



Fall Speaker
Tuesday, November 9, 2021
Zoom Webinar

**Connectedness: A Dialogue with
Rosetta Lee and Debario Fleming**

Welcome and Opening Remarks

This year's Fall Speaker Event featured a discussion with Rosetta Lee and Debario Fleming, who addressed an audience of more than 224 parents, teachers, DEI directors and other school administrators by zoom webinar. Elizabeth Savage, President of the Parents Council of Washington (PCW) welcomed attendees. The speakers were introduced by PCW Speaker Series Co-Chair, Melissa Dennis. The speakers conducted a discussion for approximately an hour, followed by a question-and-answer period led by Co-Chair, Jennifer Butler. The lead Co-Chair who helped to organize the event was Suzanne Dowd, and the summary was written by Suzanna Kang. PCW Administrator, Allison Taylor, provided Zoom and IT assistance and other administrative and communications support.

Featured Speakers

[Rosetta Eun Ryong Lee](#) is a faculty member at the Seattle Girls' School, teaching subjects such as science, math, technology, art, ethics, social justice, and more. Ms. Lee is also a professional outreach specialist, designing and delivering trainings for all constituencies of the school community, as well as the local and national educational and nonprofit sectors.

[Debario Fleming](#) is the director of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) at the Field School in Washington, DC. Prior to this role, Mr. Fleming was a faculty member and DEI practitioner at Sidwell Friends School for over twenty years.

Program Summary

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB). In schools and in our community, we talk about DEI and DEIB but this may mean different things to different people.

- Diversity
 - Sometimes when the word diversity is used, people really mean people of color.
 - Simply, diversity means differences and variety, which is value-added to a school community. For example:
 - In business, we seek to have a diverse portfolio so that if one area is not doing well there are others that can balance out.
 - In science, bio-diversity is critical for the survival of species and maintaining ecosystems.
 - In the fields of creativity, diversity is a must. Diverse groups outperform homogenous group with respect to innovations.
 - Look at diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic status, religion, age, etc. Within those there are intersections of identity, which make us who we are.
 - External factors to consider:
 - Geographic location --where we grew up
 - How we communicate our identity through appearance
 - Way our language manifests
 - Experiences with education
 - With all of these factors there are probably no two individuals who are the same. Diversity is the norm, not the exception
- Inclusion
 - Many believe in the independent school world that inclusion means that you are admitted or hired, and therefore, included.
 - Inclusion goes together with belonging to say that not only are you invited, but you have a seat at the table and your voice matters.
 - Worthiness is felt when you feel included and belong to an organization
- Equity
 - Many schools treated equity the same as equality, which means treating everyone the same and not talking about differences
 - Equity challenges us to recognize the unique experiences of each person or the obstacles that certain groups face
 - Treating everyone the same has the effect of keeping the status quo
 - Instead look at equality of outcomes in terms of opportunity, learning, and growth possibilities for all communities
 - This means recognizing and celebrating differences and naming those barriers that exist and actively seeking to remove the barriers
- Belonging
 - How do community members feel connected and like they belong?
 - They are missed when not there; their voice and contributions matter
 - A word to describe the intangible feeling of connection and doing/achieving it together.

- Schools are focusing on the student experience as well as the adult experience, especially with respect to historically marginalized groups.
- Mirroring is important --those groups tend to look for others that look like them or come from their background and how they are seen and treated within the community.

Fear and Cancel Culture. Sometimes people are afraid to try to learn new things because they are afraid of failure, especially in our current “cancel culture” and binary thinking.

- We need space to make mistakes and learn from them
 - If the choice is between being inclusive or a bigot, people are nervous about asking questions, which if answered, could actually help you to learn and grow
 - But fear of being marked as “not getting it” keeps us from asking
 - This gets tied to our moral worth –we see this on social media when someone makes a post or does something that is offensive to a particular group and half of social media followers attack that person for their overall moral character and the other half talks about all of the good of that person
 - We have to learn to disaggregate the action to say that the particular act is not okay (and not the whole moral character of the person) and learn to live in a world of “gray”—where things are not black or white
 - Important to teach kids how to navigate in this area of gray, to allow for mistakes (and acknowledge that mistakes will be made) and to learn strategies of how to address and fix mistakes
- People who are worried about or fearing failure will underperform. For example, for decades there have been studies of marginalized groups and if there is a stereotype about the race or intelligence of the group, the study participants are worried about the stereotype and they end up underperforming. One such study:
 - The Steele/Aronson/Spencer stereotype-threat study found that even passing reminders that someone belongs to one group or another, such as a group stereotyped as inferior in academics, can wreak havoc with test performance.¹

¹ According to the [American Psychological Association](#), Steele and Aronson gave Black and White college students a half-hour test using difficult items from the verbal Graduate Record Exam (GRE). In the stereotype-threat condition, they told students the test diagnosed intellectual ability, thus potentially eliciting the stereotype that Blacks are less intelligent than Whites. In the no-stereotype-threat condition, the researchers told students that the test was a problem-solving lab task that said nothing about ability, presumably rendering stereotypes irrelevant. In the stereotype threat condition, Blacks - who were matched with Whites in their group by SAT scores -- did less well than Whites. In the no stereotype- threat condition-in which the exact same test was described as a lab task that did not indicate ability-Blacks' performance rose to match that of equally skilled Whites. Additional experiments that minimized the stereotype threat endemic to standardized tests also resulted in equal performance. One study found that when students merely recorded their race

- Similarly, this occurs in groups who are historically in the majority. People do not want to be perceived as inappropriate, hurtful, unkind or bigoted, and that very worry makes people do worse.
 - Lee shared a personal example of not wanting offend a deaf colleague by doing things the stereotypical things people may do around deaf individuals (e.g., talk louder, make bigger gestures, enunciate words in exaggerated form), so she ended up speaking only when necessary. This person noticed that she didn't "hang out" and that their talks were "transactional" in nature. Because of her fear of offending him, Lee was so careful that she limited her conversations, which prevented a deeper connection, as she had with her other colleagues
- The best thing to do is to adopt a growth mindset, to try, to practice and to want to learn from mistakes to grow
- William Taylor's reflective competence model
 - Unconscious Incompetence --Often people say or do things that are problematic not because we have bad intentions or are bad people, but we never learned anything better ("I don't know what I don't know")
 - Moment of Discovery --e.g., someone called you out
 - Conscious incompetence --this is the stage you recognize we have a problem ("I know I don't know") and you put in learning and effort
 - Conscious Competence --we realize that we are doing this and we are doing better and make better choices ("I know what I know"); with practice we can it becomes second nature
 - Unconscious Competence --we just do it as a part of our everyday actions ("What I know becomes second nature")
- Everyone is at different stages of this competence model; need to show grace and patience with others not where you are at; help people to get to your level incrementally; also get support from people at your own competence level. For example,
 - If you are at the calculus level of math, you don't talk about calculus concepts to people who are at the addition/ subtraction level of math

(presumably making the stereotype salient), and were not told the test was diagnostic of their ability, Blacks still performed worse than Whites.

Spencer, Steele, and Diane Quinn, PhD, also found that merely telling women that a math test does not show gender differences improved their test performance. The researchers gave a math test to men and women after telling half the women that the test had shown gender differences, and telling the rest that it found none. When test administrators told women that that tests showed no gender differences, the women performed equal to men. Those who were told the test showed gender differences did significantly worse than men, just like women who were told nothing about the test. This experiment was conducted with women who were top performers in math, just as the experiments on race were conducted with strong, motivated students.

- There are many other things you introduce before you can get to calculus, but help those individuals get to multiplication/division.
- At the same time, enjoy the people in your calculus class

Affinity Groups. Many schools have questions on affinity groups, the value of having them (e.g., are they helpful or are they divisive) and guidelines on creating or maintaining affinity groups.

- Types of Affinity Groups
 - NAIS Definition. Lee uses the definition used by National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), which describes them as a bringing together of individuals who have an identifier in common (e.g., race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.); people who can speak from the experience from the “I” perspective
 - Alliance Group. Another type of affinity group is an alliance group. This is a group with a common commitment to an identifier, such as gay-straight alliances; coming together to build solidarity through partnerships
 - Interest Groups. People who join want to teach and learn. There is no expectation on people’s identities –this can be seen in culture clubs.
- Purpose of Affinity Groups
 - Create a space for safety and comfort
 - Sometimes individuals from historically marginalized groups are “code-switching” because they fear being seen as “less than”, weird or odd
 - They can let their “cultural hair down”
 - Unapologetically be themselves; eat their food; and speak the way they want
 - A space of critical mass –some schools still struggle with representation; a nice space to be with others in the group who understand or share your experience and sometimes they may look like you
 - Allows individuals not to be in a space where they are not the only one representing their particular identifier.
 - Create a space for affirming
 - In a world where there are a lot of disparaging message for so many groups, nice to have an affirming space.
 - For example a lot of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, (questioning), intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA) kids are often born to straight/cisgender parents, and sometimes those kids are not supported at home, and may be not even at school. The only place of belonging or love is in their affinity groups.
 - They can highlight history and stories of people within their group
 - Create a space to help prepare

- Often the individual is asked or put in a situation where they have to be the representative for their community.
 - In affinity groups they can learn more about their group and also learn a range of perspective of others within their own community so that when they are asked to represent, they have the “we” perspective.
 - Create a space for collective action
 - If there is a shared experience, an affinity group can amplify to the school community and changes can happen; for example, an African American affinity group had meaningful discussions with the school when English or history teachers introduced stories or source materials that use the “N” word and calling out the varying skillset in facilitating such a discussion
 - Some kids had hurtful and traumatic experiences not due to any intent to harm from the teachers but a lack of awareness and skill in facilitating these discussions.
 - The AA affinity group made a presentation to the English and history departments as black students in the classroom and what happens when the “N” word is used haphazardly, and this made the two departments more intentional in selecting the source materials and in facilitation the discussions
 - Lee believes that each student could have raised this matter individually, but the change happened quicker and more holistically when the affinity group represented the viewpoint in collective action.
- How to start an affinity group
 - For Lee, at her school, the Asian Pacific Islander (API) affinity group was very much organic with kids cluttering around her in the cafeteria
 - Kids were curious and glad to be with an API teacher like themselves and wanted to share culturally common information with her and with each other.
 - She saw that the kids needed a space to talk about their culture, and once an affinity group was formed, and kids attended once a week.
 - Meeting in the affinity group allowed API students to enjoy each other’s company, but in addition, it also gave them the confidence to interact more within the larger school community.
 - The African American students also wanted an affinity group as well, and that was created, and so forth –now over 12 groups in her small school of middle school girls.
 - Empowerment from a feeling that you are not alone
 - Some parents are opposed to affinity groups --even people within a marginalized group—because it has a feel of being set apart from the greater community.

- Reality is that there are affinity groups –informal ones, even if you don’t create official ones. For example:
 - Independent Schools are a form of an affinity group --you have to agree with the mission, you have to apply and get in, pay tuition, etc.
 - Grade-Levels are also a type of affinity space --based on age and not a free-for-all
 - Sports teams --you have to try out, get in and show up for practice –not a free for all
 - Faculty rooms –you can’t go in if you are not faculty
- Young people are forming affinity groups informally by themselves because kids need this type of safe space.
 - See *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Written by Beverly Daniel Tatum, Ph.D.
 - Drawbacks of having unofficial affinity group spaces like a lunch space
 - They aren’t necessarily available to all grades (maybe just one grade or a small subset) –how do you get to join if you are not in that grade or friendship group?
 - They are not moderated by an adult; student moderated spaces can reinforce stereotypes
 - True benefit is to appreciate the diversity within the affinity group as well as celebrating the shared experiences and solidarity
 - If you don’t create a school sponsored group, you can’t guarantee all people within the group have access and you don’t know if it truly is a healthy, safe space for all (or whether it’s reinforcing stereotypes)
- Difference between opt-in affinity groups v. forced segregation
 - Why would you prevent a group from wanting to get together?
- We know from research that students and parents from historically marginalized groups have a certain type of experience
 - This requires acknowledging that independent schools were originally created to exclude these historically marginalized groups.
 - We haven’t really reckoned with this history and legacy although schools have now opened up to include more diverse students.
 - And historically marginalized groups aren’t thriving.
 - Increase a sense of affirming and leverage the talents of the groups the schools have brought in
 - Well-run affinity groups can make a difference with historically marginalized groups who often struggle in independent schools.

- If schools don't organize affinity groups, provide an alternative that has been shown to provide a sense of belonging, worthiness, and ownership.

Questions and Answers

1. *How can parents encourage their schools and DEI programs to serve all families? As an API parent at a school known for diversity, we are feeling unseen as a parent group.*

Many schools tend to look at one identifier at a time; sometimes the squeakiest wheel gets the oil. Lee encouraged schools to gather data and look at them in disaggregated ways.

Schools have done intentional work for inclusivity for African American individuals. This is not about stopping that work. An API person will notice that the dialogue tends to be about black and white. API kids are perceived to be doing "just fine" but they are suffering from anxiety.

When schools engage in this kind of work, collect the data and look at disaggregated data! In St. Louis, at a school that Lee advised, when they looked at the data, they saw that African Americans had a greater sense of ownership and belonging than API Americans. The school wouldn't have known this without collecting and disaggregating the data.

In parent groups, look at whose voices are being heard and whether the parent group leadership is intentionally and actively seeking other voices. Sometimes it's the person who has time, and those thoughts are amplified.

A lot of people (for example, in the Korean culture) don't like to complain or raise issues because the institution has not invited them to make active comments. Schools can do a better job of soliciting thoughts from all perspectives and engage in an active level of questioning.

2. *What are other schools doing successfully to accomplish this in a more specific, tangible way? Are they doing more surveys or trying to make sure all communities are engaged? What are some good ideas that you have seen?*

Ultimately, data is important, and sometimes data speaks louder than experiences. But, stories can also provide important data.

- Demographic diversity— what are the demographics of the pool we draw from and are the people expressing interest in our school, applying to our school, who get into our school, and stay at our school –what is the representation and what is the patterns of over- or under-representation?

- Programmatic diversity –take a look at what is in the curriculum about identities and experiences that are taught, highlighted and featured; support programs or resource offices; financial aid to sports, equipment and trips and ancillary things; affinity groups; professional development for the teachers; annual events and assemblies, etc. In what ways do these programs demonstrate the school’s commitment to diversity?
- Affective diversity –when we ask members of our community, are there identity-based patterns of people who feel a sense of belonging and ownership and people who do not? For example, a school will say that 95% of the people feel a sense of belonging and ownership. Great news, but what if the entire 5% is made up of people of color or members of LGBTQIA. If the data is disaggregated this way, wouldn’t you, as a school, want to do something about this information? It’s not enough to seek data. You have to share the information and use the information to improve a sense of belonging and ownership.

3. *What can parents do if the school is not responding? How do you have the conversation so that the school can be more effective in DEI/DEIB work?*

Schools are tiptoeing around this work because there is some active resistance to DEI/DEIB work; those people may be telling half-truths and amplifying in social media and news media; you’ll hear something like “I’ll pull my donation dollars, if you do this.” Schools don’t want to be the next article or lose the funding. The resisters are amplifying and are louder. The supporters of DEI/DEIB must be just as loud in support of this work. Make your voice be heard; collectively amplify your voice.

4. *What can we do to address strong political views held by students that can create division and intolerance on both sides, and how do we encourage parents to deal with this and teach their kids?*

Kids are struggling with how to act when people disagree. They are witnessing debates and not dialogue. Dialogue and debate are different. In dialogue, we are actively listening to understand and to find commonalities. When I’m in debate, I’m listening for flaws and waiting for my opportunity to debunk your arguments. Kids are modeled on how to debate but not taught how to engage in dialogue. Parents can help kids know the difference between listening and agreeing, which are not the same. If you disagree, learn to say “Tell me more” or “How did this idea develop for you?”

Social media also contributes to this binary thinking because although it’s agnostic on what is believed, it wants to keep the engagement level high. It knows that twisting the facts or exaggerating one side can keep kids on the site

longer. This has a tendency to reinforce a singular idea, and more and more, to dehumanize the other viewpoint/side. When you are able to dehumanize someone, you are able to do more and more horrible acts without any cognitive dissonance. It's okay to challenge ideas but it's not okay to attack the individual personally.

5. *We are African American parents, and we have kids in many different DC area independent schools. In our experience, people who would most benefit from a session like this don't usually attend. Do you have any advice on how to engage with those parents in a non-defensive way to discuss statements of privilege and racism?*

When we talk about DEI/DEIB, we talk about the morality of doing it because it's the good, kind and nice thing to do. People think, "I'm nice and kind, so I don't need to listen to this or do this work." In addition to making the *moral case*, we need to make an *economic* and *academic* case:

- Kids who are in more racially and social-economically diverse schools have higher levels of critical thinking, collaborative and communication skills and general 21st century skills that will serve them for the rest of their lives.
- Highly coveted and competitive colleges are putting together very diverse group of kids; they are having a harder time finding kids who can have an international roommate and negotiate differences of religion or ethnicity "without freaking out"; colleges don't want to admit a kid who has to learn about diversity for the first time at college.
- Economic realities –companies that are thriving and surviving during the pandemic and derive innovative products have a workforce that is more culturally competent and diverse.
- For example, a Boeing executive stated that a culturally competent engineers are the "best engineers" because they are willing and able to look at things differently than the way it's always been done; they are also able to make connections with people from outside their fields and learn from them; also, they know how to work on international teams because they know how to interact meaningfully across differences.

What this question is ultimately getting at is why aren't white and wealthy parents a part of this conversation?

- The way systems work –all of us experience both privilege and marginalization. There is no one who is all privilege or all marginalized. How can we work together on this?
- In the areas where I experience privilege, I promise to learn more and be held accountable by you. In the areas where I experience marginalization, I will bring it to your attention, and you will listen and believe me. Maybe we can co-create the environment where we do right by one another.

- Conversations can have a “villains and victims” mentality. Take it away from us v. them.
 - For example, some approach teaching history about slavery (and the white people who created this type of system) with a “villains and victims” view, which can often result in white children feeling guilty and ashamed, and black children asking why our people get targeted and why do we keep on taking it?
 - What about looking at it from “resistors and allies”? There were some black resistors and some white allies?
 - How about looking at change as actually a series of collective actions of community members? There are some blacks who were actively in engaging in fighting for racial justice. There were also some who wanted to only engage in respectability politics and did not want to shake things up.
 - Ultimately change happens, when people who are actively trying to derail inclusion are outnumbered by those actively encouraging inclusion.
 - This is happening right now –which side do you want to be on? This is different than a “villains v. victims” discussion.
- Theme is connectedness –idea of a train
 - All the cars are connected to go to the same destination
 - If one of the cars want to disconnect and jump the track, because we are connected, it will pull all of the other cars off the track.
 - If a family wants to disconnect, you have to remind them that if they choose to do so, they risk derailing the entire train.

Takeaways

Rosetta Lee:

- Perfection is not the goal; doing something is the goal.
 - Mistakes not the measure of your worth.
 - It’s what you do when you make the mistake that determines your inclusivity.
- In this divisive and polarizing world, how do we teach our children and model the graciousness of listening to not have conversations with the goal of changing their mind but to understand more deeply where the other human being is coming from?
- When it comes to our independent schools, if you are champion, please be a louder champion! The detractors are very loud, and the schools can really use your strong voice in support of DEIB work

Debario Fleming:

- Love more
- Laugh more
- Little hinges swing big doors