



Learning to Live Together

Equity Spotlight Podcast Series

Episode Four



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

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 fourth episode and final episode, our season finale of *Learning to Live Together*, a podcast about inclusion and school integration in the 21st century.
- Dr. Diem:** In episode three, we focused on the practical aspects of integration and inclusion, focusing specifically on how to go about achieving integration and inclusion in school communities. And we learned about the importance of funding, community buy-in, and the need to change mindsets if we are to experience integration.
- Dr. Waitoller:** So, as we were listening to the prior episodes, we were struck by all the similarities across different social groups towards inclusion and integration, specifically, how the efforts in relation to gender, disability, and race have so much in common.

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Dr. Diem: So, in this episode, we decided to do something a little different. We decided to bring together all the voices from the podcast, and to do that, what did we do, Federico?

Dr. Waitoller: We put all of the people we spoke with individually in previous podcasts together in the same room. I mean, we mean, in the same virtual room. So, we collectively explore these areas of conversations across social struggles.

Dr. Diem: Yes, and in this episode, we discuss with all of our partners the commonalities and differences across social movements and struggles toward inclusion, whether it's disability, race, gender, and how these are playing out across the United States, and the areas of convergence across movements that can serve as catalysts for collaboration.

Dr. Waitoller: So, you want to know what came out of this meeting? Stick with us. Here is the conversation.

Dr. Diem: Well, thank you all for being here today. We're really looking forward to the conversation and hearing all of your perspectives on school integration and inclusion. So, we wanted to jump right into our questions. So, our first question for all of you is, upon listening to the first three podcasts of the series, what struck you the most from the other interviewees when they discussed inclusion and integration, and what resonated with you and why?



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Dr. Venzant Chambers: Okay, nobody wants to go first. I'll dive in. You know, going into it, I thought maybe we would be kind of all over the place, and, well, maybe more to the point, I thought maybe I would be more of an outlier in the group because I know my thoughts on integration might be a little bit more cautious, but I was really struck by the commonalities in our comments. Like Seena was talking about the importance of caring and belonging. And then Helena and your family was also talking about the importance of belonging. And, Peter, you were talking about affirmation. And I think I, you know, was talking about definitions but really, that was more of a long winded way of talking about what you all said more succinctly. And I really like the idea that at the core of this work is the sense of maybe, like, authentic love. And that's what really resonated with me, just that we all kind of got to the same place in the end.

Dr. Skelton: I'll tack on, tack onto that. You know, what really, I think, is at the core of when we talk about integration, and what, what we're really talking about, really, is, is authentic connections and connection without barriers. Connections without...and, and when we talk about integration, particularly integration of, of, of youth with disabilities, at the intersection of other identities, there's often, in addition, there are barriers that we, that we all know about, that we spoke to, but there are, I think, these unintentional barriers of, of sort of helpfulness, like people trying to be helpful, but in the, in the effort of being helpful, barriers are created as well. And so, I think, you know, in, in, those barriers are often, they often prevent real, authentic relationship and connections.

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Dr. Skelton:

And so, we all talk about belonging, I think, in many ways, and, and belonging in a way that is, that is really focused on being fully ourselves and human and being able to, to have the freedom to, to, to be ourselves authentically and belong, right. So not belonging in a way that's kind of orchestrated that often happens in, in, in efforts to sort of intervene, these kind of orchestrated spaces to belong, but actually spaces where people can show up and just be human in themselves and belong, right. And, and, and those kind of artificial structures or barriers are just dismantled. And so, I, I think that's something that really kind of resonated.

Dr. Piazza:

I really appreciate what each of you said about, like, love, genuine connection, focusing on one's humanity. It's really enriched my understanding of inclusion because I think I, I, I default sometimes. You know, in the first episode, we talked about the difference between inclusion and integration, or the similarities and differences between those. I often just think about it from like a policy perspective. Like, what are the policies that are going to get us to integration? Is it, is it, you know, changing attendance zones, or, or, or whatever the case may be? And sometimes that pulls me away from like the affective component of it.

Dr. Piazza:

And, Seena, I think it was your comment in the first episode about how like there's an attitudinal and relational component to inclusion. And then the...for you all on the Donato-Sapp family, and especially Helena, I, I heard like what it feels like to be included and excluded. And, and I, I, I worry that we don't anchor enough discussion on like



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the..on each other's humanities. We focus, we focus more on policy. It kind of pulls us in a, in a, in a, I don't know, less genuinely, less genuinely, like, human direction, if that makes sense.

Jeff Sapp:

Yeah, I'll, I'll, I'll add to that and say that, you know, we got up early this morning. We wanted to listen to all three of them [podcast episodes] this morning, fresh, so that we could speak to this. You know, it's not often in academic circles I feel highly emotional. And as I listened to things this morning and even now as I speak, I could tell that I'm on the verge of, of tears. And so, I was really struck by all of your words and the just kind of humanistic feel of what I was hearing. I, I...at the university I work at, I teach a, foundations course for credential students. So, I teach the history of education, and I'm just getting ready to show them some of my grandmother's archives. My grandmother was a teacher, an itinerant teacher in West Virginia 110 years ago. And I have all of her books from when she was in a Normal School training to be a teacher, all of her notes.

Jeff Sapp:

And on the back of one of her notebooks she wrote, 110 years ago: "Education is a process of soul enrichment." And it's always been one of my most beloved educational quotes from my grandmother. And I was really struck in listening to the dialogues again this morning, how emotional I got, and that this concept that came up in so many of our, our words about belonging was so key. And you...as you said a moment ago, you cannot fake this. We can't do one day or one week of community building activities at the beginning of a school, and then check that off of our list. We either feel like we

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belong, or we don't feel like we belong. And that varies from day to day, but eventually there is a collective feeling about, "I belong here, or I don't belong here."

Dr. Waitoller:

Thank you, everybody, for your response. I also thought that the theme of belonging was very important, and also how much does it take for one to belong? I think there was, there was something that was there. All the efforts and struggles that takes for someone to belong and also the costs and consequences of not belonging and the, the, the psychological soul and learning harm that cancel that. You know, and, in, in regards to that, and you kind of been talking a little bit about this common, but we, we wanted to know if you find other common themes across the interviews when they describe different social struggles, right. We talked about struggles for integration in terms of race. We talked also about struggles for inclusion in terms of disability and LGBTQ issues. What kinds of themes did you, did you, were you able to identify across these social struggles?

Sino Donato:

I think there's a, one of the things that stood out to me is that the urgency, there's an urgency to it. And I think it was Peter who pointed out this, our historical context makes the conversation unique and different from any other time. And you can certainly feel it in the air with the crisis of American democracy that you talked about, Peter. It's something that if you're, you know, probably, especially if you're minoritized, you feel a threat looming. So, there is an urgency to the, you know, I think you said, you know, integration

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was the best preparation for participating in a multicultural democracy. And that's in peril. So, you know, I feel that. And the other thing that stood out to me was the sensitivity to our positionalities. Who we are depends, you know, will, will dictate our perspective and I think you all addressed that to some degree or another.

Jeff Sapp:

I, I wanted to just go back one second because I wanted Helena to say something here. This is per the first question. I'm sorry to interrupt the flow. I'm curious, Helena, would you tell us: your high school has a prominent theme each year and could you tell us what the high school's single specific theme is at your school this year?

Helena Donato-Sapp:

My high school's theme is being independent and like working independently, so.

Jeff Sapp:

No, your, your, your overarching theme that you use in humanities that addresses everything in the school. Who belongs?

Helena Donato-Sapp:

The essential question.

Jeff Sapp:

Oh, that's it. Essential question. Sorry.

Helena Donato-Sapp:

Yeah, it's, "Who belongs and how do we know?" That's the question.



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- Jeff Sapp:** All of their coursework is to look at this essential question, who belongs and how do we know? And might I ask you Helena, do you feel like you belong in your school?
- Helena Donato-Sapp:** Not really. Like I do, I feel like I do with my friends but not like with the adults or administrators. That's where I don't feel like I belong. So, yeah.
- Dr. Waitoller:** So, Helena, can you give us like an example of some of the things you do at school with this theme?
- Helena Donato-Sapp:** We use it, like, we've read some books, like *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah. And we, we were supposed to write about the question and answer like how Trevor Noah belongs or like use the question I guess as a prompt in our writing to answer books, I guess.
- Dr. Waitoller:** And for what you're feeling it is not working very well.
- Jeff Sapp:** I really think it speaks to what one of our peers said here, that you can't...you can't, like, force this, you can't just have that question think you're doing that work. "Oh look, we're all about belonging, that's our essential question." When so many of the policies and things in the school exactly tell us the opposite. And Helena's a poet, and I don't have it here with me, but I can send it to you if you, if you want it. We, she actually, we collectively, as a family, put a piece of butcher paper up on the kitchen wall, and whenever we think about it, we answer the question, "Who belongs and how do I know it?"

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And they were frank, and, “I know I don't belong when...” And we list kind of all of the offenses, and it's, it's just been a collective kind of working poem that we've written that is a resistance to this essential question that they've just put out there. But nobody lives it in the school.

Sino Donato:

Yeah. The idea, the idea of authenticity, you can really see it in how certain schools are run. And you really do feel, if you're a student or a parent at a school, if it's just a checkbox, you know, a checkbox that they want to perform at. And, you know, it comes across whether you really care about these issues or not. And I, I do believe that's where the policies, I think, come in. And you really, whether a school or institution cares about belonging or integration or inclusion is reflected in, in policy. And I'm specifically thinking about this school's policy in regards to students with learning disabilities. And, you know, which in, in Helena's school is, is severely lacking. It's, it's really not even addressed. So, when they, you know, they can have a checkbox of a neurodiversity club, but it stops there. You know, you can see where the real work has to happen.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: I really appreciate you sharing that story. And, Helena, I think that it's so powerful the way that you're using your voice. And I think that it, it does connect to this question, too, about common themes. One thing that I've been really thinking about that you said, or maybe Jeff, you said, about Helena's experience in terms of common themes, and I think it connects to what you all are saying is just this, you know, especially when you are a person who comes from a minoritized



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identity, you know, we don't have a choice about being in the fight. Like I think you said, the fight comes to your, comes to your door, I think is what you said. And that, that phrase has been sitting with me, you know, all this time, since I heard it the first time and I was listening to the podcast again this morning, that this isn't just an academic exercise or, like you just said, isn't just a checkbox.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: And I think kids know when adults are not authentic about what they're doing, what they're saying, when it's just something that they want to, you know, oh, this is what our theme is going to be this year. That's not enough, right? Kids are going to see right through it. And if we really are about doing this work, we got to be really about it. So, I really appreciate you sharing that story, Helena, because I think it highlights exactly what we're talking about and why this work is so important and exactly, you know, what this, what this podcast series is highlighting for all of us. So, thank you so much for sharing that.

Dr. Piazza: Yeah, I had a, I had a similar thought, which is that I, you know, when I, when I re-listened to the first three episodes, this notion of student voice and student agency came out. I heard, I heard Seena saying that explicitly in one of the episodes about something that is, like, often overlooked but is essential for engaging, like, larger systemic issues. Like students should have active agency in, in co-constructing an environment where they...where, where, where their belonging is emphasized. It's not enough for the people, for the adults to say, "Well, we're going to create an environment where everybody belongs," but not ask you or shape it based on what that



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really means to you. And, the, you know, exactly along those lines, the advocacy that you all do in the Donato-Sapp family is so, so, inspiring.

Dr. Skelton:

Another sort of sentimental theme that came across for me is this, this, this, this idea of just persistence, right. Like, you can't, you can't...it's not a one-time thing. You know, it's not, you know, like that goes with the, with the checklist kind of thing. It's not a one and done. It's not a, oh, well, this, you know, going back, Helena, to your example about the, the theme or the central question for this year, it's like, you know, this is an ongoing...an ongoing journey and, you know, we never, we may not arrive at the destination within any of our lifetime, but it is persistent journey that matters. And, you know, one of the, one of the...as I was listening and then just the work that we, that I do, that we do with other educators and I often talk about, you know, when, when we have these goals like equity and inclusion, it's not just the goal, but it's the process towards the goal. Right?

Dr. Skelton:

So, it's not just, you know, oh, we have our equity goal, but if equity's not in your process, then you're not going to realize anywhere close to the ultimate equity. You know, we have an inclusion goal. But if you're not being inclusive in your efforts and your process to get there, you're not going to really...it's going to be performative as opposed to really being authentic. And so, I think, you know, I think that was something that was kind of like a sentiment throughout. And I think this, your example, Helena, unfortunately, is a good example



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of it being not maybe, you know, integrated and a part of the process other than, “Well, we’re going to have a discussion prompt for our, you know, our English Language Arts class and, and, and it’s for the students.”

Dr. Skelton:

But how often are the educators asking themselves at different staff meetings, “How do our students belong and how do we know?” Or asking of themselves, of their fellow colleagues who may, you know, embody minoritized identities, “Do our colleagues feel like they belong and how do we know? Do our parents feel like they belong and how do we know? Are these questions...are these essential questions for them, or are these essential questions for, you know, discussion prompts for the students?” And so that brings to mind, all of that comes up for me during this conversation and during listening to everyone’s really insightful offerings in the, in the previous podcast.

Jeff Sapp:

I want to, I want to say that, Federico, I was really moved that you started the entire podcast in episode one with talking about Thurgood Marshall. And so, because you started with a quote from him, it made me, of course, think about law and policy throughout all that I was listening to. And so, I don’t know if it was at various times we spoke about it, but law and policy is just critical. I just picture it stated and lifted up, because I feel like if I, if I could start all over at this point of my career and do a do over, I think I probably would have gotten my doctoral degree in educational policy, because I just feel it’s so critical, right. So that was one thing that came up. But a



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real prominent theme for me seemed to be intersectional activism and intersectional collaboration. That was a big one for me. And then again, you know, I know we said this before, but all of our, all of our words around, you know, Seena, you said, you know, a sense of belonging. You used the word fellowship, you know, which for me comes back to my Baptist childhood, you know, when you use what for me is kind of a sacred term when you're talking about education, which is so often not sacred at all.

Jeff Sapp:

And you said, Seena, how do we love each other? And that's not something we speak enough about in the field of education, about, about our love for each other and for what we do. And then, Terah, I was really, I was really moved by your discussion about the evolution of language, right. And how we're afraid we're not saying the same things, but we're afraid sometimes to even talk about it. And it just really reminded me some of why this young woman is sitting between my husband and I, because one of the things we've done early and often with her is talk about tough topics. And one of our reasons was that we wanted her to have capacity. And so, we get in conversations all the time, all of us in this meeting, where we're talking with someone, and we, we may quickly understand that they don't have the capacity for various reasons to have these conversations. And one of the reasons that Helena is different than many of her peers, it's because we've always addressed these tough topics. And now when she gets into these conversations, I mean, you know, she's, you know, a 14-year-old child in this room with just esteemed professionals, and she can hold her own.

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Dr. Venzant Chambers: I love that.

Jeff Sapp:

She has capacity. And that speaks to what one of you said about the urgency in this. We have an urgency. We've always had an urgency as non-Black parents raising a Black child to prepare her for this immense anti-Black world that she lives in. And so, there's an urgency to this. And sometimes I feel like there's so many parents that want to protect their children from tough topics, and we're like, okay, that's just Tuesday for us. That's not a tough topic, right. So, I really was impressed by, by some of those things about building capacity, and I also think that some of the, well, and then there's the other side of that, which is the people who believe they have all the capacity, but they don't have any humility about their capacity. And so, if you don't believe just like they believe, then you're wiped out by that conversation. And that's typically what I see in, in higher education hallways. There's a lot of ego and then conversations advocating with administrators. There's ego there as well. So, I really, I really saw law, policy, ego, and humility, and intersectionality, as some of the dominant themes that came out for me.

Dr. Diem:

So, I think, and I love everything that everyone said, thank you. I think, like, our next questions. After hearing all this, it's kind of like, so what, what can we do now, right? So, we've heard all these themes, and part of the reason Federico and I really came together to do this work as someone who focuses on school desegregation, and Federico looks at inclusion and special education, and we often

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don't have these conversations together. It feels like we all are doing our separate work, but if we could come together and do this work together, it would, I think it would just produce that much stronger work and eventually get us to equity, what Seena was talking about, right. So, I'd love to hear from you all, what areas of convergence do you identify for different struggles toward inclusion and integration to work together, and what spaces can we actually leverage for us to come together to advocate for inclusion and integration?

Dr. Skelton:

So, I think it's fantastic that the, the, the way that you just frame this, Sarah, and kind of, because it, it does happen where there's a disability conversation, and usually inclusion is like, in that conversation. And then there's the integration conversation in which people typically mean racial integration or social economic integration, and that's the conversation that goes over here. And it's, and it's, it's often the two don't really talk to each other. Even, you know, although this term is under attack in a lot of places. But even when we talk about DEI, you know, quote unquote, DEI initiatives, that, that disability is hardly ever in those spaces, right. I'm talking about the DEI committee, or the DEI whatever. It's usually you don't see disability showing up.

Dr. Skelton:

And then when you're having conversations around, including students in classrooms, is usually in, in, in what are inclusive practices? There's...there's a, you don't hear, you don't enter the conversation around what are those culturally responsive or culturally sustaining practices? In fact, I was doing a, our team was

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doing some professional learning with a group of state educators a few years ago, and it was around supporting the literacy development for students with disabilities. And we were bringing to bear some content around culturally sustaining pedagogy in that conversation. And the educators were confused about why we were talking about culturally sustaining pedagogy in a conversation about literacy for students with disabilities. They were like, “Why, why are you talking about culturally responsive teaching in this, in this space?”

Dr. Skelton:

And so, I would like, I think, in terms of a strategy for people to think about, you know, radical accessibility. Like, what does it mean for a space to be accessible to everyone, and centering...creating spaces that are centering those communities that have been typically left out, and creating a space assuming that disabled people are in this space, just, just that's the assumption. Like, whether or not someone identifies or not, just assuming the disabled people are in this space, assuming people with disabilities are in this space. Create a space assuming that members who identify as part of the LGBTQ community is in the space. Create a space assuming that people of Color are in this space. So, assuming that communities that have been typically marginalized and thought of as an afterthought, like, how can we accommodate and make sure these communities are responded to? Let's just create a space where we assume that this space is their space.

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Dr. Skelton:

And then by that way, I think that we begin to create a space that's truly inclusive of everyone, where we center those that have been typically thought of as an after. And so, you know, I know that can seem nebulous and kind of like very abstract, but if we can sort of try that as a strategy. We've been trying to do that here at the Center, we've been trying to assume, particularly about disability, trying to assume that, that our audience, our educators are people with disabilities. Like, we're not asking, we're just, we're assuming. And so, we're putting in place as best as we can practices that would be responsive to and inclusive of, you know, individuals who can benefit from closed captioning and subtitles as a matter of just practice. Not even, you don't have to request it's just there. Or a space or built-in spaces where people may need a break from stimuli, overstimulous spaces, like we have a space that's just created just there. It's like... so, we're trying to think about...we're trying to think about that as we're designing professional learning spaces...yeah.

Dr. Piazza:

It's sort of like the, the curb cut effect or, or metaphor, or I guess it's a metaphor and it's a real thing that like something that benefits, something that makes the world accessible to people who are typically not given that access that benefits everybody. It's just, it's just good policy in general. And I think there's not enough recognition of that. It also makes me want to real quick highlight something that Jeff mentioned earlier about intersectionality as a way of...to kind of like, to build a bridge across the various issue areas that we're highlighting here and, and other issue areas as well, you know. In terms of disability and in, in racial justice I, of course, think about like

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discipline rates and how, how both of those groups, and especially when somebody identifies with both, how, how exclusionary discipline can be so dramatically disproportionate for folks at that intersection. And that, that, that's just a call to collaborative action.

Jeff Sapp:

I want to say, Seena, that first of all, I'm going to pull a Rom Com [romantic comedy] on you and just say you, you had me a radical, okay? [laughter] And I, and I do think that belonging and love, they are radical in schools, those are radical movements. I, I really think a lot about the convergence question, Sarah. And, and, you know we have a set, we have a set of nine family values that we've identified for our family that we live by. We just recently added the ninth one because it's an organic task for us to identify what our family values are. We added the ninth one as a result of this tenacious struggle that we're in to get a fair and equal education for our daughter.

Jeff Sapp:

And the ninth value we added, we've termed *extending grace*. And I won't say, I won't say that I'm always able to do that. I often fail at extending grace, and that's because my ego might be triggered in some way. But more, more, more apt is that I'm so traumatized by this work. And, you know, we just recently had an experience where we met with all the administrators at Helena's school, and it was an hour and a half of institutional gaslighting. It was absolutely horrible. We're deep in experiencing our trauma at trying to advocate right now. And in that conversation, as people, were just coming at us with all kinds of bullshit. Can you say that in a podcast?



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Dr. Waitoller: Beep! Oh, sorry. I did it, I did it out of time.

Jeff Sapp: But the only way I could respond to, because we were getting absolutely nowhere, is I said, “The only...” I said, “We're in total disagreement and all I can even think to say to you is, will you have coffee with me? I just, I don't know what else to do. But we're certainly not connecting in a belonging sense or a loving sense. You all are sitting there protecting your system. You're not protecting my child.” And I didn't know what else to do but to extend grace. And so, I think an area of convergence for me would be, you know, we, we, we really must extend grace with each other and have more coffee and more dialogue, because we're just not on the same page. It is so painful and traumatizing.

Jeff Sapp: And so, I just, I haven't gotten any invitations for coffee [laughter]. Okay. But I keep putting out there that, you know, we're available for coffee. Please let us know when you can. And I think there's something about extending grace because there's so much possibility for conflict when you're advocating, when you're presenting your theory, and it differs from your calling down the hallways theory, or there are so many areas of conflict. Extending grace has just got to be, it's just got to be key. And again, sometimes I can come from my highest self and do that, but honestly, sometimes I am not able to extend grace.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: That's so, well, I resonate with that very deeply. All I would add is just, I think this podcast series highlights so distinctly how important



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it is for us to work together. We can end up being so siloed but if anything, this, this series has been so powerful. And whenever I get sort of discouraged about the work that I do, all I, all I have to do is listen to this series and be encouraged by the work that you all are doing, to learn, you know, to be encouraged by the examples that are happening in parallel areas of study, right, that there are...there are these examples of work that is moving forward. And if we could do this, y'all, it would be one of the most radical social transformations that we would see in our lifetimes. I mean, truly. So, I just appreciate the work that we all are doing, that you all are doing, and the opportunity that this podcast has brought us all together to be reminded that there's really great work going around. So, thank you for that.

Dr. Waitoller:

And it has happened before. You know, if you look back at the history of disability rights movements, you know, the first time that they took the building back in California to complain for 504, it was not implemented, was the Black Panthers who went and supported and bring them meals. And there was a lot of collaborations between, at that time, between disability rights movements and civil rights movements. And I know there are people now doing, bringing these things together, but still feels, feels very limited. Peter, you were about to say something. I interrupted you like a bad host.

Dr. Piazza:

No, you're good. That's fascinating history. And it's, it's part of what's sort of being buried now, right, in the effort, the sort of censorship effort that's happening in schools that, you know, speaks to this

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larger threat on democracy, that like, that history can, can be so inspirational, instructive, and it's, it's being kind of, kind of buried for exactly that reason. The point that I was going to add earlier was just to, to build on what Terah was saying about, like, the inspiration and models that we've talked about in, in, in the podcast series. And I've, I've, I've thought a lot about the love letters that Helena wrote to her teachers since the, the...since you all shared that in the early episode. And, just thought of that as such a, such a, like, clear and straightforward way of, of sort of putting that radical love out in the world. And I think about the teachers on the receiving end of those, and I can only imagine how much that meant, that meant to them. And, you know, we often talk about, about resisting and being on, on defense in the social justice world, but that, that's a way of putting something, something, something bright out into the world. And so anyway, just wanted to highlight that.

Sino Donato:

These spaces, like, you know, when we're talking across, across states, even across countries, over Zoom, it's, it's I think part of the answer is, is in that, doing more of that communicating to each other. One of the things that has happened in the last couple months in our struggle with getting equitable schooling for Helena is that Jeff put a kind of an all-call email out to scholars and allies and people, and people in the labor movement just across, across the States [United States]. And we've really found it to be so, so helpful. It brought, you know, several people answered back. And it was for...was it for a character? Kind of a character.



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Jeff Sapp:

Yeah. I helped Helena as she was struggling with homework in Humanities. One night, they were doing annotated bibliographies. They were going to do five. This was the first one that she was struggling with for several nights of homework. So, I helped her. I sat with her and did a think aloud, talk aloud. She finished it. She took it to her Humanities teacher, and her Humanities teacher said, “Well, this word right here was intersectionality. This word right here says, senior, you're a freshman. You couldn't possibly know this word.” And she said, “Did someone help you with this?” She said, “Yeah, my dad helped me write it.” The teacher then accused Helena of plagiarism and lowered Helena’s full grade for the semester from a B to a C, not because she cheated, but because her dad cheated. And so, we were asking for letters of character reference for the school, for this. And that's kind of what it was about.

Sino Donato:

Yeah, but all those voices were so, it was just so empowering to know that other people see us. Other people are doing the work elsewhere. It wasn't really even for the administrators. They could just ignore them. But it was, it was really for us to empower us to do the work and, and know that we're not alone.

Jeff Sapp:

Yeah. I have one other area of convergence that I really want to make sure we point out, because we have this glorious child sitting right here between us, and this just organically happened in our family. But certainly, she is evidence of the power of youth voice. And part of this convergence, you know, as adoptive parents, one of our first commitments we made to her when she was an infant was



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that we would lift all veils of shame from her. And so, part of her positive identity formation about her learning disabilities is that we value all of our identities, and that is an unusual disposition to have in many families who are afraid to even have their child diagnosed because of stigma around it--socially or in their families. So, we, we have really seen Helena's voice resonate with the entire world. And so, speaking of letters, Peter, Helena just this past week texted us while she was at school and said, "I wrote a letter to my school." And of course, you know, we've raised a fierce activist, so we're like, "Oh, really? Do tell what it's about." And she, she sent a text, a picture. I asked if I could see a picture of it. I've asked if she would consider reading it to you all and would like to share that letter. You want to give us any details about why you wrote the letter?

Helena Donato-Sapp: Well, I wrote it when I was doing my online math and I'm in a room by myself when I do online math. So, I didn't really do any math because I wrote this letter, so.

Dr. Waitoller: That's called resistance, right? When they tell you to do math and you write a letter of complaint.

Helena Donato-Sapp: "Dear school, after the meeting with my parents, the school has disappointed me even more than when I've said it has. I am now regretting my decision that I even chose this school as my number one choice. This conflict has had a big impact on my mental health and my parents, too. It felt those in the room supporting the school were ignoring what I said and how I felt after I left and when I spoke.



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Don't you want to support your child, too? As parents, I thought you would understand what my parents are doing to support me. This school doesn't love me. It only loves students who are independent, perfect, quiet. That is not me or anyone. You can't change who I am. When you ask me if I'm okay, I may say I'm fine, but really I'm not. And that's because of this place. This school is not living up to its values. I will not give up until the day I die to fight for what's right. You will not make me sad anymore because I will leave you behind. But I will be ready for the next time.”

Dr. Waitoller: Thank you, Helena, for sharing that with us.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: That's amazing. Amazing. You have such a powerful voice, Helena, such a powerful voice.

Jeff Sapp: I want a generation of kids doing that. I want to move on to the children speaking truth to power.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: Yeah.

Jeff Sapp: She went right into that meeting with us, and she spoke fiercely to the administrators that are not supporting her. And it was her idea. She goes, “I want to go in and speak for myself because this is about me.” And that's that capacity building and that's, you know, Sarah, how I would answer that question about convergence. We cannot always speak for children. We must raise up a generation of children who can fiercely speak for themselves.



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Dr. Skelton: And I would even offer—

Dr. Venzant Chambers: That's so good.

Dr. Skelton: After that generation, that we have a generation that can be and not have to, not have to write a letter like that.

Dr. Waitoller: Thank you so much for that. And, you know, we've been identifying all these teams of convergence. I think the last one that we, we discussed about is the idea of, like, nurturing this new generation of youth that can do this kind of work. And, and issues of belonging also were discussed. You know, I think I'm just going to jump to, to, to the last question, and, and, and, and I'm sure Helena is going to be an expert on this, which is what can we do in everyday practice, teachers, families, administrators, activists, to work towards creating these spaces, right? Or they have this sense of belonging for everybody, that everybody is learning together and giving grace and belonging and relating to each other in very humane ways. What are some practical things that we can leave our audience so that they can do in, in their upcoming days?

Dr. Venzant Chambers: So, you know, I think people think that it's going to take big things, and big things are okay, you know, but a lot of times the most impactful actions can be small things that we do. And I think the lesson is that everybody just needs to do what they can do. But what does that mean? Okay, so, for example, you know, I'm on my local school board. Sometimes people will say, like, well, I could never be

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on the school board. I could never run for school board. And, you know, that was not on my bingo card either. So, I would say, maybe you can be on the school board. Maybe you could think about that. But also, if that's not for you, then there are other things that are just as important that you can do, like go to school board meetings, stay up to date on what's happening to support, you know, what's going on in the, in your local area, too. You can speak at meetings if you're comfortable with that. You can support the candidates that are running for school board that are aligned with justice and equity. You can send supportive emails.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: Let me tell you, when I read 20 or 30 terrible, mean, awful, not supportive emails, and I get one email that's just like, "Hey, I just want to let you know I appreciate what you're doing." That goes a really long way, right? And then, you know, just helping inform your neighbors about what's going on, that can really be helpful. All of that can be tremendously helpful because there's a lot of misinformation that circulates. And that's just one area of ideas. It's not, there's not one perfect way to do this. The most important thing is to do, figure out what you can do and then do that thing. I think people underestimate the power of just being plugged in and informed. People think...and is like, that's not enough. But that can just, just being informed can be everything.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: And if I can say one more thing, it's, I'll, I'm going to direct a comment to, particularly because the question was about teachers and administrators, too. And so, if I can direct a comment,

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particularly to white teachers and white administrators who are listening, I would say, we need you, too. Our children need you. We have some powerful examples of folks of Color who have led the way here, but there aren't enough of us. And so, it's important to see white educators out here fighting just as hard. My son has had the benefit of having three amazing Black teachers in his life. He's only twelve, but one of the best teachers he had was a white teacher who showed up for him and his classmates in the most powerful way.

Dr. Venzant Chambers: It impacted him in a way I didn't realize that he needed, and his classmates needed to see a white teacher show up for him the way that that teacher did, to see an example of a white person who was truly and genuinely teaching them about social justice and leading the way personally. And so, we need white teachers and administrators who are willing to listen and learn and make mistakes and learn from them and show our students that fighting for integration and inclusion is a cause we should all believe in. And that's the only way that this is going to work. So, that's, that's, that's my thought on this question.

Dr. Piazza: I love that, and I just want to build, build on that to add white parents. Like as a white person who advocates for racial and social justice and a white parent myself, I, you know, I think about just the, the long history of white violence and then, and relatedly white silence on these issues. And we talked earlier about, you know, there's...this is not a checkbox, it's not a one and done type of thing. But I think unfortunately, a lot, a lot of folks have treated it that way, especially

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folks in dominant positions in American society. And especially lately there are a lot of great organizations that are facilitating these types of conversations. But, but we're, we're, we're behind and we need a lot more, a lot more discussion, a lot more efforts to break that, that white silence.

Dr. Skelton:

I guess my suggestion is specifically for classroom teachers, I think, and that is when we're teaching about an individual, historical figure, that we teach about all of their identities. So, often when we're talking about historical figures, we leave out certain parts of who they are and it becomes invisibilized. We, we, we erase. So, when we're teaching about Harriet Tubman as the awesome Black historical figure, that we talk about her womanness. We talk about that she was an individual with a disability as well as, as well as the, the...what we know about and what we learned about Harriet Tubman. If we're talking about political figures, we're talking about, like, Barbara Jordan that we talk about she was a person with a disability. She's a Black woman with a disability. I think that is so important to hit to the point of intersectional...intersectionality.

Dr. Skelton:

And I love what the Donato-Sapp family, what you all talked about, in terms of the [inaudible] Helena, being proud and accepting and embracing all of who she is, all of her multiple identities. Being a Black person, woman with a disability, that's so important. So much of...there's so...we leave out developing positive disability identity. And that is so important to develop positive disability identity for those of us who have disabilities. I identify...you may not know that I

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identify as a Black woman with a disability, and had I known about the historical contribution of my community, and when I say my community, I'm talking about my disability community, I would have approached and embraced my disability identity so differently when I was a young person than I have grown to as an adult. And so, when we teach about a person, we teach about all of them. We teach about their...all of their identities, their intersectional, complicated, wonderful ways in which we show up in this human experience, that we try not to leave any aspect out.

Sino Donato:

I just want to add, thank you, by the way, Seena, for...I appreciated the, your idea of assumptions, assuming that people are present who are, may not be apparently present, you know, because so many people with disabilities have non-apparent disabilities and they are not talked about, you know, or acknowledged. But I also think, you know, one practical thing that sticks to me is keep speaking up and keep, keep, keep talking about it. It takes courage to do that. In some spaces, it takes more courage. In other spaces, you know, it's unwelcome. So, keep speaking up. I feel like the forces that, that are trying to silence or, you know, get in the way of inclusion and integration, those forces are really galvanized and loud, and they are well organized right now. And I think, I feel like, you know, I don't know where we are, you know, as a group, as a collective, but I feel like we really need this context of history to be galvanized as well. And, you know, in our daily lives, that means, you know, muster the courage to speak up when you can.



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Dr. Waitoller: Well, thank you, thank you so much to...for coming together today and sharing with our audience all your wisdom and insights. This has been a lovely conversation.

Dr. Waitoller: Whoa, Sarah, that was such a powerful discussion. I'm still thinking of so many things that they were saying.

Dr. Diem: I know, Federico, there were so many important lessons and takeaways for us to consider as we move forward with thinking about how we continue to learn to live together and create and maintain spaces that are inclusive for everyone.

Dr. Waitoller: And it was so fascinating to see how much our interviewees learned from each other and find areas of connection between. And I think that those lessons can be applied beyond education to build inclusive communities everywhere. But what about, Sarah, if we review some of these take-home messages?

Dr. Diem: Yeah. So, let's start with one that I think really stood out. This idea of belonging and how we create spaces where people belong, regardless of who they are. Where people can be their true, authentic selves, and they can discover themselves and still feel that they belong to community and place. And Seena, really, she talked about this notion of authentic connections and connections without barriers, which directly connects to belonging. And something that also really struck me is when Sino talked about whether a school

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really cares about belonging, whether they care about inclusion, and integration is really reflected in, in their policy.

Dr. Waitoller:

Yeah. And, and related to that, what Seena was saying about radical accessibility, meaning, always assume that everybody will attend any activity or the school or a classroom lesson plan, and plan accordingly. Plan that people from the Black community will attend. Latinx folks will attend. Plan that students with disabilities will attend. Plan that LGBTQ people will attend and make an inclusive activity and space where everybody can build from the get-go. This is so critical if we want to create inclusive spaces.

Dr. Diem:

Exactly. And, you know, another thing that everyone talked about was focusing on humanity, which may sound intuitive, but I don't think that we do this enough. At the same time, focusing on love and the affective component of inclusion and really better understanding what it feels like to be included and excluded is, is such an important part of this discussion.

Dr. Waitoller:

Yeah. And you know what else, Sarah? I was also taken by the role of student voice. Having Helena part of the conversation and, and, and she telling her stories really brings home the importance of student voice and agency in changing schools so they are more integrated, they are more inclusive, so students feel a sense of belonging regardless of who they are.



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Dr. Diem:

Yeah. And besides the student voice, and, you know, we're seeing our students engaged. We all need to be engaged, too, right? We all need to get involved. And Terah talked about that there isn't a perfect way to be involved. You know, we have different lives, we have different skill sets, we have different time constraints, but the bottom line is that we need to educate ourselves. We need to be informed as to what's going on around us, and we need to get involved. This work, you know, you don't just arrive at it. It takes time every single day to be engaged in this work. And something that Seena said I thought was really powerful, that equity is not just a goal that we should have, but it's also a process toward this goal as well.

Dr. Waitoller:

Well, Sarah, this has been a great journey, not just for us, but also for our interviewees. I'm so happy that I got to work with you on this, and I hope that we have more spaces like this. Of course, movement, conversation, and encounters, because it really enriches all parties involved.

Dr. Diem:

I couldn't agree more, Federico. And I hope that for everyone listening that they learned as much as we did and that they're encouraged and motivated to get involved in these efforts.

Dr. Waitoller:

Well, I guess this is it for *Learning to Live Together*. Maybe this is until next time. Maybe it's until goodbye. Hopefully, a just, see you soon. Take care, everybody.



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[End of Audio]

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