



DISPOSITIONS OF HUMILITY, CARE, AND CURIOSITY: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN ACTION

At Astra, we believe that strong relationships—what we call Radically Reimagined Relationships—are the foundation of a healthy school culture, engagement, and achievement. In schools that put Radically Reimagined Relationships at the center, we see evidence of five indicators: Culture of Belonging and Well-Being; Shared Purpose and Responsibility; Agency and Trust; Commitment to Equity and Justice; and Dispositions of Humility, Care, and Curiosity.

WHY HUMILITY, CARE, AND CURIOSITY?

We believe that the strongest and most meaningful school relationships grow out of a sense of genuine humility and the belief that each of us--adults and students alike--has something valuable to contribute to the school community.

Mike Chalupa is the director of the City Neighbors Foundation, which operates three public charter schools in Baltimore, Maryland. Mike says, “We take a stand that children are creative, capable, powerful, worthy of the deepest respect, and then really try to determine what teaching and learning look like if you have that belief at the core.” One of City Neighbors’ founding questions is, “What would it take for every child to feel Known, Loved, and Inspired?”

We honor the City Neighbors’ question and expand it. How can all members of the school community feel known, loved, and inspired? To answer this question, we must bring curiosity to our interactions. What unique talents, experiences, and passions does each person – child and adult - bring to the community and how might we harness the community’s collective strengths to support each member’s well-being and growth?

We also believe that humility, care, and curiosity are essential if we are serious about equity. The term “cultural humility” describes a sincere wish to correct power imbalances and a commitment to advocate for and amplify the voices of those with less privilege.¹ Care comes into play because we want all students, regardless of zip code and other factors, to find challenge, joy, and purpose in the work they are doing. And a stance of curiosity allows each of us to grow in our openness to others and our willingness to work on our own implicit biases.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

We saw one of the simplest and most powerful demonstrations of humility and care at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, which serves 356 students in grades 9-12. English teacher Victor Ha had created

1 Brown, E. L., Vesely, C. K., & Dallman, L. (2016). Unpacking Biases: Developing Cultural Humility in Early Childhood and Elementary Teacher Candidates. *Teacher Educators’ Journal*, 9, 75-96.

acknowledgments for each member of his student advisory. Small posters outside the classroom door included “Anth - Thank you for teaching me what it means to earn and show trust and respect” and “Daph - Thank you for making me laugh with your outrageous commentary.”

Humility and care came up at Ron Brown College Preparatory High School in Washington, DC, the District’s only all-male public school with 277 young men enrolled. On the day we visited, during the daily 30-minute ninth grade community meeting in the school cafeteria, the school’s Director of Culture, Empowerment, and Restorative Justice, Dawaine Cosey, was talking with students about thankfulness and gratitude. Small groups discussed the scenario of “Your mama came home from a long day at work and cooked you a homemade dinner. Did this have to be done? Is it a privilege or a right? What does this act show that she believes about me? What did that act cost her?” Cosey observed, “We neglect the responsibility of being grateful, so we treat others badly. When you recognize that they are choosing to show up and love you, you’ll treat them differently.” He got nods from many teachers in the room when he told students, “I got to love on you and teach you, even though you just cussed me out.” He shared that gratitude will “change the way you show up for your relationships and yourself--you will be humble, you will be better, your life will be easier.”

We saw school leaders demonstrating humility at Fall Creek Middle School, a public school of 187 students in Fall Creek, WI, and at Harvest Collegiate, a public high school in New York City serving 457 students. On the day of our visit to Fall Creek, Brad LaPoint, the school’s principal, was busy with lunch duty, covering classes, and helping students who needed to be outside for a science class assignment; it was clear he didn’t consider himself “above” performing tasks often delegated to other staff members. At Harvest Collegiate, music teacher and restorative justice coordinator Martin Urbach decided in 2018 to hand over leadership of the school’s restorative justice program, Circle Keepers, to a group of juniors and seniors. Martin and his colleagues are often invited to participate in, but not lead, a restorative circle when an issue arises between staff and students.

On the day we visited, Martin helped the Circle Keepers’ student leaders prepare for a circle with a group of 9th and 10th graders who were regularly skipping class. Martin encouraged the student leaders to avoid placing blame on students for skipping class and avoid using “you” statements. He encouraged them to exercise curiosity: “What are some reasons kids might skip class?” James, a senior called in to help with the circle (because he used to skip a lot as a sophomore and junior) concurred: “You don’t know what’s triggering the kid.”

Curiosity about students' needs and lives outside of school was evident at many schools we've visited. For example, at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School in Washington, DC, staff works hard to learn about students, especially at the beginning of the school year. Teachers meet to talk about the charter school's 457 PreK-8 students--particularly new ones--and ask: Who are their friends? Who's isolated?



A small group reading discussion at P.S. 172 in New York.

“Teachers pay a lot of attention to that,” said head of school Deborah Williams. “We know that students need at least one adult in the building, so we need to figure that out, too. The best learning will happen when students are engaged and feel like they are part of the community.”

At P.S. 172 in Brooklyn, the Beacon School of Excellence, staff members collaborate in a similar way to learn about and support individual students. Principal Erika Gunderson and several of the elementary school's teachers told us they operate with the assumption that all of the school's 538 students want to do well; thus, when a student is acting out, there is likely something going on with that child that the staff needs to understand in a deeper way. The school's weekly Pupil Intervention Committee meetings bring together administrators, resource teachers, interventionists, and classroom teachers to figure out what's troubling the student and how to help.

Principal Shyla Rao of City Neighbors Hamilton, a Baltimore, MD, public charter school with 235 students, said, “If you don't have any idea what's happening outside for a kid, you're just responding to a facade.” Rao counseled that school size and class size are important factors in the ability to know students well; at one point City Neighbors made the decision to open an additional campus rather than increase enrollment at an existing school because school leaders understood that when it comes to each student being “known, loved, and inspired,” “known” and “loved” can be more difficult in a bigger school.

Schools that are really committed to dispositions of humility, care, and curiosity create the space and freedom to manifest them even when it might take away from traditional instructional time. Kemi Aiyedun, a third grade teacher at the PreK-8 Bronx Community Charter School in The Bronx, NY,

commented, “There are times when things happen during the day and we say ‘Wait, we have to stop and we have to talk about it.’ We might be a little late on math or reading, but community is so important. We need to deal with it in order to move on and learn. It shows students you care about them as more than just readers, writers, and academic learners.”

Bronx Community’s director of student support Jeannine King added, “We work hard to know children deeply and we use all the levers we have to get to know them.” Learning about each of the school’s 508 students takes intentional effort. For example, kindergarten teacher Priscilla Otero and her co-teacher eat lunch with students in their classroom: “Just listening and talking with them in these small groups and informal times is what helps build these intimate relationships we have with them. One thing I think about a lot is how it’s easy for us to help kids calm down and understand their big feelings because we know them so well.”

QUICK TIPS

1. Don’t be afraid to call a “time out” from instruction to deal with students’ social and emotional needs. You’ll find that engagement and achievement ultimately benefit.
2. Be curious about the interests and experiences of students, their families, and colleagues. Look for small opportunities every day to get to know people better.
3. Set up regular time for staff members to talk about the social and emotional needs of students—an activity at least as important as analyzing student work or testing data.
4. Admit when you’re wrong: it models humility, self-reflection, and learning from our mistakes.
5. Find ways to publicly acknowledge the support you receive from others in the school community and the lessons they’ve taught you.

RESOURCES

Cornelius Minor: [On Feedback and Love](#). Podcast from Heinemann, June 2017.

Todd Finley: [A Focused Practice for Relationship Building](#). Article from Edutopia, June 2018.

Jennifer Gonzales: [Five Reasons You Should Seek Your Own Student Feedback](#). Article from Cult of Pedagogy, October 2014.

Katrina Schwartz: [When Coaching Teachers Has Curiosity as its Primary Goal](#). Article from MindShift, October 2017.

For additional resources, please visit our [Resource Library](#).

ABOUT ASTRA CENTER FOR INNOVATIVE EDUCATION

The Astra Center for Innovative Education affirms the critical role that relationships play in learning environments. We promote educational models that demonstrate Radically Reimagined Relationships - a commitment to creating and sustaining genuine, thoughtful, and meaningful connections between and among students, staff, and families in an environment of equity and racial justice. Our work centers around researching schools and school models, reporting on the impact of relationship-building, engaging schools and like-minded organizations that share this philosophy, and working directly with schools to build capacity. Learn more about our work at www.astrafoundation.org/center-for-innovative-education.

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On the cover: A father and daughter at P.S. 172, Beacon School of Excellence, in Brooklyn, N.Y. Photo courtesy of P.S. 172, one of the schools the Astra team visited in 2019.

