

An aerial photograph of a dense urban neighborhood, likely in New York City, showing a mix of brick buildings, green trees, and rooftops. The image is used as a background for the text.

CLOSE

BUT

FAR

## You'd think growing up just a few miles away would help you understand and connect with your students. Not necessarily.

BY KIRBY MORRISON

I grew up just outside of Boston, less than 15 miles from where I now work. Despite the fact that my students and I seemingly grew up down the road from one another, we might as well come from different worlds.

My school is in Dorchester, a diverse section of Boston. Dorchester was annexed to Boston in 1870 but has such a strong sense of pride and community that it often feels like a separate city entirely.

Many of my students are first- or second-generation immigrants from Haiti or Vietnam whose family members speak limited English. Many others are from Irish-American families that have lived in the same neighborhood for generations. Much of what accounts for our cultural differences, however, is that my students and I grew up in entirely different circumstances, mere miles apart. Growing up in the inner city and growing up in the suburbs has shaped our lives and the ways

in which we view and interpret the world.

My quiet suburban town didn't have the violence, poverty and crime that exist in Dorchester. You felt safe walking anywhere in town at any time of day. My first introduction to the vigilance necessary in Dorchester came in my first year of college when I went to play tennis with a group of classmates on the notorious Blue Hill Avenue. While we were waiting for a bus back to campus, a police officer pulled up and told us we really shouldn't be out there and that it wasn't safe. My students aren't afforded the luxury of the naïve innocence provided by the quiet suburbs.

In spite of our cultural differences, my students and I find common ground and form meaningful connections. Much of our ability to develop rapport can be attributed to our willingness to embrace these very differences. Our life experiences offer new perspectives and new ways of viewing the world.

### Fourth-Grade Lunch Group

“Is today a good day for lunch?” I’ve taken maybe three steps into our school’s gym when a fourth-grade student approaches me with this question. Although, it’s not so much a question as it is a demand. Each morning, from 7:15 to 7:35, I watch over all students who have arrived early for school until morning assembly begins. This seems to be the preferred time for this particular fourth-grade girl to inquire daily about lunch.

After I tell her today would be a good day, she rattles off the names of five friends she would like to invite. We lightheartedly argue – a major component of our rapport – over how many friends she can invite. Eventually, I put my foot down and say only two are allowed. We settle on three.

This is my third year at St. John Paul II Catholic Academy, and this student has been coming to my office for lunch groups since she was in second grade. It initially began as a way for her to develop social skills and has morphed into an opportunity for a relaxing lunch for her to continue honing her social skills and me to learn more about her culture.

Unable to resist the chance for a practical joke, I decide to convince this student and her friends at lunch that I was born in Haiti. She, like most of her friends, is of Haitian descent. Anticipating their skepticism, I craft a backstory and even look up a few words in Creole to add some legitimacy to my story. After some intense questioning and speculation among the group, the girls are fairly certain I’m joking.

This may not seem like the work of a school counselor at first glance, but it is rapport development – the foundation of effective counseling. I leverage our relationship, built over lunches and silly jokes, so I can push and challenge these students to become leaders in and out of the classroom.

The key to my success with this group and with the students in my school is my ability to relate to them. Much of that relatability comes from my personal style, which is infused with energy and humor, but also from the school counselor/student dynamic. Taking a genuine interest in my students’ lives and treating them with respect supersedes any cultural

differences. What student doesn’t appreciate someone taking a genuine interest in his or her life?

Having the ability to relate to my students has been tremendously valuable and overrides any obstacles our cultural differences may create. Furthermore, because of this ability to connect, our differences don’t divide us; rather, they offer an opportunity for new perspectives and new ways of viewing the world.

### Altered Perceptions

Prior to working at my school, the little I did know about Dorchester was negative. Dorchester was one of those places you weren’t supposed to go to, a place on



My students and I may come from different worlds, but we form a connection and rapport regardless.

the news where shootings happen. What I missed, and have since experienced, is the sense of community and pride associated with living in Dorchester. Sure, there was pride in coming from my hometown and a sense of community but not to this level. Parents seem to all know each other and take an active interest in each other’s lives – for good or bad – instead of going their separate ways. Compared with the often-cold community feel of the suburbs, Dorchester has a vibrant and warm feel. To develop a notion of it from newspaper clippings doesn’t do it justice.

I also knew next to nothing about Haitian or Vietnamese culture. Working

with my students has exposed me to aspects of their culture and educated me on their values, beliefs, norms and customs. My students enjoy asking questions about my life, such as where I grew up and where I went to school. This provides a great opportunity for individuals from different worlds to share their experiences and broaden our world views.

In addition to school counseling, I coach the school’s seventh- and eighth-grade basketball team. Because of Boston’s rush hour traffic, going home after school and coming back for a practice or a game can be a nightmare. Instead, I typically stick around Dorchester to grab some food or read a book in my car and maybe close my eyes. This can be a challenge as finding a location safe enough to stay in my car for an extended period of time can be harrowing, especially at night. This seemingly trivial example has helped me understand, if only slightly, what it must be like growing up in the inner city.

When our team – coming from the city and made up entirely of minorities – plays against suburban schools I always notice the stares from the suburban families as we enter their gymnasiums. Little moments like these show me a glimpse of what it might be like growing in Dorchester. I start to feel the Dorchester pride in moments like this, even though my status as a Dorchester resident might only be honorary.

The relatability and connection I have with my students also sends a powerful message. At first glance, a group of fourth-grade Haitian girls living in the inner city don’t have all that much in common with a white male school counselor from the suburbs. The bond I have formed with this group, and my students in general, sends the message that cultural differences don’t dictate with whom people connect.

### A Blank Slate

For some reason, my school happens to be chock-full of energetic, rambunctious boys. For some, this might be an issue, but I happen to know this type of student quite well because I was an energetic, rambunctious, mischievous boy myself. I have firsthand knowledge of the struggles these boys face with no place for all that

energy to go. I know what strategies help them – such as a run in the school gym or a walk out to the schoolyard – and, more importantly, what strategies don't help them. As helpful as this firsthand knowledge is, it also prompts introspection.

Although I understand this group of students particularly well, I question my effectiveness working with students when I may not have the same sort of insight into their lives. What intricacies and nuances might I be overlooking that someone who understands what it means to be a kid from the city or to grow up Haitian in Dorchester would immediately understand?

When I counsel students I enter the experience with a blank slate regardless of firsthand knowledge I may or may not have of a student's life experiences. I remind myself every student is unique, and it takes a lot to truly understand what it's like to walk in his or her shoes.


I lean on my students to teach me about their life experiences. My students

educated me on things foreign to my own personal existence, and they can see that I am truly interested in understanding the uniqueness of their lives.

This approach provides a rough blueprint to working with students who come from different cultural backgrounds than my own. We form a bond and rapport not because we were born in the same neighborhood, have the same color skin or have similar life experiences but rather because we form a human connection. With my fourth-grade lunch group, our connection comes from our lighthearted joking nature. With other students the connection is formed through meaningful conversations, drawing, taking a walk outside to calm down or a casual conversation in the hallway. Each student is unique and requires a unique approach.

Of course, there are struggles in being a cross-cultural school counselor. Different cultures and different neighborhoods vary in their beliefs and values.

A defining aspect of most cultures is protecting one's family. In Dorchester, this often means keeping any family issues within the home and out of reach of anyone who can help. This often amounts to a reluctance to share information with any school officials or school counselors, despite good intentions.

Although this is an example of cultural differences presenting as an obstacle, the vast majority of the time our differences aren't barriers. My students and I may come from different worlds, but we form a connection and rapport regardless. Along the way, perceptions are challenged, and new perspectives have been shared. Working in Dorchester has been full of challenges and rewarding experiences, all in a world distant from my hometown just miles down the road. 

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