

Dr. Federico R. Waitoller, MAP Center Equity Fellow – Illinois
Dr. Sarah Diem, MAP Center Equity Fellow – Missouri

TRANSCRIPTION

- Dr. Diem:** Hi, I'm Sarah Diem, and I'm an Equity Fellow for the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center, and a Professor and Chair in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri.
- Dr. Waitoller:** Hey! And I'm Federico Waitoller, an Associate Professor at the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois-Chicago.
- Dr. Diem:** And this is *Learning to Live Together*.
- Dr. Waitoller:** A podcast about inclusion and school integration in the 21st century.
- Dr. Waitoller:** Welcome to our third episode of *Learning to Live Together*. A podcast about inclusion and school integration in the 21st century.
- Dr. Diem:** In the last episode, we discussed whether it's worthy to continue to pursue racial integration or inclusion for all students, regardless of their social group.
- Dr. Waitoller:** In this episode, we will move into the practical aspects of integration and inclusion—into the “hows.” Because as Terah remind us, it's not a question about *what*, it's still a question also about *how*. It's as not much about what we're going to do, but how we're going to do it.

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Dr. Diem: So, now that you bring up Terah, Federico, let's start with her thoughts about what we need to do to achieve racial integration and inclusive education.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: But I think it's going to require three things if we really want to do this. Well, it's probably going to take more than three things, to be honest, but maybe these three things represent the necessary preconditions from my perspective. So, the first is financial support, but financial support like we have never seen supporting schools. And we got a taste of what can happen during the pandemic. Again, we saw the federal government come through with some cash, and that was great. But the lesson from desegregation from the 50s and 60s and 70s, is that if we try to move forward on a playing field that we know is inherently inequitable or unequal, then those inequities will only be exacerbated going forward, right? So...and it's going to actually work against the efforts that we have. So, number one, we have to prepare for that and make sure that we are investing financially in our schools the way that they need to be invested in. So that's, that's the first thing.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: The second thing is community buy-in. This is another mistake that I think we need to learn from the past. Community involvement was essential to the success of the desegregation movement, certainly the Civil Rights Movement. But, and, when it came to the implementation of desegregation, that process was completely taken over by bureaucrats, policymakers, politicians. And we should learn

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from that, that the success of the, the movement leading into the implementation was built on the efforts of community activists and teachers and parents and all kinds of community members. We cannot lose that community buy-in if we want an effort at integration to be successful. And it's got to be...it's got to be interdisciplinary. And it's...I'm going to drift from my point here. Let me just get back to it. Yes. So, it's got to be...it's got to be representative and based on the community if we're going to be successful. So that's two things.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: And then the third thing, oh, is a little harder. It's a little less tangible, and it might get me a little bit more directly to your question about the political moment that we're in. But the last essential piece that I think that we need for significant change is a change in mindset. The word equity is in our vocabulary now. People understand what it means in principle, but we still don't really like the idea that in order for things to be fair, it means that some people need to get more, whether it's more resources, more attention, more everything, right? It's ingrained in us as Americans that a meritocracy means that you get what you earn. And even though we know that the idea of a meritocracy is false, that it's not really how things work here, it is still kind of baked into our, our idea of how things work here. And so, equity is still a hard sell for a lot of people.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: And so, if we are going to revolutionize our educational system, we have to get over that hurdle. And to that point, I think that is what we're seeing in this political moment, is a backlash against this idea

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of equity, against this idea that what is fair means that some people don't get the same because some people have been getting more all along, right? And in order to make it fair now means we need to compensate for that. And when you want to talk about people feeling like their privilege is being messed with, that is what we're seeing on the national stage. We're seeing people acting out because they see their perceived and real privilege being messed with, and they are coming hard to protect it. It is not surprising. If you're a Critical Race Theorist like I am. Yep. Cue all of the emails. You can send them to me. That's fine. I get them all anyway. There's nothing new, there's nothing surprising about what we're seeing happen. So, it just requires us to be smart and savvy about how we're going to move forward from this.

Dr. Diem:

Peter also gave more specific ideas on the *how* of integration and the importance of the curriculum.

Dr. Waitoller:

Yes, he, he was very specific and even gave us a little framework to think about it.

Dr. Piazza:

I'm a member of the National Coalition on School Diversity, a group of individual...individuals and organizations that are working on this issue. And I bring up NCSD because they have really been a leader on redefining integration using, in, you know, when they're doing that, they're using a definition that comes from youth organizers in New York City, The Five R's of Real Integration, which I will try to

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remember now: race and enrollment; resources; representation, refers to curriculum, diversity; restorative justice; and I knew I was going to blank on the last one....representation...the last one is teacher diversity. And I'm not remembering the R; it'll come to me.

Dr. Piazza:

But I love this definition of integration because we hear often, but maybe not often enough, that integration is different than desegregation. And The Five R's, that model answers the question of *how*. Well, how is integration different? One of the five R's is race and enrollment. That's kind of what we think about when we think about desegregation, the moving of the bodies, school level composition. But when we think about these more embedded, nuanced aspects of a student's experience as a school, that's important in the conversation, too. Are they in a school with a punitive discipline policy that may, as we see across the country, may be disproportionately used to exclude students of Color from learning? Well, that's, that's a problem for integration, too. So, short answer to my definition of integration, I, I really try to adhere to The Five R's as a framework.

Dr. Piazza:

You also mentioned defining inclusion. And when I, when I think about this term, I think about it as really similar to, to affirmation, to cultural acceptance, that your, your, your cultural background, your social background is affirmed in the curriculum, in your experience of school. And I don't know that it's possible to do inclusion without affirmation. These, these things feel so closely related to each other,

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almost to the point that the, the Venn diagrams are, are, are overlapping. And this is a time where given all the threats to affirmation, I think it's important to, to, to highlight that explicitly as affirmation, because, you know, we're, we're, we're seeing so much that's pushing against different ways of being in the world, and it's really troubling.

Dr. Piazza:

So, I think there's a few things going on here. I think one is curriculum, and this is the, this is the representation part of The Five R's. And by the way, I remembered the fifth R, which is relationships that speaks to teacher diversity. Anyhow. For a statistically desegregated school to be using a curriculum that, that is, is sort of monocultural or Eurocentric, then that would be problematic, and that would not be, that would not be meaningful or real integration because it would fall short on the...on, on at least that one R of representation. So, I think curricular diversity is a key piece of that.

Dr. Piazza:

You know, we see schools that use things like ability grouping that ends up being, ends up being a, a, you know, a factor in creating within-school segregation. These are all policies that we need to pay attention to and that, that, that there is...there's good work already being done on how to dismantle these types of things. But it, it, it happens too commonly, even in places that nominally support and embrace diversity. You know, there's an exam school, and that exam, those exam schools are, are not representative of the, of the population. Or within an individual school there's ability tracking that

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separates kids. I think it's also important for schools to...in, in, beyond the curricular experience to make spaces for affinity groups for students to discuss their experiences. And I realize that as I'm saying all these things, there are things that have been attacked even in blue Massachusetts, you know, there was an affinity group lawsuit in nearby Wellesley. So, you know, none of these things...none of these things are safe.

Dr. Diem:

It's interesting that Peter mentioned something that Seena brought up in the previous podcast—this idea that even within integration or inclusion efforts, there needs to be space for affinity groups and for people of some social groups to have the opportunity to congregate.

Dr. Waitoller:

Talking about Seena, she reminded us of a critical point for integration or inclusion, a point that is usually missing in the discussions about this topic. Let's hear her.

Dr. Skelton:

I'm going to say something really, really radical, I think, and that is schools should talk to their students, their disabled students, about decisions related to how we structure schools, how we structure how decisions related to the allocation of resources involve students with disabilities in the identifying what are the issues, what are the problems. And then involve students with disabilities in the articulation of what the solutions might be. I don't remember ever being asked as a student with a disability, nor do I remember as a practitioner asking students with disabilities in schools and districts

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that I worked with about their own educational experience. And I think part of the challenge is special education in and of itself is such a individual, it is, it is perceived as such an individualized endeavor.

Dr. Skelton:

You know, we even use the Individual Education Plan, right, that is, that is, one individual at a time, as opposed to thinking about students as a community, as a group, as a, as a, as a political body, right, that, that can, can come together, can identify problems, systemic problems, as a group and claim what those problems are in terms of how they, how they are treated in school. And what those solutions could be, to be a part of the problem-solving effort.

Dr. Skelton:

And rather than education being something that's done *to* them that we rarely ask students about, let alone students with disabilities, even, even when we're talking about their Individualized Education Plan, the, the, the, the practice of even involving students in their own IEP meetings, I still don't think is common practice. I think relatively speaking, it's fairly rare. Let alone thinking about students as a political group, right, that can come together and say, "As a group, we think this, these are the issues. And as a group, we think that we can be a part of solving, or being a part of the conversation to solve these issues."

Dr. Skelton:

So, I, I, you know, kind of offer that. I know there's a lot of, you know, dialogue and a lot of advocacy of students, of involving students, student, quote unquote, *student voice*, but really involving students

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and engaging students in, in larger systemic kinds of issues as they relate to school districts, that students are a powerful source of information and a powerful contributor to addressing systemic issues. We can also think about that in terms of our students with disabilities. And I mean across disabilities. I mean students with intellectual disabilities, students with health...significant health, chronic health issues and disabilities, students who may have different, different sensory ways of expressing and using their sensory impairments or sensory differences across disabilities to bring students together and have students be a part of discussion around inclusion.

Dr. Waitoller: You know, Sarah, what Seena said made me think about an important point that Terah made.

Dr. Diem: Yeah, Terah and Peter both touched upon another important point: community support and engagement.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: Is this something that your community supports and is interested in? I don't know that that is the case in every community. And so, if not, you've got to start where you are. If you're in a community that has no interest in supporting integration, I don't know that that's the platform I'm going to be pushing for, right. But I am going to be pushing for a step toward that direction. I'm going to be pushing for education and coalition building and, you know, trying to find places of support and advocacy, especially to support the minoritized

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students in that community, because it sounds like it could be a tough road. I know that educators in those communities, students in those communities, may be feeling particularly targeted, and so that's a mission of great importance in those places. So, I would start there.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: And then on the flip side, if you are in a place where there is expressed support for integration, again, there is a difference between what people say they want and then the actual execution of it. And I feel like I'm living that life right now in my school board role. I live in a very, quote unquote, *progressive community*. If you ask any question that is on the DEI [diversity, equity, inclusion] spectrum, the answer you're going to get is overwhelmingly positive: Yes, we support integration. Yes, we support inclusion. Yes, we support whatever it is, it's going to be a resounding, "We support it." Now, when it actually goes into implementation, you're going to see parents roll out en masse at the school board meetings, and they're going to be very thoughtful in how they couch their criticism. They're not going to say that they're anti-DEI. In fact, they're going to come out and say, "Well, it's not for my privileged white child that I'm standing out here talking. It's for the racially minoritized students who they are unfairly targeted," when that's really not what's going on at all.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: There is a savviness involved that is very interesting to watch. So, I guess my answer is, after that winding wind around, is that when

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there is community support, and when we say that this is something that we want, we need to build that buy-in. We need to build coalitions across the community so that there is really strong support. Because what we know is that even when there is strong community support, there will be these spikes of conflict and dissension, and they will be loud, they will be vocal, they will be politically savvy. They know the buttons to push. And so, we can stay strong and move forward, even in the efforts to stall, derail, because that is another effort, right? I may not be, I may not be able to stop what you're doing or reverse course. But I truly know how to make you have to pause and not be able to move forward because I'm taking up time on your agenda, because I'm slowing down, I'm taking time away from your ability to do X, Y and Z. There are all kinds of strategies involved.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: It's not a great experience to sit up on the school board table in a meeting and get yelled at by parent after parent. However, I know that even if 15 or 20 parents may be coming to voice their concern about something, not to diminish the importance of 15 or 20 voices, because I value them. But I also understand that our community represents thousands of people. And so I keep in mind all the people who aren't coming to the school board meetings, all the people who aren't writing us email, all the people who don't necessarily know the seven people who are on the school board and can make a connection to them and catch us at the grocery store, or, you know, while we're walking our dogs or whatever it is. There are a lot of

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people who are supportive. So, another piece of it is making sure that the people you've got in leadership positions can stay the course when there is opposition.

Dr. Waitoller:

Let's hear what Peter had to say about this.

Dr. Piazza:

I, I think that there can be more public engagement, public outreach about these issues to get the people who might be sympathetic to it but aren't, aren't pulled into the conversation. And, so, I'll give you an example of what I mean. Again, I'm thinking about the area of the country where I'm located. We have a number of voluntary school integration plans, so-called controlled choice plans, that were developed all by the same individual, all by Michael Alves in, in, in Cambridge is probably the most nationally well known, but there are dozens in our area. And they're implemented without any connection to the original...to the original purpose.

Dr. Piazza:

So, parents will select schools for their kids and then, you know, they'll rank their choices in a controlled choice model, and then their students will get their student assignment. But, you know, the parents that I know, not from schoolwork but just from, from my various social networks, they do these things without knowing why this is a policy in the first place. And there is little to no public outreach to parents about, well, why is this a controlled choice system in the first place? And I have...I can think of a number of, you know, a number of my own contacts who would be sympathetic to it

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if they were...if, if, if the ultimate purpose was kind of described or promoted more broadly by, by school administrators.

Dr. Piazza:

And I think that there's...so I think that there's, like, there's people who are sort of predisposed to being supportive of integration efforts that aren't being...aren't being engaged in the process. And I, you know, I, I, I, I say this with some reservation because I also don't want to imply that, like, the problem is school administrators. Like, this is a big social problem, right? And, and there's a lot that we could be doing to have this conversation more broadly, like it doesn't fall just on, like, school superintendents who have a lot going on in their place. But I think especially now that there is this pushback and there is...there is...there's wider attention to race and public education, and there's wider concern about the direction that we're headed as a country. I think that...I think that we can do some things to reach out to folks who aren't on the extremes, you know. And bring those people into the conversation in a, in a more meaningful way.

Dr. Piazza:

Yeah, I think organizing is really important, and that the way that we organize is, is, is, is, is super important. And on, on this point, I look to a fellow NCSD member organization simply called Integrated Schools. They have a popular podcast where their, their sort of initial audience, though it's expanded, was white or affluent parents who are considering diverse schools for their, for their children. And they have done, like, deep, rich work in thinking about how white parents

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show up in integrated spaces. And that sometimes we, and as a white parent, I, I, I, I see myself as part of this, the...this group, like we can...we can be dominating.

Dr. Piazza:

And, and, and, you know, we, we have a lot of work to do to earn the trust, earn trust from people who are in communities longer than we were, you know. We arrive at a school and have all these ideas about all the things that need to be fixed, and this isn't the way, you know. This isn't the way to do it. And I think...I think that, like, the work that Integrated Schools is doing about, you know, like, show up, listen, engage, I, I, I think that model is tough and messy and democratic, but I don't see another way for real coalitions to be built. And if we're going to push back against all this noise that's out there right now, we got to build coalitions with, like, multiracial coalitions with people who feel differently.

Dr. Diem:

So, to wrap up all of the wisdom we received from Terah and Seena and Peter, we can also listen to something that the Donato-Sapp family discussed that's overlooked in conversations about integration or inclusion.

Dr. Waitoller:

Learning to Live Together, at the end, it's about people's relationships. This is about caring for each other, about being hurt and to forgive and be forgiven, about resolving conflicts, external and also internal within us. About pain and joy. And as the Donato-Sapp family says, it is about, well, let's hear them.

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Jeff Sapp:

Well, we have, you know, a set of family values that we live by. They're very specific. We add to them. We're up to ten now. We added one this year and it really answers your question. And the one that we've added this year is we want to extend grace. And so, you know, Helena, in her graduation speech, she was invited to speak to any teachers that made an impact on her. She, the week before, wrote a love letter to every single teacher and staff, and gave all of them a love letter, even the ones, honestly, that she had to dig a little bit to give some love to because they were hostile teachers to her. Who were homophobic, anti-queer. They were not about supporting disabilities. They were anti-Black. We still found things to say positive about them.

Jeff Sapp:

We wrote every single adult in the school campus from the principal, every staff member. She wrote them, gave them each a love letter. Now, she did name some from, from the stage. She, she extended grace. We extended grace. We still do that with our, our families. We still do it with our friends, our neighbors, who ideologically differ from us. We have many Trump supporters, you know, quite conservative, MAGA people in our families and in our communities. We simply try to extend grace. And I think, you know, it's so important for us to extend grace because it is so often not extended to us. And we don't want to be a...we don't want to be a victim of exclusion. We want to respond with inclusion and model this so deeply that we hope people are impacted, we hope it makes them get reflective a moment. And

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it's just for us, This is the way we can go to sleep and lay our head on the pillow at night.

Dr. Diem:

The Donato-Sapp family pushes us to think beyond practices and policies and think about people's relationships and about giving grace. But can we always give grace even to those who are harmful and hurtful to us? Is it too naive to think that we can give grace on those conditions when people are intentionally doing harm and perpetuating hate?

Dr. Waitoller:

It is something that we continue to grapple with, but at the same time, we can have no integration or inclusion without reconciliation for all parts.

Dr. Diem:

So, what do we make out of these ideas to forward integration?

Dr. Waitoller:

Or inclusive education? I think we can conclude by saying that it is more than moving bodies and about having certain quotas of enrollment of different social groups.

Dr. Diem:

Right, and, you know, it's about funding. And funding is always mandatory, but it's not sufficient. We need equitable funding to have well-resourced schools. But we also need other things.

Dr. Waitoller:

Yeah, and it's also about curriculum. A curriculum and practices that affirms people's identities. And we can further say it's just not about

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affirming, but also about sustaining and expanding children’s and youth’s cultural and ability identities.

Dr. Diem:

We need affinity groups within integration and inclusive education efforts. We need spaces where people can opt to gather with people that share similar backgrounds and experiences.

Dr. Waitoller:

We also need to build community support and activism.

Dr. Diem:

And we need to teach each other to care about each other, care as human beings while we do the difficult work, while simultaneously pushing back and resisting practices, which doesn't mean that we should not give grace to people and vice versa.

Dr. Waitoller:

Something that people did not mention is that integration and inclusion or inclusive education are not things that you achieve when you're done. We got integration, yeah, we got it. It doesn't happen like that. Integration, inclusive education, like any act toward justice, is a never-ending process, a process of continuing examining our practices and our policies and our own thoughts and beliefs about inclusion and integration.

Dr. Diem:

It also made me think about how these different parallel struggles around racial integration, inclusion of students with disabilities, and being inclusive, inclusive of LGBTQ+ students have so much in

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common. There are so many common threads and so many leverage points to build powerful coalitions.

Dr. Waitoller: And that Sarah, that is what we will explore in our next episode of *Learning to Live Together*.

Dr. Diem: So, stay tuned, and thank you for listening.

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Learning to Live Together
Equity Spotlight Podcast Series
Episode Three



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Equity Center.

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