



Nat: I'm here with **Eric Wlasak** who is the first person that I'm interviewing for this podcast. And I'm just really excited because Eric is the cover star of Time to Teach, Time to Reach. And I met Eric three years ago when he was referred to me via a parent who just absolutely said glowing things about you. And it's about the power of your connection with her kids. And when I started talking with you about how you connect with kids when you're teaching, you do it from your 20 years of teaching classroom experience. And I think, what do you say, like 30 years plus working with kids.

Eric: Yeah, I did the math the other day. I'm like, oh my gosh, this is like a real career.

Nat: Yeah. And I learned so much and it got me really thinking hard about just how you and how we as teachers connect with our students. And the power of connection is the theme of this podcast. And Eric, I'm just so happy to have you here.

Eric: Thank you. It's great to be here. I'm honored actually to be on the cover of the book and to be your first guest.

Nat: I'll show it again. This is the book cover right here, Time to Teach, Time to Reach. Eric Wlasak. Two years ago, right there. When you think about a moment when you connected with your students that may have involved, it was a surprise or something where you're in the classroom and something happened and suddenly the teacher saw your authentic self and... The students, I mean, and you found it to be actually a connective experience.

Eric: Gosh, you know, I would say anytime I did something wrong, anytime you make a mistake, because just letting them see that you're human. Letting them see that, oh my gosh, you know what, he actually can make mistakes and he learns from his mistakes and he's willing to make mistakes in front of his students. It's always better that way.

Nat: But isn't making a mistake as a teacher, something that you don't want to do?

Eric: You know, I'm sure many people feel that way, but I feel like you're human. It's so easy to think that you're not going to human to be the person in front. Everyone's looking at you. You think, okay, you have all the answers. But if you go into it like that, that's so much pressure, and I just really don't know everything. So to go

into a classroom and just realize, okay, I'm going to do the best I can do being my most authentic self, and when I make a mistake... You know, I taught third grade chemistry, if you mentioned that, but I taught third grade, and in third grade in particular to be able to show that you can make a mistake and either laugh at yourself about it or learn from yourself about it and to move forward, because that's what we teach our students every day.

Eric: It's okay to make a mistake. That's why pencils have erasers. All those things. So it's kind of like, it's okay to make mistakes. And so if you can model that and just model it all the way through, making the mistake and not beating yourself up and letting it go and showing them all of those different shades and colors to making a mistake, it's so much easier. Plus it just frees you up.

Nat: It frees you up and it, well, it would free you up. But I imagine for many teachers it actually would kind of lock them down because they feel that they are not being the perfect teacher.

Eric: Potentially, yeah.

Nat: How is perfection kind of pernicious in teaching then?

Eric: Well, I think it's a scary mindset. I think perfection is... How can you reach that? And what does perfection mean? What does it even look like? So I don't even know how you can define perfection in terms of education because every student's different. Every classroom is different. Every year is different. Sometimes the curriculum is different. So how can you be perfect with a new curriculum or with a particular student? You really have to just kind of do your best and keep your aim true and just kind of figure, you know what, you're ready. You're prepared. And making a mistake is fine.

Nat: It's so funny. You're talking about the kids are really watching for you to do your best and to be true and to be authentic. And they won't articulate it, right? Like third grade, they're like eight years old, nine years old. [crosstalk] So they're not going to say to you like, yeah, I'm watching and I'm learning from you as a person and I'm learning about character traits in you that... But it is true that they are, as Ted and Nancy Sizer here on *The Students are Watching* book, which is phenomenal, the students are always watching and they're not watching... Well here's my question for you then. How do you create a classroom environment where the students are watching you, not with a, I want to watch him make a mistake and catch him at it, but with more empathy. Like you know, if Mr. Vlassic makes a mistake, I'm not going to mock and laugh at him. That's not the name of the game. So how do you, knowing that the students are watching, how do you create a classroom that agrees with that?

Eric: The reality is, honestly, for me it was always the first day. There was always like a moment where we'd start the day and I would just kind of go through, just that respect is the basis for everything we do. It's the foundation of everything we'd have in our classroom. We respect each other, you'll respect me, I'll respect you, all these kinds of things. And when you have that as your basis from day one, first of all it relieves them because they realize, oh, he's not out to get me. He's

not out to find things wrong with me, and I'm going to feel safe in this classroom. The whole idea is that everyone feels safe and they feel seen and they feel heard in every classroom.

Eric: And so when they have those three, when they feel safe, I feel all education comes from that because safety means I'm not going to be made fun of for academic things, for physical things, race, ethnicity, any kind of demographic you could think of. It's going to be a room in which I can really be my authentic self, going back to your original question. So when you have that as your basis, I find that they're not really looking at you to make a mistake. They're just watching you, they're eager to learn from you.

Nat: You brought up the word safety quite a bit, and I'm just curious about that word because we tend to think about as teachers and as the only adults in the room that we, right, that it is up to us to create classrooms that are safe for our students. But how about flipping it? How about, how important is a feeling of safety for you as a teacher and what do you think of when you think of that word?

Eric: It's huge. Oh my gosh, it's huge. At a school, as I came out in 2000... Period? I think 2000 to my first principal, and up until then it wasn't like I was hiding everything about myself, but it just, it was a piece of myself that I just felt like I couldn't, not only did I feel like I couldn't share at school, that it could cost me my job potentially because back education and sexuality weren't really in sync. So to be able to be my authentic self, just coming to work every day, just knowing that my teacher friends know who I am and the admin knows who I am, just having that kind of safety, and when you feel safe as who you are as a person, you do your best teaching as far as I can tell, because you're not hindering any thoughts. You're not hindering yourself. You feel like you, can walk into the classroom, into the school, into the district and be yourself.

Nat: It's interesting. Thank you for sharing that. It's interesting that you focus on the importance of feeling known amongst your colleagues, your principal, and the other... You actually didn't mention the students, and I'm not sure if what you were referring to is coming out to your students necessarily, but why is it important for a teacher, and why was it important for you, to be known as who you completely are by your teachers? Why is that important? Because, and I'm thinking about how teachers talk about classrooms being kind of silos. I'm with the kids all day, but I crave actually being around adults. But clearly we are aware that we are in a village of adults as well.

Eric: Right. Yeah. I think it's just because you see them every day, and you see them every day, and what happens to you in your life impacts how you're feeling that day, and to feel like you can't share things in the teacher's lounge or whatever, it gets to be ridiculous after a while, especially when you see the freedom of other people. Oh, they're getting married, they're having kids. And it's this big celebratory thing that everyone's talking about, everyone else. In terms of with the students, I wasn't necessarily saying with the students necessarily because it just never really came up. But with the faculty, just for myself as an adult in the building, it was really important.

Eric: I should say this, it wasn't important until it was. It didn't really impact me I didn't think, until I felt it after I was out, some of my coworker friends, because I was like, oh I really am myself. I really can just come in like... Not that I was afraid of being found out, but I guess maybe on some level I was. But just that it was like I've never had that 360 degree feeling in my career before because it really didn't feel like it was allowed before. And yeah, that's a interesting process

Nat: And that's really well described. And thinking about the theme of this episode is about the power of connection. We actually walked down a road about the importance of our connection with our colleagues. Do you have any advice you can give in terms of why it's important to have trust-built connections with your colleagues? Because as a third grade teacher, your classroom was your, that was your world, and you were building that world and clearly you were in charge of that world, yet knowing that your teachers, your colleagues, your administrators had your back, even though they barely entered your world, was important. What can you say or advice you can give toward the importance of connection with your colleagues?

Eric: Well, I think it's about who you are, is bringing who yourself... Because the other part of it is that our job is so personal. You get so invested, you bring every part of yourself to the classroom, your energy, your time, your humor, your determination, everything will go into it because ultimately you're there for your students. That's really what it's all about. And to feel supported by the admin in creating the best environment for your students, you want to work in the best environment for yourself.

Eric: And I think about every time, I work at a phenomenal school, and the commute is horrible. I live in LA. It's a half hour to work but an hour and a half every day. And every day when traffic gets on my nerves, I just think, oh my gosh, I could work at that school. That school's closer, that school's off Sunset. I don't have to work off... You know, I'd be home sooner. But to know I'm at a school that totally accepts me and supports me, that's where you want to work. That's where I want to be. Because with anybody, you want to go to a job where you feel supported and cared for, and like I said supported.

Nat: When you think about a school, what word comes to mind when... school is like a blank.

Eric: I'm not sure what you mean.

Nat: What I'm thinking of is you were describing a school, you're describing the importance of your relationships with your colleagues, with your students, with your administrators. And a lot of people who have never been... let me walk back. A lot of people who've never been to a school before as a teacher, who've never worked at a school, we've all been to school, we all feel like we know what a school is. They view a school through perhaps an organizational lens. Like a school is a corporation for kids. Would you agree with that?

Eric: No, and nothing wrong with that. I would probably say I'm someone could probably speak differently to that, but I, now I think about it, a school is a home. It

really is. You have so many people at different ages, and they spend so much of their day there, and they do so much growing there and learning there and discovering and about themselves, about each other, about how to relate to one another, how to work with adults, how to work with different people, how to work with different genders. You just learn so much, and you're there for an extended period of time. Generally you're there about six, seven years. So to have that, you want to have a home feeling, you want to feel like this is their second home, and there's a responsibility with that to make sure it's a nurturing, caring home that they get to go to every day.

Nat: Excellent. So thinking about homes, I just had my house remodeled and just redesigned like just new wallpaper and new back splash in the kitchen. I never knew what a back splash was until about six months ago.

Eric: Ca-ching!

Nat: Ca-ching. So yeah. And that too. But I'm thinking about your classroom. If you were to scan your classroom right now and think about what's on the walls and how it's laid out and how you designed your home, what are some of the items that you have in your classroom that serve to help with connection with your students?

Eric: You know, I would say first of all, they usually pretty much sit in groups, but I change that up every month, who they sit with. And the other thing is, I have this, but I can't take credit for it, this is from my student teaching experience from 21 years ago. I have different empty desks just called thinking desks. And the idea, the theory is it's not punitive. The idea is that it's like, you know when you sit in these groups for so long, sometimes you need your own personal space. A student can go there at anytime and just kind of sit and work by themselves. It's quieter and whatever. But that also allows me to kind of come up and say how's everything going? And just checking in with them or whatever. But there's those kinds of moments.

Eric: We have just various things that go on every morning. We have like a whole routine of things, and one of them is saying the pledge and one of them is doing this school calendar and things like that, the classroom calendar rather. And it just allows me that one on one time with the students, and they rotate each week who does what. So there's a line leader and all these things, all the third grade stuff, the third grade big deal stuff. But each time it allows me, even just walking to a class, I have me a line leader, you can talk to someone and it really is, but it's really just checking in with them. But also just recognizing that a connection with a student is doesn't just mean being nice to someone. It's when you really get to know them, really getting to know who they are and they get to know you and have an actual relationship, the relational teaching you're talking about.

Nat: I love the empty desk.

Eric: Isn't that a great idea? That's why I stole it.

Nat: That's fantastic. That's meant to be plagiarized, some things are meant to be plagiarized.

Eric: I know. Lila Patiti, first grade teacher.

Nat: You hit on a theme actually that I was hoping I'd be able to have a chance to address with you, which is this idea of talking about connection and the power of connection. People can misinterpret that as saying, okay, your job is to connect with these students, with these kids. And we default to thinking, oh that means being nice. That means, shake their hand every day and look them in the eyes, which I imagine you do actually, or probably.

Eric: You know, I greet them every day at the door.

Nat: Which is absolutely important.

Eric: It's huge.

Nat: Okay, let's get back to learning, right? Like learning is never a passive activity. Learning involves challenge, and you have to grade, you have to get feedback, you have to give parents maybe some tough news sometimes about, or you have to give the students tough news sometimes. So why is it important then to connect with the students in terms of your overall job, which can also involve giving negative feedback and whatnot?

Eric: Because negative feedback isn't seen as negative feedback when there's that [inaudible] when they know that you trust their child and the child trusts you. Because I think along with that, if the first thing you say is a negative thing, it's going to come across that way. But when you have that relationship from walking to the classroom or sitting at a different desk or whatever and have those conversations, you build that relationship, you build that trust. And so your first communication with them is not a negative interaction. On top of the fact that my whole philosophy has always been that before, then you really praise the positive. So when the negative comes they're more likely to hear you.

Eric: And that goes for parents, that goes for certainly the students, but it's all about a sense of being able to grow. But it goes back to your first question about when I make a mistake. That can be seen as a negative. But if you go through it, it's like, oh, okay. It's a bump in the road and not every bump in the road is a code red. It's like you pick your self up and you move along.

Nat: Fantastic. You take the long view.

Eric: Yeah, you really have to because again, luckily I have the luxury of having the entire year with the same group of students, so you really get to know them. Yeah, it's the end game, but I think beyond that, it's kind of like, yeah, I want them to get through third grade, but these are... They used to call them soft skills, but I call them foundational skills, all of those interpersonal communication skills because you need those to continue on. It's one of those things that I always joke around with my principal. I said, I'm going to say this and I might get fired over it,

but for me it was always more important for me that my students love coming to school because if a student loves coming to school, they will learn, they'll be present, there'll be ready. But if they hate coming to school, they could care less what a noun and a verb are, you know? But if they love school not only will they want to know to noun and verb are, but they'll start discovering it for themselves.

Eric: So it's about just creating that environment where they want to be everyday. It's a home, you want to feel safe, it's authentic.

Nat: Can you give me an example of a time where you found it to be really challenging to connect with a student?

Eric: I'm sure there have been times. I'm just trying to think, because you know, when you think back to the year, you always kind of, I picture the how student was at the end of the year, or my relationship with the student, how it was at the end of the year. And it always ends on a positive stretch. So I think it's just, I really can't think of a time when it was difficult to really connect.

Nat: Probably because you set the foundation so well on the first.

Eric: Yeah, well, I didn't mean that to be like a backhand compliment, but I'm sure there are... I'll put it this way, some days are more challenging than others, and that might be because the AC is out or whatever. There's a lot of reasons why things are difficult. But I just keep thinking, they're eight years old and they've been on the planet for eight years. They've been walking for six, they've been in school for five, they're learning to read and write and they've been doing that for three years. So it's like cut him some slack, everyone's trying to figure it out. And they're all bringing in different parts of themselves to the classroom everyday. So it's like, how do you... Everyone's going to be in a different place. So it's kind of like my job is to connect with each student, each time, each year, and that's...

Eric: Maybe I don't find it challenging because that's kind of the fun for it for me, is really finding, okay, how can I connect with each person and how can I make that person laugh, or how do they make me laugh or whatever.

Nat: I would say especially working with younger kids, the connection with the parents is extremely important.

Eric: Absolutely.

Nat: Because you guys, you form a team. It's a teacher, parent, student triangle, right?

Eric: Yeah.

Nat: What advice would you give to parents who, maybe first time parents whose kids are about to enter into your class, third grade, what advice would you give to them about how to connect with their teacher, and why is it important for them to get to know the teacher as well?

Eric: Right. Yeah, it's a two-way street because they're going to hear my name a lot over dinner. You hear a lot of stories, so it's kind of a... It's always good. Back to school night's always an important time. It's kind of been coming on the teacher too to really kind of build that connection.

Eric: With technology now you can send an email, phone calls are always kind of better, but there's email you can... We have a back to school picnic that we have every year. So those kinds of events, it's really important that they know who you are because they're very curious.

Eric: And the other thing is too, the other part that can be difficult or a challenge sometimes for just talking with any parent at any time is because everyone kind of comes into school with their own memories of what it was like for them at school. So when you have a parent who might've had a tough time in school, they might still view school through that lens, like, oh, it's a difficult place, or it's hard to make friends, or it's a place where you aren't successful. So you kind of bring that, sometimes that concern kind of comes up.

Eric: So it's kind of like remembering that each year's a new year, it's okay to come in and talk to your teacher, your child's teacher, and just kind of check in. But yeah, I'm not sure if that answered your question.

Nat: You did beautifully. For my final question, I'm not going to give you a lens, but I'm going to give you a portal, eric, to you, when you were a third grade student.

Eric: Oh Lord.

Nat: And if you were your own teacher, what advice would you have given on how to connect with Eric Vlassic, eight year old Eric?

Eric: Oh my gosh. Wow. That's a great question. I never thought about that. I would say, gosh, it's so funny. I can put myself back in my third grade...

Eric: I'll tell you this, I don't know how, but I know my third grade teacher did, Mrs. Reed, Caroline Reed. She was awesome. It's one of those things that it's a mixed bag where I kind of have some memories of it. And then I just kind of... And I remember my friends were in my classroom, but the thing that was so great about it is sometimes you have these memories of like, it's like kind of... Off topic, I'll come back, I promise.

Eric: I worked at a summer camp way when I first started working with kids, and a fellow camp counselor said to me, she goes, you know, these kids aren't going to remember us in 20 years. And she goes, that can be kind of depressing because we put so much stuff into being a counselor, dah, dah, dah. But when they think about camp, they will have a really warm memory about it, and they'll feel really good about it, but they won't know why.

Eric: So I kind of bring that to my third grade year. I remember, she was my favorite teacher and I remember certain moments, and she really got to know me, I feel like got to know me, but I have that warm feeling in me when I think about third

grade, and there's some of that that's tangible, some I don't know why. And I think it's because that I did feel connected.

Nat: It sounds like you also felt safe.

Eric: Completely. Oh my gosh. It was, yeah, I just look back... And it wasn't that the previous years were horrible, it's just some thing about that third grade year. I think my friends were in it and the teacher and the way she was and her personality. And so a lot of what I bring to my third grade class, I think that's why I love teaching third grade so much because it was really, she put that imprint on me, that that was a fun year, and it really is. It's a really fun year.

Nat: That was Ms. Reed?

Eric: Caroline Reed, yeah. She just passed recently. I have to say, it was like a couple of years ago, I was kind of taking stock of myself and doing a little inventory, and I was writing letters to some people who I wanted to thank over my career, and I sent some out and I went to look her up and she had just passed like maybe the March before, which was horrible, which was interesting, but I meant to say this too. When I first started teaching, 1998, my mom worked at the district that I grew up in, and she had, unbeknownst to me, sent a letter to Caroline Reed, she was then retired in Arizona, and Caroline Reed sent me a letter in 1998, and I wish I could find that letter, but it was so powerful to read that, and she goes, oh, I remember you in third grade and this and that. It was like really a beautiful moment and it was so interesting as to see her cursive writing, that 1978 cursive writing that teachers had.

Nat: I remember the stationery. It was the thick line and then the dot, dot, dot, dot line, and then the thick line.

Eric: We still use it.

Nat: Do you still teach the letter Q the way that it... it was so odd, the uppercase letter Q. I never thought-

Eric: So many different ways. Exactly.

Nat: You're still teaching cursive. That's another episode. That'll be another episode. Handwriting and its importance to the new millennium.

Eric: Can I tell you something? I love doing it. The kids love doing it. It's one of those things. [inaudible] third grade, cursive writing and multiplication.

Nat: I used to love it.

Eric: Those are the two things that kids want to learn because it makes them feel like they're adults.

Nat: Yeah. Well, hey Eric, thank you so much.

Eric: This was great.

Nat: Eric Wlasak, helping us to, as adults, to remember the importance of how we connect with our students, with our kids, through vulnerability, through creating classroom environments of safety, through feeling respected and valued by your peers and supported by your peers and your colleagues, despite the classroom being a silo, and also just really being able to reflect back on the importance of the teachers that we grew up with and the feelings that they brought. Even if you don't remember exactly what you learned, except you know you learned cursive. It's how you felt, and that feeling of belongingness being so critically important, and as a man who's teaching in elementary school, I think it's an area that we need to, as a country, focus on too, is putting more men in the younger grades. Would you agree with that?

Eric: I would. Luckily I work at a school that's very diverse gender wise, and a lot of teachers, I have male, female teachers. My very first teaching job, I was the only guy at the school. So it was me and the janitor.

Nat: In the entire school?

Eric: In the entire school, everybody, it was like, yeah, it was funny. But at that point I was used to it. My education classes where I was the only guy in those classes too, so you kind of grow into it. But yeah, I see the difference. It's good to have role models of every type.

Nat: Absolutely. Absolutely. Ms. Reed, being one of them.

Eric: Yeah, exactly. Lucky me.

Nat: Yes. Lucky you, and lucky us to have you here today on this episode.

Eric: I appreciate it.

Nat: I really appreciate your time.

Eric: Absolutely. It's a blast.

Nat: Thank you. Eric.