone has any of their own perspective that they can add in..." But just being real. Being present and being real, I would think they're the two number-one things I would say to new principals.

Angela: This is so good or them to hear this. I'm saying this all the time, that I need leaders to really see that the way you build trust with your staff when you're new is to be honest with them. So many leaders are told to fake it until they make it, to be polished and professional all the time, that because you're the school leader you should have it pulled together, and you should know, and that it's your job to solve everybody else's problem.

It kind of feels like that's why you're in the position. But when you can say to somebody, say to a teacher, "I hear you. I can see the struggle. I'm validating the struggle that you're in right now and I don't know how to fix it. I don't have the answers for you. I don't have solutions. Let's talk through, what do you think solutions might be?"

Because a lot of times, teachers actually have some brilliant solutions that we just can't see because we're either new to the position or we're not in their position, seeing it from their angle. So, I think what you're saying is

just that that honesty of, "I'm human. I don't know what's going on here. I don't know how to do this. But we are in this together."

And when I can, in terms of building safety and security for your teachers is like, "Here's what I can offer. I can offer that I've got your back. I'm in this with you. I'm here to listen. I'm here to support in the ways I can. And what supports you do need that you can't get on your own, I will, given my positional authority, try to get those for you."

You can connect with them in that way. Here's how I'm going to create this container of safety for teachers to share with me as a school leader to share with me, as a school leader, even when I don't have all the answers and I can't even get you all of the things that you might need. But I am here for you in this safe space where you can tell me what you need or what's hard without worry that it will have a negative impact on you as a teacher, right?

Natalie: Yes, creating that safe spot is so important because – and the feeling of security, even with themselves as leaders, they have to feel secure in themselves. Because if they don't feel secure in themselves, they're not confident in who they are, it's going to be very hard to create a safe and secure connection with your staff. Meaning being able to make a decision and being okay that the staff doesn't like it being okay to be honest and know that there are going to be people who judge you and disagree with you. Knowing that, like you said, knowing you're not there to be a people pleaser, you know, you're there to show up, be honest, and have open lines of communication. But being honest takes a very secure person. And you are a very secure person. You help create that secure environment for the staff.

Angela: Yes, leaders, I want you to really hear this, that in order to be open and honest with your staff, you have to be secure within yourself. And that

means having your own back. That is principle number one in the Empowered Principal Program. It is aligning to your own leadership values. And you have to do that to ground yourself when you make decisions for your staff, your campus, your team, whatever decisions you're making.

You have to be really grounded in those decisions because you will not please everybody. Everybody will not love every single decision that you make. And you have to love the decision and you have to understand why you made it and even when you can't always share all of the details of why you made that decision, you can reassure people to know, like, "I had to make this decision. There are factors I had to consider that I am not privy to share with you. But I want you to know, I made the decision with the school's best interests in mind and I have our back even when it doesn't seem like I do..." and reassuring people.

But you have to be so grounded. That's a really advanced skill, to be that grounded in your leadership values to the point that when you have to make controversial decisions or decisions that people don't understand and you don't have, especially when it comes to HR issues, or HIPAA laws, there's privacy involved and things that you just can't disclose to other people, you have to be really grounded in who you are as a leader. So, to maintain that container of safety of your staff.

So, they're looking at you like, I think you said this, Natalie, like, "I don't agree with your decision. But I feel safe and I feel respect for and respected by my school leader," because she was grounded and she was able to hold that space basically for other people to feel a little unsettled and her to still stay calm and be like, "I've got you guys even though you don't really know what's going on here."

Natalie: Absolutely. And I think one of the main differences about the principals I had, and I guess people in general, is sometimes people can

assume being confident and secure is arrogance in power. And there is a difference. Confidence in being secure is not the same as having control and power or having the arrogance in yourself and your decisions.

And if you don't mind, I'm going to share a quick story that I had – years ago, a friend of mine and I were riding a horse. We were at some spa resort. They had a couple horses. We decided to take a horse ride. And at the time, I was about to get my Lasik eye surgery. So, I wasn't allowed to wear glasses. So, I had to get on the horse without – I couldn't wear contacts, so I had to get on the horse with my glasses. The glasses kept falling off. So eventually, I took them off. I didn't want them to drop and I stuck them in my pocket.

Well, at that time, I wasn't too familiar with horses. And I jumped on and I thought, "I have to figure out how to be okay with this horse because I have to trust this horse to get me through this ride without seeing." I didn't have great vision.

And I remember just kind of connecting with the horse. I talked to it a little. I got on it. I stroked it gently. I settled in. I got calm on it. I got secure with who I was. And I grabbed the reins loosely. As opposed to my friend, god bless her, who is a control freak and she could see perfectly.

She jumps on the horse. She's a nervous wreck. She keeps pulling the horse everywhere and the horse does not like it. And so, she basically spent the entire ride pulling on the reins of the horse, the horse resisting, then the horse taking off running, scaring her half to death and then her freaking out. And it was just like stop and go, stop and go.

It was a push and pull fight, struggle for her. For me, it was the best ride. It was easy. My horse listened to me. I trusted my horse. He followed the guide. We ended up at the same destination; much different journey. And I

think about that with leaders, that without the connection, it's really just them trying to control.

And they can control their staff because of their position. But it's going to get them there with a lot harder of a journey. There's going to be a lot of resistance. There's going to be a lot of push and pull, you know, people disconnecting, stop and go, stop and go. And it's a lot longer to get where you want to go, as opposed to taking the time to slow down and connect and trust the people that you're working with, valuing them, getting to know them.

And then, that creates a much faster and easier process to get where they want to go because then the staff wants to show up. The staff has less absences. There's less turnover rate. The staff themselves want to have more connections between each other, with their kids, with their students. It's a ripple effect.

And so, I just wanted to kind of highlight that difference between being secure and confident is really different from the control arrogance that sometimes leaders will naturally, fearfully make.

Angela: That is the perfect analogy because what I was thinking about when you were talking was, you personally internally know the difference in your leadership because of the way that it feels when you approach it. So, when you're authentic with connecting with people, it feels more like ease. It feels more like love. It feels more like authenticity.

When you're scared and you're leading out of fear, your brain is going to tell you, get in control, kind of that stiffness. And it's almost like a defensiveness. Like, you're on the defense because you're afraid that you won't get a result or that people won't listen or follow your lead or do what you say. And so, it's like you buckle up and the shield comes up. The

disconnect happens. And then you feel like you're trying to force connection when people don't feel connected to you at all.

But it's because of that, like you said, it might show up as arrogance. It might come across as very aloof or cold or distant. Or it could just be like, people can sniff out the fear. I've had my own horse stories. Like I was freaking out on a horse and the horse took off running, and I'm screaming.

I had the experience your friend had where I was so scared, so afraid. And people and animals can feel that, that energy that you're putting out. So, teachers know when you are leading out of fear versus leading out of love. And I love that story about the two same time, same place, two very different journeys just based on that energetic approach, the difference in that energetic approach. That is really good, Natalie, thank you.

So, I want to ask you about the ripple effect. So, I feel like when we approach a situation, there is the first layer. Principles out there are saying, of course, connection, we're always told, build relationships, connect, connect, connect. They kind of feel like yeah, yeah, yeah, they get that. And they do that. So, they make connections with their teachers on this level. But what is the ripple effect, the deeper results, the deeper outcomes of how it impacts staff?

Like, when you feel connected to a school leader, how does it impact your teaching, like your results, which that is obviously going to impact students, the student climate, the student culture, teacher achievement, student achievement, ultimately the community achievement? How do you see connection from the principal being open and honest and willing to connect with people? What is the deeper value of all of this?

Natalie: As a teacher, I just think of one of my favorite principals who I had the deepest connection with. And he had his own back and he absolutely

had my back. And I think about all the initiatives that I stepped up for and I was able to create because I had a safe, secure environment to create them in.

And even when I was an instructional coach at a school, that educational leader also I had a deep connection with, and so I took my idea of the Life Center for kids and I was able to work with her on it. And I think the deeper connection, one of the ripple effects, is the power of innovation and creativity. And when there's innovation and creativity, there's a drive for success. There is a drive to crate and innovate, meaning being creative and innovative on how you get your students to learn.

So, if one way is not working, you just figure it out and you try again a different way. And that ultimately helps our students achieve more, which at the end of the day, that's what we're all here for, to help our students achieve what they want to.

And so, I see the ripple effect of it being more creativity, more innovation, more desire to support the school, to support the leader's initiatives, like when the principal decides, "Hey guys, this is what we're going to do. Once a month, we're going to be here at night. We're going to be passing out whatever it is." All of a sudden you're like, "Okay." We're on board, you know. We don't know why but because we're connected and we believe in the leader, we're there.

So, it helps support the principal's initiatives and then ultimately it leads down to the trickle effect and the students, there's less turnover there, less absences, and higher student achievement and scores.

Angela: Yes, I mean, you're totally backing up what – I've had interviews this whole month and one of my interviewees, Ben Pugh, who was a principal at an Indian reservation school, and he said, "When they stopped

adding more instructional minutes and making it all about math and science and social studies and language arts and more about deeply connecting with kids, getting them involved in their community and surroundings – they were taking them kayaking. They were taking them on trips where the family members were coming along and doing picnics and barbeques or whatever, you're absolutely right. What happened was people were like, "I'm onboard. I'm all in because it's fun. Because you're not just telling me what to do and how to do it."

There's really this cocreation of learning that's happening. And I also love what you said about that the container to be creative and innovative. Because teachers are afraid to go outside of the box when they feel like they're going to be judged for any failures that might happen. And what it sounds like you're saying is that when teachers feel really connected to their principals, they feel safe enough to try something new and to be willing to fail at it and then just keep trying something new.

Nothing's gone wrong. We're just going to keep at it and try different things. And they have the space to be more creative, which I think when you're feeling that level of comfort, the creativity rises to the surface and you get creative solutions much faster. But when teachers know it's okay to try and fail and try again and keep working and adjusting, and that it's not something personal that's wrong with them if it doesn't work out, that is when, like you said, the magic happens really.

So, it's when people are willing to jump in and stay late and try, like you were mentioning, you created this whole support system for families and kids. Teachers are willing to jump in and do that. And that's where then, the more people that are onboard, the faster the train goes, right?

Natalie: Right, the faster the train goes. That's what we want.

Angela: So, what you were mentioning, like what's in it for the principal, like principals, we really want to sell you on the idea and the value of connection. It feels like you don't have time. I know your brain tells you that there's not time for that or it's kind of fluff. It's the soft stuff. We've got to be getting down to the data. We've got to be getting down instructional minutes. We've got to be getting down to those meetings or figuring out the master schedule.

But truly, this is for your benefit. This isn't just to make teachers feel good about themselves. Natalie, can you speak to this? Why does it benefit principals to build these connections with them and what is the impact on the principal when they focus on connection with teachers and staff?

Natalie: Yeah, so I have a quick story also for this one. It was my last year in the classroom and I was new to the school, new to the grade level, had just gotten engaged, was selling my house. My classroom was half ESL, half special education kids. There was a lot going on. There were a lot of things that people could easily say it could feel overwhelming.

However, because so many of those things were good things, like being engaged and planning a wedding and moving, it did seem a little easier and it didn't seem like a negative looming overwhelming. And so, one of the tips that I want to give your principals and the educational leaders that are listening is you can focus on things being overwhelming. You can focus on it.

But when you're focused on what's overwhelming, all you're going to do is feel panic, feel fear, feel like you want to shut down. And then you will shut down and you have the disconnect. And what I would say is change your focus.

So, that year that was happening for me and all the factors that were at play, I had a meltdown. Usually most of us do. And so, I went into the closet and I shut the door and I had a cry when all the kids were at recess. And it was early October and I thought, "How can I keep going on this?"

And that was when everything really shifted. I realized that the kids in my classroom, much like the staff members that your listeners have, had so much going on at home, so much going on in their worlds that I was coming in with my organization and my rules and my data. And although organization and structure helps everyone, I was missing that connection with the kids. I was missing the fact that they had things happening at the home.

And so, I shifted and I decided to make my focus not every day on those things that had to be done and the overwhelm. I shifted my focus to connection with them. And the really foo-foo cheesy way of saying it is I just thought I really just need to love them. And if I can love them, then I've done my job. And so, I would always tell them, "Hey, my number one job here is to keep you safe and create a safe environment for you. And I love you."

So, after that shift, and I showed up every day instead of trying to focus on the things that were overwhelming and instead of focusing dealing with the kids, pretty soon I had a classroom that ran like clockwork. I had three different teachers running in and out because of support staff. And it was the kind of thing where I could walk out of the room and they would know, because it was an elementary school, "15 minutes is up. We move to the next center."

And they could do it completely on their own. They had each other's backs. It was a completely different environment, that they were doing the work

without me as the leader in the classroom because I had built connections with them, not just rules and structure.

And I would say the same thing wit the principals, allowing them to connect with their staff members, allow them to know, like, "Hey, they're going to be all in it and they can do the work," and now you act as a guide, instead of the controlling person who's trying to do the structure and the rules. So, anyway, I just wanted to offer that story.

Angela: That just makes me want to cry actually because that really is the solution. And I don't know where this whole thing started where the rules come first and the standards come first and the grade levels come first and the expectations and the adults in the industry come first.

I mean, obviously education has shifted into a very adult-focused industry. And when we go back to it being a human industry and we're in the business of evolving these little humans and that we are humans ourselves and we're just in the business of love and support, the other things actually come into play.

I feel like this, in so many ways about life. Like, we think we need to work longer, harder, faster, more and push, push, push, and we think that gets us a solution. And the problem is that it kind of does. Like, you can push to a certain limit and you can lead out of fear and intimidation and disconnect to a limit. You can get things done to a limit.

Or you can actually release that urge to control and to use power or use fear or use your positional authority to impose upon people and release that. And I think about it as a teacher because I had that moment too, Natalie, where I was pushing myself and my kids so hard that I was in tears, they were in tears, and I had a moment like, "What am I doing?"

I was teaching kindergarten. Like, it really struck me that I'm not going — I'm so choked up about this. I remember thinking, "I'm not doing this anymore to the kids." And if they want to fire me and they don't like the way I'm doing this, forget it, I'm gone.

And what happened was the opposite. The kids behaved better. The kids listened. They were excited about centers. They were excited to come in and learn. Parents loved me because their kids loved me and their experience as a parent was different. It changed everything.

I invited parents in. We were baking bread. We were doing plays. Like, we just changed it up. And one, it was just fun for me. But two, I still got the academic results that my principal and the district wanted. It was a win-win-win all the way around. And so, what we are here to offer the listeners and what Natalie is really suggesting is that one, connecting with yourself and understanding and grounding yourself so that you can feel that you have your own back, and whether or not you know what you're doing as a school leader, you know you have yourself. You are grounded in yourself so that you can then be much more open with other people and with teachers and let them be seen.

Because guess what? Your teachers are in their classrooms not knowing what they're doing trying to figure it out and trying to feel pulled together and polished in front of heir students, in front of their parents. They're feeling the same way you're feeling, so let's just come together and help each other through that. Natalie, that is such a good story. I love that.

Natalie: Well thanks for sharing that one. I really got chills listening to you because I could see that shift. And it's so funny how, when you let go of that idea that you have to be the rule-follower and the structure and you can love, it's both empowering and, like you said, you get even better results.

And I wanted to mention too, the year after I was offered my first instructional coach position. And so, here I was, at that second I thought, "If they fire me, they fire me. I'm going to love my kids." And the exact opposite happened. They were like, "Oh, you shine as a teacher. Let's move you to instructional coach so you can teach others how to do what you do." And the same thing with your school leaders.

Angela: Yeah, I mean, I think this is where we put a bow on it and end it because it's all out of love. And school leaders, I just want you to think about your staff like a classroom. I say this to my clients all the time and they're like, "Oh, I love that connection." I'm like, "Hello, you are literally the teacher of these teachers." You're guiding them. Your campus is your classroom and I want you to connect with your teachers in the same way that you made connections with students in that classroom setting.

And if that was a struggle for you, number one, hire Natalie. She can help you connect with yourself and with others. And two, get an instructional coach or get a mentor or hire somebody like me, who is a life coach or who can help support you, and build that connection with yourself so that you can build the connection with others. Because it really is the solution to evolving our schools and the way that we do business with kids. And I think that's it, right?

Natalie: Yeah.

Angela: Yeah. So, Natalie, where can people find you?

Natalie: Please, find me on Instagram @natalie_wilson_coaching. I'd love to connect with you via Instagram. We can be friends there, or on my website at nataliewilsoncoaching.com and then, of course, if you want to email me, you can feel free to. It's natalie@nataliewilsoncoaching.com.

Angela: Thank you, Natalie. And Natalie, I just had an idea and I'm going to throw it on the podcast. It might be kind of fun for you and I to do a webinar together on building connection.

Natalie: I love that idea.

Angela: Yeah, I just had that thought and I'm just throwing it out there. We might want to do something joint where we're teaching new leaders how to get present with themselves and feel grounded so they can go out and connect with their teachers. Because there's a lot of school leaders out there who need that support and I think there's a lot of teachers out there who would appreciate hearing from you and from their new principals. So, we might have to brainstorm something on that.

So, listeners, be on the lookout. There's something evolving as we speak. We are going to teach you how to be more connected with yourself and your staff. So, Natalie, thanks again for being on the show. I have loved talking with you today and really appreciated your time and energy. Such a lovely time with you always.

Natalie: Thank you so much, Angela. I really love being here with you.

Angela: Yes, and I'll have you back. I promise

Natalie: Sounds good.

Angela: Talk to you soon. Take care.

Natalie: Bye.

Angela: Bye.

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