

An Inspirational Message from Ashtyn Berry

2022 Burroughs Wellcome Fund Southwest Region Teacher of the Year

“Our journey starts with the understanding that no great good can be done for a people if we do not listen to them first. Powerful teaching is rooted in powerful listening.” -Cornelius Minor

Around this time of year, I often hear teachers (especially beginning teachers) being given advice about classroom management and student expectations. Phrases like “reteach rules and procedures after winter break” and “reestablish your high expectations” and more troubling ones such as “make sure to crack down” and “bring down the hammer” have been most prevalent in my experience. When I was a new teacher, I thought those phrases meant that I was expected to become more stern or stricter after the arrival of the new year in order to maintain control in my classroom...that I had to make sure my students remembered how “school works” in order to ensure their success as we crept toward the ever-looming testing season. There was a lot at stake (we were often reminded) and it was up to us to make sure things went according to plan. This advice made it seem as though compliance was the ultimate goal...the ultimate success criteria of an effective teacher. Even as a beginning teacher, this message didn’t sit well with me. Although it took me a few years to feel brave enough to challenge this advice during conversations and meetings with my colleagues, I knew that concentrating on the things my students weren’t doing “right” instead of the unique strengths they each brought to our classroom community meant that I would constantly have to look at them through a deficit lens. I knew that placing more value on compliance and control rather than authentic relationships meant that I would run the risk of overlooking all of the amazing parts of my students’ identities that **should** be seen as assets in the classroom.



“Cracking down in the new year” just wasn’t for me. I quickly noticed that not only does this practice not work, but it is also no fun at all (for anyone), and it contributes to the inequities that have become increasingly prevalent in our public schools as evidenced through glaring disparities in exclusionary disciplinary action data across student subgroups. Although I agree that classroom culture normally needs a revamp about halfway through the academic year, I have found that this goal is better accomplished by intentionally **sharing** power rather than hoarding it (which is possible without lowering expectations). Rapport, trust, and inspiration are much more effective tools than harsh rules and punitive discipline.

Last year, author and educational researcher Carla Shalaby posed a thought-provoking question regarding classroom management on Twitter: "Do I want to model how to use power to manage people in a space, or how to use it to hold and make space?" Don’t walk- RUN to go follow her if you aren’t already! I challenge you to push against the deficit mindsets you encounter in your schools by harnessing her words through your pedagogy and praxis. Hold and make space for ALL of your students by fearlessly celebrating their humanity and complete identities. Allow them to see yours, too! Not only will you notice your classroom community growing stronger, but student engagement will increase as well. If you find yourself in need of inspiration while lesson planning or designing curriculum, use your

students' stories, interests, passions, and funds of knowledge to make decisions and choose instructional materials!

My favorite way to hold and make space for ALL of my students is through a project that we complete together called the Family Stories Project. Inspired by JoBeth Allen's *Creating Welcoming Schools* (2007), this project invites all students and their families to share a story with the class that provides insight into their family's culture, traditions, history, etc. Although stories can be collected a number of different ways, my students love recording them at home with their loved ones and then sharing the videos during our morning meeting time. This time is set aside each day for us to celebrate our unique differences and discuss them as assets in our classroom. After hearing students' stories, I can then use each one as inspiration for choosing anchor texts, designing projects, or planning instructional units! For example, a student's family story about immigrating to the United States from Sudan could possibly spark a service-learning project about water inequality. Another student's story about their family farm in India can enhance your science unit about plants and soil. Another student's family story about a special meal they make to celebrate a holiday can supplement your ELA unit centered around technical nonfiction texts (which include recipes). The possibilities are endless and can make lesson planning a lot more fun and culturally responsive!

As I wrap up my thoughts, I will leave you with wise words from award winning author and educator Cornelius Minor (and yes, you should go follow him too if you aren't already)! In the first pages of his book *We Got This* (2020), Minor explains, "Our journey starts with the understanding that no great good can be done for a people if we do not listen to them first. Powerful teaching is rooted in powerful listening." As you press on with the 2022-2023 school year, I invite you to lead in your classrooms and your schools by **listening to your students and their stories.** Doing so will empower you to see your students through an asset-based lens rather than concentrating on deficits. Trust me...they will notice, and you will all reap the benefits together!

NC Beginning Teacher Professional Development Corner

ELA Newsletter

In this month's BT PD Corner check out the helpful resources on [Phonological Awareness](#) for elementary and secondary grades in the provided by the NCDPI ELA Consultants.

Upcoming Twitter Chat

Join educators state-wide on February 16th at 7 pm for our North Carolina Beginning Teacher Twitter Chat. The theme will be "See Kindness; Be Kindness"? in recognition of National Random Acts of Kindness Day. Login to your Twitter account and follow hashtag #NCBTChat to participate.

