Case 6.1: Kindness Pledge

The student demographics at Lozen School, where Mr. Bankston started teaching more than twenty years ago, were unique for its suburban region. It was predominately white, like other schools in the region, but unlike those schools its second biggest racial group was comprised of mostly second and third generation Asian American students. The biggest portion of these students were from families whose ancestors had immigrated from China several generations ago.

Mr. Bankston enjoyed working at a school with a unique student body. He always volunteered to present at the annual fall "Inclusion and Belonging" conference hosted by his district. The theme of the most recent conference was "The Power of Kindness." Mr. Bankston was excited by the idea of using *kindness* as a springboard for talking with students about matters of equity and diversity. He felt it would provide a positive, constructive approach for talking about bias, bullying, and discrimination, and seemed more accessible a concept for his students than, say, structural racism.

Soon after the conference Mr. Bankston initiated a Kindness Matters club at his school. He hung messages about kindness around his classroom. When he noticed students mistreating one another, he made it a point to focus, not on the negativity of the mistreatment, but on the positivity of kindness. Instead of saying, "We don't talk to each other that way in this classroom," for example, he might say, "In this classroom we lead with kindness." He asked students to sign a kindness pledge.

One day Mr. Bankston heard a commotion in the back of his classroom. He noticed Min, a Chinese American student, bent over her desk crying. Jeremy, a white student, was standing over her. When Mr. Bankston approached the students and asked what happened, Jeremy responded, "I don't know. She just started crying."

Wei, a Chinese American student who had witnessed what happened, defended Min. "No she's didn't, Jeremy. You're a racist."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Mr. Bankston replied. "Let's remember our kindness pledge, Wei. We don't want to throw language like 'racist' around. Lead with kindness."

He asked Min if she wanted to talk about what was going on. Slowly she raised her head.

Pointing at Jeremy, she said, "He keeps saying *I* caused COVID and killed people. He's been doing this all year."

"Is that true, Jeremy?" Mr. Bankston asked.

Jeremy answered, "That's what my parents said. China made COVID and sent it here to kill Americans."

Mr. Bankston wanted to be careful to not directly criticize Jeremy's parents and their views, so he turned his attention back to kindness. "Whatever we might believe about COVID or what this or that country might have done, in this classroom we lead with kindness. What you're saying to Min is unkind."

Wei interjected, "It's not unkind. It's racist."

"That goes for you, too, Wei," Mr. Bankston replied. "Let's find a way to have this conversation where we all presume the best in each other."

"You want us to be kind to somebody who's being racist toward us?" Min asked. "What are you going to do about Jeremy being racist?"

It struck Mr. Bankston in that moment that he had been chastising Wei for sticking up for Min. And he was about to chastise Min for holding Jeremy accountable for the damage he was

doing. And aren't both of those actions—sticking up for a friend and holding somebody accountable for harm they're doing—also forms of kindness? Maybe he needed to rethink the relationship between kindness and equity.

Questions

1. The notion of kindness has become more and more popular in schools, as in larger society, and often is associated with conversations about bias and bullying. Why do you think the idea of kindness has become so popular?
2. How might you have handled the situation differently from how Mr. Bankston handled it when Wei defended Min?
3. Jeremy said that he heard from his parents that Chinese people made COVID to kill Americans. Mr. Bankston was cautious about directly countering or criticizing Jeremy's parents' view. Was that the right choice, in your opinion? If not, what would you do differently? Should our approach to addressing Jeremy's actions account for the fact that he was socialized by his family to believe harmful things?
4. How might the idea of kindness obscure the need for stronger equity solutions? Is there a way to frame kindness so that it supports equity efforts?

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