Season 2, Episode 4: Values in Education (Part 1)

Welcome to the Exploring the Core Podcast. I'm your host, Greg Mullen.

In this fourth episode, I'll be exploring Values, what they are, and how we perceive them in a learning environment. These values I'll be exploring represent an essential layer of my framework for understanding who we are and how we learn. These values are the broad brush strokes of behaviors we view as ideal, and so they shape those larger elements of a learning environment, which I discussed in the previous episode. In this layer, I include six specific values: Respect and Responsibility, Trust and Fairness, Community and Integrity. We want people to behave according to these values, and we want children to grow up learning what these values are, but too often we think everybody else reflects on these values the same way we do, referring to them as common sense values, and we expect people to learn them the same way through what we might think are common experiences - and this just isn't always the case. So I want to take this episode to explore two of these six Values, Responsibility and Respect, which actually come up a lot in a school setting. And to help put my thoughts about these values into context, I'll be sharing conversations I had with two educators who each have an extraordinary perspective on teaching and learning. The first conversation is with Amanda Presutto, a teacher in Southern California who uses education technology as a tool to promote the value of Responsibility with her students. I then explore the value of Respect and share my conversation with educator Brian Morris, who's been teaching in Japan the past few years and shares his experience introducing an inclusive project-based learning environment in both the U.S. and Japan. And do keep an open mind as I explore this layer of Values in education, because we will get into some deep-rooted beliefs about who we are and how we learn, and I hope it helps spark meaningful conversations between educators in their own learning communities.

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Responsibility, at its core, is all about accountability. We all make mistakes, and when we talk about responsibility (specifically in a school setting), it's often about holding people accountable for mistakes they make, in order to promote what we refer to as Responsible Student Behaviors. And when we teach students about responsibility, it's usually in the context of holding them accountable for behaviors we value in a school setting, like showing up to class on time and turning in assignments when they're due, and through these kinds of behavior expectations, we're able to talk about this value of Responsibility.

But there's a deeper aspect to this value that I want to explore - and that's the responsibility for learning, which is different because learning is not a behavior like showing up to class or turning in an assignment. Learning is a decision that changes how you think about a concept or perform a particular skill. So when a student decides

to learn something, for whatever reason, they'll make decisions that lead them to people and resources who might be able to help them, and when they successfully learn at the level of proficiency they intended to meet, who do we say is responsible for that learning? Sure, the people and the resources are partially responsible, but the student typically gets most of the credit because he or she made the decisions that led them to that new learning.

And honestly, we want students to be responsible, to hold themselves accountable for their own learning. We want students to make decisions that lead them to successfully change the way they think about increasingly complex concepts and skills. But because the person making those decisions is likely going to be the person mostly responsible for that learning, we want students to make those decisions, but we also want them to decide what *we* want them to learn. And for really young students, it's generally not a big deal for teachers to take on that responsibility for deciding what, when, and how their students learn things like phonics and numeracy skills. But at what point are they coached on how to manage this Responsibility for Learning, for deciding what, when, and how they learn different concepts and skills? What would this even look like in a school setting?

Well, fortunately, this topic came up in my conversation with Amanda Presutto, a school teacher in Santa Ana, California, who promotes this kind of Responsibility for Learning through the use of education technology. And as I share segments of our conversation, keep in mind that, even *before* the virtual school mandate due to the pandemic, Amanda's been exploring this kind of tech-focused Responsibility for Learning, which she explains.

AMANDA: "It was so long ago, I feel like during this pandemic it seems like it's been ten years, but I remember the Fall before, feeling like something's got to change. We have access to all of these supplemental curriculums, access to all of these different technology platforms, and there has to be a way that we could use it where students can produce what they need to produce, know what they need to know, and then follow through with it. I found a few of them, and then it shifted, so then we were on the right track before we went 100% virtual. [...] There were supplemental curriculums like Flocabulary, we had Freckle, Adaptive, we had Zearn, we had access to Khan, and I was only teaching math at the time so I had access to all these supplemental curriculums but were not really trained in them so it was just kind of throwing them out as needed; so already it was personalizing based on interest of students, so I felt like I was doing what I need to do. But then, once it becomes a chore for students, then you're losing, like once they're not interested anymore then you're losing them. They're not going to learn because they're not interested anymore. It's not new, so you kind of have to switch up all the time, like, Prodigy is a really good math game, however if it's not used right they'll end up playing tag and placing chase on the platform and not used for solving math - they'll find a way to make it fun for them and not really get the learning

done. Then I found DeckToys because I can personalize different Decks for different students, you can have the choice of making it mastery based so you can say they need to get it right in order to move ahead, instead of them randomly… finished 100% of the Deck but at 20% correct, so I usually make them mastery decks so they have to try over and over until they complete it, but you can insert whatever types of games…"

GREG: It was great to hear about how Amanda has made so many different online platforms available to her students, and it was really interesting to hear how she was using these platforms to promote ownership of learning in her students, especially since shifting to 100% virtual schooling due to the pandemic. Since she already had an interest in using technology in her classroom, I wanted to know if more technology resulted in more student ownership of learning, and, if that wasn't the case, what else she was doing to promote that ownership in her students.

AMANDA: "I think it's helped a lot just giving them access to all of these different platforms, from one platform, and now they know that, okay, I'm not that strong in this area and that I can go to Khan, or Flocabulary, and they know all the different links I'd embed. [...] I think it's important that they see they have access to all of these different skills. Another thing - I don't help them, so if they're lost, they think they can't look on Google for anything. They think it's, like, illegal. Like, I'm a student, "I can't look that up on Google", like, why not, it's a resource, use it. When we don't know what we're doing, we look it up on YouTube. We look up tutorials, we ask Siri how to do something, or Alexa, and it's no different than that, but they think it's taboo for some reason to look up something. Because it's been ingrained in them that they can't use a calculator, but now they're in middle school and they can actually use a calculator on most of the math domains. So just getting them to build that, if they don't know something, don't just ask your teacher and move on, actually explore it yourself, and that's built into school culture, though. Now this has introduced them to so many supplemental curriculums that we have, and so now we can explore those on their own when they're having trouble finding something or finding an answer to something, or I wouldn't necessarily say answer, it's not like they find answers to things but when they're curious about vocabulary or when they're curious on what are the three types of rocks and they don't remember, to go and look at the resources we have and not just use YouTube. We have Flocabulary, we have Amplify, we have all of our resources, so I just think it's opened up a world kind of like a choice board situation and just made them more self-reliant, instead of relying on the teacher for everything. I mean, now that I've pushed them to do a lot of their own learning, it's interesting that I catch how many times I would have just given them the answers when they ask me questions. And now, it's like, I don't know, you tell me. You challenge them and they're like, "aren't you my teacher?" and I'm like, "Ya, but I'm not teaching you anything if I just give you the answer. You have to go look for it.""

GREG: As my conversation with Amanda continued, I started to focus on how student ownership seemed to stem from her view toward teacher-student relationships. The relationship she describes having with her students, especially having looped with them now for the third year, really seems to speak to how she views this value of responsibility, given how she describes being there to facilitate their learning by offering resources which allow them to focus on mastering academic objectives. It had me wondering how the students have responded to this, and the response from Amanda was pleasantly surprising.

AMANDA: "I think that they like it, they like a challenge, they actually - kids want to do things on their own. I was just at the skate park with my son and you're watching these kids, and their parents aren't pushing them. They're there and they're growing and getting better because they want it. They're intrinsically motivated because it's something that they're interested in. Even if it means they're going to get hurt, right? So when we have students who, we need them to buy into it, almost like they would any interest that they have, and make it that important to them that they want to push themselves and they want to use the skills that they have to go and try new things."

GREG: This led me to a really tough question, tying together a lot of what I've introduced in this second season so far. My question was how she develops in her students that desire to push themselves, to complete academic tasks aligned to the standards her school will test them on later that year - essentially, how she addresses motivation in context of building student ownership and responsibility for learning - and her response is definitely worth noting.

AMANDA: "I think motivation is multi-faceted. Motivation comes from culture, classroom culture, the relationships you build with your students and just that inquisitive nature that we all have and if you promote that in your classroom then they're going to constantly do that, right? So when you're modeling it, and you're checking it, and I've been teaching middle school, I moved from elementary to middle school so I actually do not know a lot of things that I am teaching them, and there are kids who are smarter than me in my class on certain topics, so I'm modeling the same exact thing, "I don't know, let's look it up, let's explore that, like… and allowing yourself to go on those tangents and follow what they're interested in, follow those conversations even if it's going to take you thirty minutes out of your lesson is super important, because then they feel they can talk to you, they can push their interests, they can bring up something that's interesting to them and you're going to pause and go into that. The second part would definitely be, when you were talking about interest, I always talk about money. What kid doesn't like money? What adult doesn't like money? So we, I think I always related math back to money and business and what they might want to be and want to do, and just daily life skills that involve math. Also, I'm honest with them, so I'll say, I don't know, you probably won't ever use this, but it's going to be a foundation skill, and someday you might need it, and to not have that, you know, it's pretty interesting. So just being honest with them

in that relationship and I think the key is not being so honed in on "this is my lesson and I have to get through this" because we're told now, in virtual teaching, I only have four hours a day and some middle school teachers only have 45-minutes a block so it's really hard because you want to push that curriculum and push those standards, but the students should really know the standards, and they should kind of know what they're good at and know that, instead of you telling them, I think that's kind of where you and I are going with this is student ownership, them knowing what they need to do, the big picture is key. I remember going into school, and sitting and having a book, and it's like, what unit, what lesson, and I didn't see the big picture. I didn't see the end game. It's different when you come and it's like, this is what you have to learn, let's learn it together, and here's your checklist, and you go through it, I think that's super powerful because they're, like, "oh, I'm really not good with my Number Systems domain and this standard" - you want them using that language and they're going to push themselves."

GREG: Amanda and I had a fascinating conversation that tackled a number of topics relevant to education, but I really wanted to share thoughts on this idea of building ownership and responsibility for learning through technology. I think technology is still something a lot of teachers struggle to adopt and adapt for a lot of different reasons, and I'm hopeful that Amanda's insights are able to inspire more educators to consider the use of technology to promote the kind of ownership of learning that she talks about.

But I'd like to share a different conversation I had with another educator, with a focus on a different value, one that's generally a bit trickier to tackle but is that much more important to address because of it - and that's the value of Respect. Stay with me as I work through the core components of this value. I also share my conversation with Brian Morris, a California educator who's been introducing an inclusive, project-based learning environment to schools in Japan.

[MUSIC]

Often, we think of Respect as simply treating others the way you want to be treated. It's a simple belief, but comes with a lot of exceptions and boundaries. I've actually found it helpful to change this up a bit by saying, 'treat others the way *they* want to be treated'. It takes more effort to get to know how someone wants to be treated, but it removes a major boundary that I think really gets at the core aspects of this value of Respect.

To me, respect is made up of two components: Authority and Self-Worth. When someone tells you to "show some respect", what they mean is they want for *you* to stop treating *them* the way you think they should be treated. That's the *authority* aspect of this value - they want to maintain their own authority over how they want to be treated. And within that Authority aspect is the other part, the Self-Esteem aspect, where not having confidence in your own worth might actually make you more willing to give that other person the authority to treat you how they want to treat you; but now having *too much* confidence can cause you to *demand* others treat you the way you feel you deserve to be treated, which actually takes us all the way back to the original issue of treating others the way you want to be treated, because you wouldn't want people *demanding* you treat them a certain way - that would be disrespectful, but recognizing someone's confidence in how they would prefer that you treat them, might garner a certain level of respect, especially if you, too, share in that confidence for how you'd like to be treated. And it's that balance of Authority and Self-Worth that we experience this shared value of Respect.

And once we start to recognize this value in this way, we start to see it in all of the different relationships we have. We may be more than happy to have our preschooler decide what game we're going to play but correct them when they point and laugh because we let them win. We may be okay with our friends using sarcasm toward us in ways we wouldn't want other people to use with us, and let them know if they go too far. Because at the core of this value, Respect, is the authority and self-worth that get tied up in how we make decisions with each other, depending on our relationship with that person.

And so when we think about the kind of learning environment we're creating for our students, and the kinds of differences in authority and self-worth a teacher-led classroom has versus a student-led classroom, or a lecture-based versus a project-based environment, we may want to consider what kind of decisions we're expecting our students to make about what, when, and how learning happens, and pay attention to the kinds of authority and self-worth our students perceive about themselves as learners, especially when we we place a project-based teacher into a classroom of students who have only ever known a teacher-led, lecture-style classroom.

And this is where I'd like to introduce an amazing educator, Brian Morris, from San Diego, California, who holds both a math and special ed credential. He's currently a Learning Support Teacher at Ow-Ba Japan International School near Tokyo, and has

spent the past few years helping to implement a more project-based learning model and inclusive learning environment at international schools there in Japan. I was excited to speak with Brian because he's teaching in a country that is generally more collectivist-minded when compared to the United States, which means there's a larger focus on the group when it comes to authority and self-worth that far outweighs their focus on the individual. So as Brian and I talked, I really appreciated his insights into the subtle differences in teaching and learning he's noticed from his experience teaching in both San Diego and Japan.

BRIAN: "Overall, I don't think I've changed that much about how I teach students. Japan doesn't have sarcasm, but even little things like having a big cup of coffee and saying, "look at my tiny cup of coffee", when you have a large cup of coffee, kids won't get it. My last school, I did that, and the kids had no idea what I was talking about. Things like that are different but because I've been at schools that value the more western styles of teaching, I haven't really had to change how I run a classroom. So I think about how I taught fourth grade, we focused on individual students and their achievement, but more than normal emphasized how well the class was doing and that seemed to resonate a bit more with students. Often, you'll have a class that's like, 'I don't care about everyone in this room'... whereas when I was back in America and talked about the class overall, it fell on deaf ears. That was more of a subtle change. My teaching practices carried over. Especially at this school now, the way I've found teaching works, it works here. I think I might have found a home away from home at this school because it values a lot of what I valued as a learner and what I value as a teacher, which is that student agency, working together, social emotional learning, and it's not the product we care about it's what the students learn along the way. Teaching students how to think versus teaching knowledge is really important, and our school really teaches students how to think, and guides through their ability to think."

GREG: I couldn't help but appreciate that what Brian is teaching at this school in Japan is so heavily focused on helping students to learn HOW to learn, to promote student agency and working together, what became noticeably relevant is this idea of respect and how Brian perceives the teacher-student relationship. Specifically, when you consider the amount of authority over what, when, and how students learn that Brian is transferring to his students with his project-based learning approach, and the self-worth he's introducing to his students as learners, as participants rather than recipients, it became apparent that this is a big shift in Japan since the traditional Japanese school has an entirely different focus, as Brian describes:

BRIAN: "So, traditionally, Japan has a very traditional style of students sit in rows, look at the teacher, listen to what the teacher says, and memorize as much as possible; from my understanding of japanese school systems, learning how to work with other people, the social aspect of school, is not as important. We do way more SEL at our school; we're still not a blip on the radar for traditional japanese schools. Of course, I say that

not knowing so much about traditional Japanese schools; however, I have a friend who I met in high school who is a Japanese national, she was an exchange student, and is not a principal at a school in Japan. So I've gone and talked to her a couple of times about education, so some of what I'm saying is based off of a Japanese person who went to Japanese school and didn't like it."

GREG: Although Brian does point out that his perspective is not one of a traditional Japanese student, which I already knew, he does have a fascinating insight that's quite unique. After we spoke, Brian emailed me the name of the school where his friend is a principal, and I think it's relevant to point out that it's actually a private school named LOOHCS (that's the word school spelled backwards) and is named this because it is looking to celebrate the kind of self-directed environment that promotes student agency and autonomy over their own learning. They actually have a partnership with the local school there in their small town in Japan which, to be honest, I think speaks to the paradigm shift we're seeing in education all over the world, and I couldn't be more excited about that.

My conversation with Brian did also involve some thoughts on creating an inclusive learning environment, since one of the reasons he was hired was because of his special education credential. So while project-based learning is something he is there to model and promote, I did get a chance to talk to Brian about how he's been working with his colleagues to create a more inclusive learning environment.

BRIAN: "Ya, so the reason I came to Japan in the first place for that other school was because they thought they wanted to do project-based learning, […] this newer school needed a special education teacher […credentials...] because there's still that big stigma about special ed here in japan, like if you have a child with a learning disability... often times, we'll say japan is about twenty years behind with those kinds of social things at a school, you wouldn't find an intentionally inclusive classroom in a traditional Japanese school, you'd have that student in the corner and grind them to make them work... a few parents don't understand why their student just can't get better if they just work harder, like if he just studies harder his autism will go away, and i'm like that's not how that works. and, like if it happened back home it would cause an outrage, [...] but here it's just that these parents have no idea, and i feel like back home we should know better... we're just a bit farther ahead when it comes to social awareness."

GREG: With Brian's perspective coming from a progressive schooling experience in Southern California with credentials and experience in teaching math and special education, I ask Brian a tough question and he gives a tough answer. The question I ask is: how have people responded to these opinions he has about what school is and what school ought to be. Especially in context of this stark difference between what school is in Japan and what Brian is being asked to introduce to this international school

in Japan. I was curious what kinds of responses he has experienced from both the staff as well as the community.

BRIAN: "There's a large conversation happening with my department right now which is talking about what inclusive education is. What we've been asking the staff is, do we need to change the student, or do we need to change the classroom? And that's the first time, in like six months, I had the staff go, "uh, the student?" and I'm like, no. the kid's not learning, and it's your fault. It's not his fault. Fortunately, part of my job is to model instruction. That's been really positive, where the message of what we're trying to do as a learning support program was unclear before, and we're trying to change it from, hey, this kid has a documented diagnosis for a disability so clearly he has learning support needs, to all students need learning support needs. you mentioned in your episode on inclusive education, and how all students need an IEP, and it's absolutely true, every kid is special needs, especially the kids who aren't. So i think it's slow, if Japan is twenty years behind this, my school's maybe about ten years behind this, and my metric for that is, we're doing a lot of things that I did in high school as a student, so that's what I have to compare it."

GREG: My biggest takeaway from my conversation with Brian was this idea that a school can become what we want it to be, if we know what we want our students to value. The fact that this international school brought Brian on board in the first place because of his focus on inclusive, project-based learning, tells me that the school values a teacher-student relationship that shares the authority, as well as the responsibility, for learning. I get the sense that the teachers at this international school still maintain an edge of authority over some aspects of student learning, which, when compared to the self-directed learning spaces highlighted in the last episode, still places this school more on the traditional side of the education coin, though it's really cool to hear how it's making active efforts to lean more toward the self-directed side of things. And when I think about the value of Respect, and this balancing of authority and self-worth over what, when, and how we learn, and I think about my conversation with Amanda Presutto on Responsibility and ownership of learning, it's this layer of values we place on expectations for certain relationships that I think is critical for exploring who we are and how we learn. In the next episode, I explore this same layer by looking at the value of Trust, and what it means to build trust in relationships as well as in ourselves.

And before I bring this fourth episode to a close, I'd like to once again revisit this second season's introductory episode when I talk about capturing a rainbow. This layer of values is not in itself an explanation for who we are and how we learn. The topics and all of the people throughout this season are all part of the environment responsible for this "rainbow". The question to ask is not how this episode answers all our questions but rather how these ideas connect with the ideas in the other episodes, to create a shared language that's meaningful to you and your community, and are specific to the goals

you want to create and share along with them. So I hope you're enjoying this episode and I thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.