Season 2, Episode 8: "Personality Traits"
Guest: Heather Abreu, Visual Arts Teacher

Welcome to Season Two of The Exploring the Core Podcast. I'm your host, Greg Mullen.

In this episode, I'll be sharing a conversation I had with Heather Abreu, a teacher and parent of two, who has an amazing perspective for meeting her students where they're at. She does this by reflecting on herself and who she is as an individual in context of the communities she chooses to be a part of, and the environments she creates. And with this perspective in mind, I'll be exploring the innermost layer of my framework which looks at personality. And when I talk about 'Personality', some might think of the kind of online quizzes that compare you to a comic book character, or place you in a specific Hogwarts House (I'm a Hufflepuff), but there are also very elaborate personality assessments that get pretty deep into the kinds of thoughts and beliefs that reflect your personality. Well, when I return, I'm going to explore a well-researched framework for identifying specific traits of a personality, and connect it to education in a way that I believe solidifies its place at the core of my framework for who we are - and how we learn.

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Classroom teachers often feel a lot of pressure to create an all-inclusive learning environment that is lively and engaging; a space that is well-organized with a sense of order and consistency, but also one that's flexible, imaginative, and promotes curiosity. There also seems to be an expectation for it to have ample space for collaborative and energetic discourse while also serving as a quiet and focused workspace when needed.

And this pressure teachers feel is very real. I've felt it in every classroom I've taught over the last decade, and for years I thought I was doing something wrong because I couldn't seem to strike that balance between all of these contrasting, and at times contradicting, expectations for my classroom environment, and so I'd have students who maybe were a bit more efficient and organized in their approach to things, while also have in that same group those who were more easy-going with their thoughts and habits. And for every student who was more outgoing, friendly, and amenable to going along with things, there was one who was more detached or skeptical about the kind of collaborative learning environment I would try to create.

Well, as it turns out, there's a reason why my classrooms ended up looking and feeling like it wasn't ever right for every student on my class roster, and why there seemed to always be a student or two who just didn't seem to be as productive as I wanted them to be in my classroom, and that's because the way I designed my classroom directly reflected my personality, and it just didn't gel with every student that walked into my room.

Now this doesn't mean I couldn't have ever reached those kiddos, but without being aware of it, I was trying to get them to adhere to a set of personality traits that simply didn't work for them.

Now the personality traits I'm going to be talking about are actually a Psychological Trait Theory that's been around for decades. It's called The Five Factor Model, or "The Big Five". Created back in the 1980s, it's based on a century of personality trait research, and this particular set of five traits has since been researched and replicated in a variety of contexts and disciplines with little discrepancy to its validity as a trait theory.

And these traits are easy to remember, since the five trait names form the acronym OCEAN, the O referring to our Openness to new experiences, and ranges from being inventive and curious to cautious and relatively closed-minded toward new ideas. The next is Conscientiousness, referring to our sense of organization and dependability, ranging from efficient thoroughness to easy-going carelessness. Then we have the trait Extraversion, referring to our desire to socialize, and ranges from our preference for being outgoing and energetic to reserved and solitary. The fourth trait is Agreeableness, our willingness to go along with things and trust that people have our best interests in mind. This trait typically ranges from compassionate and pleasing to skeptical and confrontational. But the last trait, the 'N' in OCEAN, refers to Neuroticism, our predisposition to psychological stress. This trait looks at how we respond to situations with varying degrees of either confidence or anxiety, and it's unfortunate that this trait often has a negative connotation, because to have zero of this trait is to have zero fear or concern which can be just as dangerous as having too much fear and anxiety about the world. So all five traits, together, create a way of reflecting about ourselves, as people, but as educators it gives us a particularly fascinating insight into so many aspects of our role in education. And there's a growing body of research from around the world that supports the use of this trait theory in education.

For example, a 2011 study from a team at the University of Southern Mississippi showed a small but significant connection between the leadership and self-efficacy of a teacher and their level of openness and conscientiousness. A 2014 study out of Nigeria found strong correlation between these traits and a teacher's effectiveness, while another 2014 study out of the University of Novi Sad, in Serbia, showed how these traits also played a role in how students perceive the effectiveness of their teachers, with students of social and humanistic sciences favoring more extravert, open and conscientious teachers than students of technical and natural sciences. In fact, a study published just this year, in March of 2021, showed that these traits, specifically Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, have positive direct effects on online academic self-efficacy.

Now when people talk about these traits, it's critically important that we not see them as a one-or-the-other situation. A person is not an extrovert or an introvert - there's a range between the two extremes that most people fall somewhere between. So is there a

benefit to being higher on one trait or another? No! And that's the point. Someone who is higher on one trait will simply have a tendency for certain ranges of different attributes than someone lower in that trait, and it has nothing to do with a person's capacity to think, and feel, and be.

In fact, most introverted people can socialize just fine and it can actually be hard to recognize them at a party or some other familiar or comfortable social gathering, but at some point that person will need to recuperate, and how quickly and for how long will vary for each person, which is where this trait can help us to understand. Plus, a person can be higher on the scale for Extraversion and also higher for Conscientiousness, and that kind of extroverted person would be different than someone who is also higher on the Extraversion scale but lower on the Conscientiousness scale; so when you think of all five traits having these wide ranges of scale, it gives us an extremely wide range of possible combinations across all five traits, and that by reflecting on our own balances and ratios of these traits, we can start making some sense as to how, as educators, maybe instead of trying to create a classroom that can meet any possible personality combination for any student that walks into a room, we create a baseline of clean and organized spaces and resources that you and your students can fill in as you learn about each other, about who they are, and how they learn. Because once you know what your own balance of traits are, it's not like you can walk into any classroom with thirty other people and just "do school" like you did every year before. Because, honestly, the first week of conventional schooling has always been about icebreakers and name games, routines and procedures, and setting the tone of the classroom for the year to come. And a big reason for this is to help students get to know how you, as their teacher, want them to learn certain tasks, to learn where things are, to become accustomed to the norms and traditions you have in mind to make your job as their teacher more manageable - and that's a completely reasonable expectation. But when you start to reflect on how those norms and traditions are tied to your own preferences based on how extraverted, how open, how conscientious, how agreeable you are, and then think about the percentage of students that really don't understand why things have to be done that way for them to learn the things you're asking them to learn, maybe that whole "well, they just have to do things they don't like" approach to teaching is perhaps causing a lot of the challenging behaviors in students who are less Agreeable, less Open, or more Conscientious with regards to who they are and how they learn.

Now for those that choose to explore this layer of personality traits, keep in mind that reflecting on these traits may help you to recognize and respond to challenges you face moving forward, but that it will do you no good to simply say someone else has a personality trait and therefore is - or is not - willing or able to learn - No! Recognizing and responding to challenges according to this layer of personality traits is meant to give you the insight to reflect on how you might actually have a tendency to react rather than respond, and recognize whether a student or colleague has a tendency to need more time to think through a problem because maybe they're a bit more introverted and a lot of

processing happens without them energetically talking out loud to other people about what they're working through.

And I want to end this segment with *Why* these personality traits are at the core of my framework, because this layer influences every other layer in this framework. These traits influence our ranges of the six attributes I talk about in the last episode; and knowing how these traits influence those ranges of behaviors can help us identify the kinds of social-emotional competencies we may need to develop in ourselves as well as our students; and from there, that can guide our understanding of values like responsibility, respect, and trust, which can give us the context we need to understand the larger elements that make up our learning environment, the structural relationships in our classroom, the governmental hierarchy for decision-making in both our classroom and on our school campus, and the norms and traditions of behaviors which we may be placing value on over others. But it's this innermost layer of this framework that places emphasis on knowing ourselves, well enough to recognize in others, the attributes that can cause the same behaviors to look different in different people, and so, in context of school and learning, its this layer that I believe gets at the core of who we are and how we learn.

And on that note, I'd like to shift to the conversation I had with Heather Abreu. She and I talked about these kinds of personality traits and she shared with me some really inspiring thoughts about how and why, in order to meet her students where they're at, she reflects on where she's at personally, in context of the groups with which she intentionally chooses to gather, as a teacher, as a parent, a friend, colleague, and community member. So stick around as I share my conversation with Heather Abreu.

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GREG: Heather Abreu is a visual arts teacher in Denver, Colorado. And at the time of our chat, she was teaching remotely because of the pandemic, which does come up in how we reflect on a number of things in our conversation. Well, and that's what I was most interested in, is her perspective toward self-reflection, and not just with the kinds of personality traits we get into a bit, but the impact this kind of self-reflection can have on how we see our role as educators. Now prior to our chat, we both agreed to take three personality tests on truity dot com: the Five Factor personality test, the Myers-Briggs 16 Types Assessment, and the Enneagram Test. We also both agreed that these results were for the benefit of our own individual reflection and personal growth, and not for placing value judgements on ourselves or anybody else. When we did finally get together to chat about the results from our surveys, one of my first questions for Heather was about her interest in exploring this topic and what she was looking to get out of this kind of data.

HEATHER: Well, I think, and I can only come from a personal standpoint, looking at the predictors that I've already kind of been chewing on and playing with are the ideas of,

"Am I gathering with the right people". When we gather with people in the context of different purpose, we're seeking or looking for a different need or want, whether that's what we're bringing to belong, or what that we're receiving to feel that same sense of purpose and belonging. So what of these factors, what factors do I need to gather to know that I am meeting with purpose with the right people. I wanted to find that and look at that and kind of gather information towards that. Then along with that, it also means taking a hard look at myself, and be like, well, what are people gathering *for*, and I need to better define that.

GREG: Now this led me to ask about this idea of gathering, and where this interest for finding purpose in gathering came from, which ended up being its own really interesting topic with its only really interesting insights.

HEATHER: I was listening to a podcast with Renee Brown and she had this amazing author on there. Her entire life's work has been about the art of gathering, and I'm blanking on her name right now but I'll look it up for you in a second - Pria Parker, I remembered, Pria Parker. And so I've just been, for a couple weeks now, just digging in to this idea and it came about as my own personal need of just looking at how we gather, like how I choose to gather with people, and how differently that looks right now, in my own personal life, and then what that looks like inside the context of school and how we're gathering right now. Like, how the heck my children get to hang out with other people right now. Looking at the idea of church, and community, and all the things like, these are still happening, but how are they happening, and why are they happening? So the art of gathering talks about the concept of these invisible structures that are in place that help people to gather with a purpose, whatever that purpose is, it's so simply to stay grounded in that purpose. Then looking at what different people take away from those gatherings because I fully accept that not everyone views the world the same way that I do, not everyone has the same needs that I do, but the understanding that we all gather with a common purpose and then what people take away from that is there's to take, or is there's to give, what you bring to the table.

GREG: Now when we did get into our personality test results, it didn't surprise us to find that, on the Big Five personality test, we both had our top three traits be, in this same order: Openness as our highest trait by a long shot, Extraversion second, and Agreeableness a close third. Now conscientiousness and neuroticism were different between the two of us but both were pretty close behind Agreeableness, and it was when we then looked at the Enneagram and Myers-Briggs, we noticed that the kinds of descriptors that defined those assessment results aligned pretty closely to how we were being depicted by the Big Five personality traits. For example, my own Myers-Briggs type was primarily ENTP, which is described by the truity website as an inspired innovator, and the Enneagram test had me as what's called a "Five" and describes this type as alert, insightful, and curious, both of which aligns pretty well to results from The Big Five personality test. So as Heather and I reflected on this self-assessment data together, I

was happy to hear how she viewed these kinds of assessments and the data they provide her.

HEATHER: I love the concept of the toolbox, right? I looked at these tests, and I love that you gave me a new tool with The Big Five because I had never heard of it before. It's the idea of using these tools to help us understand ourselves more so that then we can manage and grow and change and adapt in wherever we choose to go and whatever we choose to do, with the understanding that I get to define me; but these are tools to help me take a mirror to myself and see that aren't going through the filter of someone else, because other people can be a mirror for my behaviors and choices as well, which has such great quality, but I don't want to define myself by other people, I don't want to define myself by social constructs, I want to define myself based on the tools I choose to use, that are useful and beneficial to me. My whole thing as an educator is, I'm here to teach students about themselves, and give them the tools to learn about who they are, and what they need, and what they want, and then how to pursue. I understand that these kids just get shoved into a school, it's a neighborhood school, it's a school they pick, whatever, but why can't the culture of the school be flexible to who we are including in it. It's so important, because, again, the understanding of, yes, I want you to fit into a society, I have no idea what that society is going to look like when you're twenty years old, but we're trying to plan toward a society that you'll fit into based on the skills and habits and behaviors that you're able to hold inside of yourself and participate with…

GREG: Now Heather and I talked more about these traits and their impact on the larger, outer layers of who we are and how we learn, and I'd like to again stress this connection between personality traits and the outer layers of this framework because, as we explore what it is that makes us who we are, it becomes readily apparent that who we are plays a role in how we interact with others, how we form groups, how we make rules and decisions that impact others in ways that may spark a response we didn't expect, and that all comes back to our understanding of people. And this is definitely true of a school setting because its sole purpose is entirely rooted in the gathering of people, but especially a gathering for the purpose of self-improvement, of learning, and I said this in the last episode that Learning is Change, so the more we understand about how we learn, the more we understand about how we can change as individuals, and how we can change as groups. And this knowledge about who we are at our core, if we were to teach this knowledge to children, and create a learning environment that is adaptive to their development as people, that it could be a gamechanger for education, which is a topic that Heather and I talked about toward the end of our conversation. We ended up talking about the words What, Why, and How, in context of the idea that, if we're expecting our students to be adaptable in their ability to learn and grow in this world, if that's our What, then a conversation must be had about Why schools must then be made to be adaptive to the developing needs of students and their families, so they can learn to be the adaptable people we're expecting them to become. It was all part of this idea I have for a

Self-Directed Schooling environment, and Heather had some powerful thoughts about this idea.

HEATHER: My heart hurts when I look at this idea, because this idea is so fantastic. The understanding that you expect kids to adapt, be flexible, persevere, all of these things, but yet we do not have a system in place that teaches them how to do that. We have teachers who bend over backwards half the time to teach kids how to do things, to show them in real-life construct as well as in the classroom, this is what all of these qualities look like, but the system needs to be adapted to be that same thing, the same thing the teachers are generating inside of a microcosm of a lesson, a classroom, those things are functioning, those things are beautiful, and creating culture inside of gatherings, constantly, but what do we need to do as a society to update the invisible structures that are around us to move that into the centerpiece. We want to put students first, we want them at the center of what we're doing, but how do we allow them to be autonomous human beings for each individual, you know, we throw the word autonomy around all the time as the idea of, well, you get to be you, and I'm like, yes, but that's not cookie cutter. (Greg: and we want them to be themselves in context of the social groups that they find themselves in, so they have to be adaptable to what everyone else is individually trying to become) and when you become an adult you get to pick, like right now I'm struggling through. I get to pick my friend group. I get to pick the church I go to. I have all these choices and half the time I don't know what to do with myself because I've been told this is the mold of the school, this is the mold of what it looks like for your family, this is what - adapt, adapt, adapt, adapt, I'm really good at that! - what I'm not great at as a person is going, 'I get to build this myself? I get to make all the choices as to who I include and who I don't, what I choose to do and what I don't with my free time, with my work time' - it's overwhelming! I can only imagine what my students feel.

GREG: Heather got me thinking about a conversation I've had with a number of different educators and professionals, about the power of What, Why, and How. The What being crucial for identifying a specific goal, the Why giving context for that goal, and the How being the particular approach for meeting that goal. And so I asked Heather about this idea about this What, this goal of changing school to be more *adaptive* to its students and families who we are hoping will become *adaptable* humans that can cope with whatever comes in our future. Well I ask Heather about this, and how often she thinks teachers talk about this idea of What, Why, and How, with each other, but more importantly with our students, whether we are helping them to discover their own Why for becoming the kind of life-long learners that will serve them well in the future.

HEATHER: Well, I love this, because, no, I feel like we tell them a lot. We tell them a lot of things. We show them and we tell them a lot of things. But asking that genuine question, 'why are you in our class today?' And given the way we are having to meet right now, my students don't have to show up to our class - they choose to, they elect to; when I ask why are you here right now. Because whatever your Why is, it might be twelve different

Whys from the twelve kids that show up, but whatever your Why is, that's where the individualized self-directed learning takes place. I want to learn origami today, yes, let's do it. Why are you here? I missed you. Great! Let's connect! Whatever it might be.

GREG: Heather Abreu is teaching in Denver, Colorado, with her two girls, in a community where she is valued by many. It was great to talk with her about her perspective and approach as an educator, and it's always a good experience talking with educators who are doing so much to make the kinds of changes that will benefit young humans moving forward. But we can't presume that, just because these teachers are working to implement these kinds of changes, working to make this kind of bottom-up change happen, that there must somehow be top-down support by administrators and the families informing that school's leadership as to what they want that school to be. The kind of bottom-up change that teachers are ready and willing to enact requires constant and open lines of communication and ongoing reflection at all levels of a school as well as its community.

And as I bring this episode to a close, I want to take this moment to really highlight the idea I introduced at the start of this second season, the idea of capturing a rainbow, because the personality trait theory I discussed in this episode is not solely by itself a means for making meaningful change to education. The topics and all of the people throughout this second season are all part of an environment that ultimately shares in the responsibility for that metaphorical rainbow. The question to ask is not how this episode answers our all questions about who we are and how we learn, but how the ideas presented connect with the ideas in the other episodes to help us understand ourselves as individuals as part of larger communities, that's helpful to improving you as a person, and your various communities both big and small, locally and globally. So I hope you're enjoying this second season, and I thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.