

## Coffee Talk Notes

### January 24, 2020: “How are we talking to our children, and each other, about Race and Equity?”

Panel Discussion facilitated by Mercedes Soto.

Present: About 30 parents/family members, Lauren, Claudie, Anthea, Tony, Hope

Mercedes Soto, G&P Parent, G&P Steering Committee Rep, Agenda for Children OST, introduced the discussion, explaining that Fletcher Maynard is going into its fifth year of holding “Courageous Conversations.”

She said one of the lessons learned at FMA is “you just have to start,” that perfect is the enemy of good. “This is multi-year, lifelong work. There have been 400 years of oppression,” so it’s not going to be fixed with just one presentation or discussion - it takes lifelong, committed work.

Mercedes introduced each speaker:

Uche Amaechi – Extended Day Coordinator at Fletcher Maynard Academy. One of his special projects has been how to integrate equity work with other areas of the school, which has included bringing in community members and staff. He is also on the faculty at Harvard School of Education.

Lisa Downing – FMA Parent, Leadership Team, former co-chair, has attended the meetings from the beginning and is now on the task force, she is also on the Special Ed Advisory Committee, and on one of the Building Equity Bridges teams.

Kathryn Fenneman – Executive Director of Tutoring Plus, which was founded by a group of mothers. She has also been active on the leadership team and on the Equity Task Force for the past few years.

Question 1: How did you get involved in this work and why is it important?

Kathryn Fenneman: Tutoring Plus is focused on educational equity, understanding that all parents care about their children doing well in school, but not all have the means and opportunities to pay for tutoring. They are always working to bridge out of school time with school time, and think it’s important to make system change, so see this work with parents and staff as vitally important.

Uche Amaechi: One of the concepts that has risen up is acknowledging and distinguishing between intent and impact, whether through action or inaction. Good intentions can be a cover – both intent and impact should count. I bring this up because when we started, we had a sense anecdotally that there was disparate knowledge and awareness of race and equity on the staff, and this was causing an impact with the kids that varied from classroom to classroom.

So we ran our own version of the doll study (side conversation explaining what this famous study was for those who didn’t know), and what we found was that younger kids were more likely to pick a doll of the race they identify with, except in a couple of classrooms that had only white teachers, and those classrooms had more kids of color

also choosing the white dolls. So we thought, “Hmmm...that’s interesting.” As the kids got older, they tended to opt out and say “neither.” [For more information on the doll study, see [here](#) and [here](#)]

This caused the group to acknowledge inequity across the classrooms, and we wanted to bring in family members, and community members, to figure out how to address this.

Lisa Downing: My two children are both boys of color, adopted, and so ours is a family created out of racism. I recognized I had a lot to learn, and for me, it was important for me to learn about my role in this system to help myself, my family, and my community.

Mercedes Soto: Our family is Puerto Rican and we only ever talked about this positively at home. One day our son came home and said, “Mom, I need a lighter Dad.” Of course, we were concerned where he was getting this from, and it was a wake-up call about having to be intentional about talking about race and color. I was grateful to the school for opening up the opportunity, and remember sitting in a group with my son’s first-grade teacher, which was heartening. It made me realize I’m not the only one with these questions, there are other people out there willing to sit together and feel our way through it.

Question: What has most surprised you in doing the work?

Kathryn Fenneman: It’s been wonderful to see people push themselves, they keep showing up even though the conversations are uncomfortable. This conversation isn’t necessarily about East Asian kids, so I had to start thinking about my own position. My stepson is of African descent and has a very different experience of the world than I do. We are not all impacted the policies in the same way.

Uche Amaechi: One of the things that has most surprised me is that people have such different ideas about what to do. There is more agreement around what the root problems are, though some slight differences there, but when people talk about the solutions/paths to take, they are actually very different. One of the teachers helped come up with a curriculum for kids, and families were divided on it. Some families wondered if this is something teachers should be doing, but this was not consistent across parents. This has been an ongoing question: Who should take the lead in teaching and talking to kids?

Lisa Downing: The first year was very challenging with lots of personal dynamics. (Everyone agreed with this). It was a lot harder than I thought it would be, and the whole thing could have stopped because of this, but the leaders found a way to go forward.

Question: Challenges or takeaways?

Uche Amaechi: My powerful takeaway is that people have remained bought in. We still have some heated debates at these meetings, and sometimes that’s where things end, with nothing “decided” or determined. This changes *how* you engage with one another.

Kathryn Fenneman: [As someone who is action-oriented] I’ve found the rate of progress challenging. It’s a very long process, and it’s been a learning process having to be OK with that. Because meanwhile kids grow fast. Holding these pieces in tension.

Lisa Downing: It’s hard to measure our progress, really hard with this kind of work.

Mercedes Soto: There are always people who want to externalize the work, whereas others are more interested in the relationship building and internal work. This will always be the case: internal work vs. external systems change work. Some concrete actions/recommendations have come out of the process: Family visits, curriculum work, books, intentional matchings & pairings between students/staff.

Lisa Downing: It's really about relationships.

Mercedes added: Facilitation has made a big difference, and having skilled facilitators matters.

Then the discussion turned to talking about how this work might get started at Graham and Parks, and was opened to questions. The panel was asked if they had recommendations for us, what would they recommend?

KD: There are so many resources, so much good work happening. You can start knowing there's a whole community of support.

UA: In the spirit of connection, be sure to have family and school representation in the group.

LD: We had an outside facilitator that first year, which was really helpful.

Others asked for resources to be shared and if there is a "clearinghouse" of resources. Also asked what's happened or been happening at G&P on these issues. Lauren & Mercedes agreed to share what we have and set up a place where people can keep adding resources.

There is an Equity Task force of teachers and staff at G&P, and there is the district-wide work, [Building Equity Bridges](#)(BEB).

LD: BEB has identified barriers to equity, and each school could start by looking at them.

Question – Any sense from the high school kids what would have made a difference for them?

MS: BEB did participatory action research, and they have aligned with the BSU. Also a group of middle schoolers is focused on discipline practices in the district.

UA: We've brought in FMA alumni which has been especially helpful for teachers to hear from. One goal of ours: How do we build student capacity to advocate for themselves?

LD: Surveys have shown most students of color in the district don't feel they have strong relationships with adults in the district.

Question – Examples of topics we could address?

MS: Having a common understanding of language/definitions. Writing our racial autobiographies.

UA: Basics – types of power, types of racism, microaggressions and implicit bias. Think about examples from your own experience, then be sure to bring in and discuss historical practices and policies like redlining.

This year our focus at FMA is to build resilient students and set high expectations.

MS: A big group of us went to see Beverly Tatum speak at the Ed School, and she reinforced the idea: just start! We need to do this work together ourselves so that we can support our children to build muscles to do this work.

The large group was then divided into “table groups” and had a facilitated discussion. These were the guiding questions:

1. How often does the topic of race come up at home?
2. How comfortable do you feel talking about issues of racial equity with your children?
3. Are you interested in learning with other parents about how different families approach this topic with children in age appropriate ways?
4. Would you be interested in helping plan future conversations about racial equity at G&P?
5. What do you think would be the benefits for our families and our communities?
6. What are some barriers we might face?
7. How might we address these?

Group 1:

- Lots of our conversation reflected a desire to get to know other families, but not knowing how/not feeling comfortable getting to know other families. One parent mentioned that when her family first started at G&P, there used to be a program where each family was "matched" with another family and did something together like once a month. Seemed like some interest in possibly reviving that or a similar sort of forced socializing outside one's usual group.
- Lots of our conversation also unearthed the need to do some internal work, and perhaps some affinity group work to help lay the groundwork for a more welcoming/conducive large group conversation.

Group 2:

- Comfort with courageous conversations: —there's a question about feeling comfortable and doing well with talking about it (intent and impact)
- Son identifies as person of color—trying to figure out those conversations at home. Aware of how much more she has to do. Look forward to working with the school on this.
- Talks about issues a lot—their son's kindergarten teacher sets a great precedent in recognizing the need to educating parents about anti-racist education (in response to a school incident). Talk about it a lot, but not sure if she's saying things that are entrenching other issues.
- Works at Gately—with high schoolers talking about racist teachers—but trying to figure out what actually happened, and trying to figure out how to help the kids work through the challenges. Don't want the kids to feel like victims, but want to affirm their experience.
- Has kids here to help them get exposed to the conversations. Looking for the school to engage parents, kids and teachers in a way that parents can't do individually. Some topics are hard for a parent to address—especially given the parent/child relationship they have to navigate.
- (Mercy) difficulty of figuring out how to respond to kid's questions about race—trying to not communicate from experience that may bias her response. Benefit of having the community of people with different experiences to help come up with responses.
- Wanted to come here to show the kids that the parents really care about this topic—setting an example. Willingness to be vulnerable.
- One parent's instinct was to hide that she was coming here for.
- Having joint conversations.

Question about helping plan the events.

Having been exposed to two different schools (FMA and G&P) They're very different in terms of how to engage with parents.

Understanding the dynamics of the school so we can get a diversity or representative group.

#### Group 3:

- Benefits:
  - supporting resiliency for students of color/students who'd experience racism,
  - knowledge of best practices for actions/behaviors so that people's impact can better match/align to their impact,
  - establish shared vocabulary and language especially because so much is implicit - the conversation are not as overt
- Barriers:
  - logistical primarily, especially because it's really important and invaluable to have a wide array of participants.
  - Trust - this is likely a bigger concern for people who would be at the receiving end of disadvantage - this issue could be helped by having a facilitator. This needs to be someone who is credible and has lived the experience, but also need perhaps to have multiple?
  - We should reach out to faith communities to engage them and have them bring families into trust that way.
  - Language differences are also a barrier.

#### Group 4:

- We talk about race at home a lot, my kids sometimes get tired of me bringing it up. We try to expose our kids to many books with diverse characters, and use those to start conversations.
- Books about children of color that are NOT about the struggle are harder to find (i.e. Jubari Jumps). We don't want our kids to think that every story about a black child is about fighting racism.
- An outside facilitator would be great, someone who doesn't have a stake in the game at G&P.
- Timing is a barrier - it's hard to find a time that is best for people. We all have different schedules.
- We should connect the G&P Equity Taskforce - maybe some of them could be involved in planning the series of workshops? There should be some alignment of goals.
- We need families with young children to be involved because this is a long process and we need to build it over several years.

At the end of the event, we thanked everyone for attending and asked that fill out an "exit ticket" with information on how to stay involved and preferences on timing of upcoming events.

**To get involved, [click here](#).**