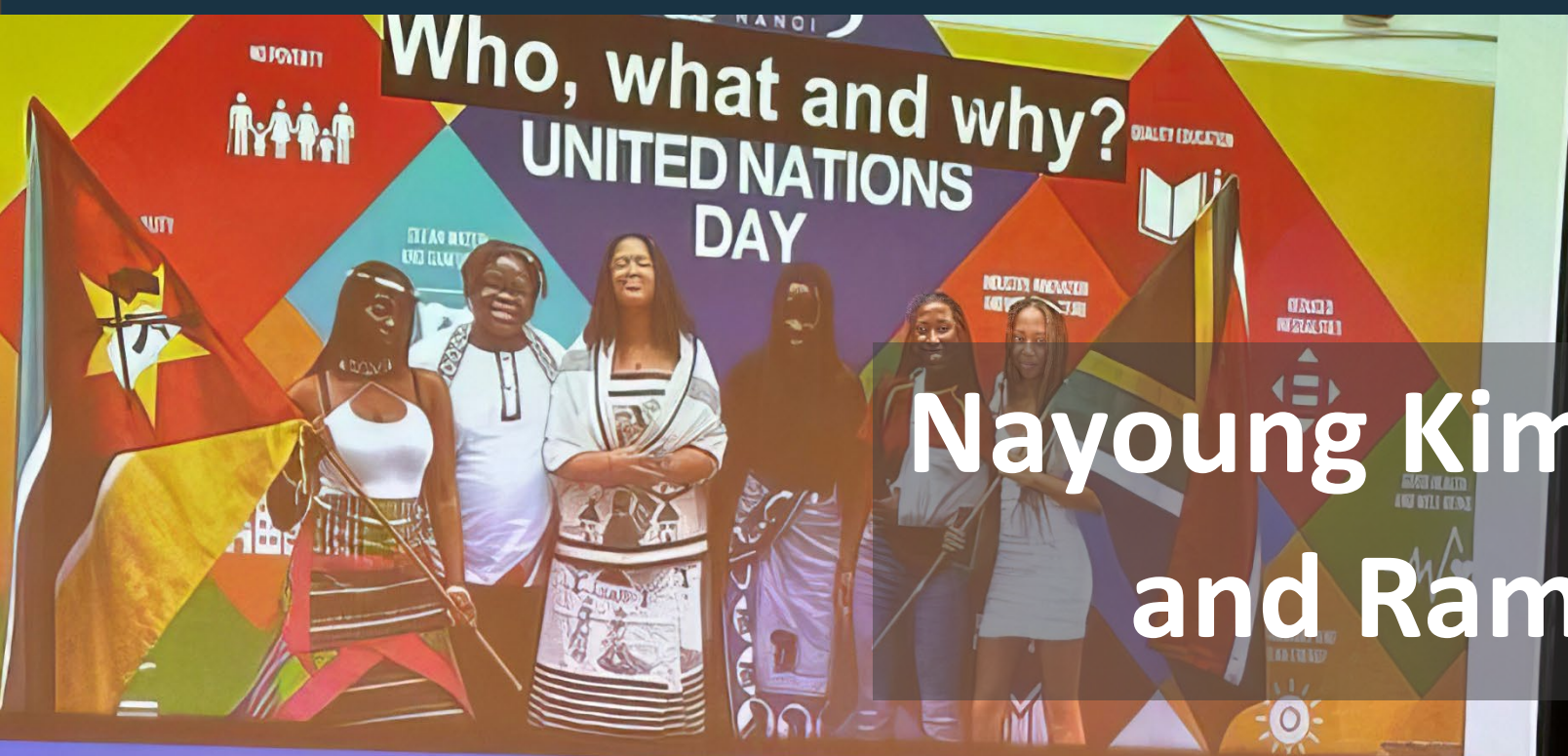


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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION



**Nayoung Kim-Weaver
and Rama Ndiaye**

*Who are we?
What is our session about?
Why are we doing this?*



**Creating a Foundation for Learning
through Intentional Community Building**



The Worthy Educator

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WINTER 2025

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Creating a Foundation for Learning Through Intentional Community Building

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As educators, we have long understood that meaningful and authentic learning takes place in environments where students feel safe, supported, and valued. But what happens when the very foundation of these environments within our communities is fractured or insufficient (Kim-Weaver & Ndiaye, 2021)?

We have spent much of our careers fighting for the simple recognition of our basic humanity in spaces that demand our excellence while withholding the tools and support we need to succeed. These systems were designed for others: those who fit neatly into the dominant narrative of belonging in academia and in the world at large. We have advocated for ourselves through channels that were never made for us, and this ongoing struggle leaves us questioning: How can we help our students thrive when we are just trying to survive?



Intentional Community Building

We know representation matters. Students need to see themselves reflected in the adults who guide them. But if what we model is a constant battle for visibility and respect, what message are we really sending? If we embody oppressed adulthood, are we merely teaching children how to survive rather than how to thrive? In her transformational book, Dr. Bettina Love (2019) argues that “Abolitionist teachers have to hold themselves and their colleagues to a level of accountability that focuses on justice, love, healing, and restoring humanity.” We believe a collective approach to education can cultivate the values articulated by Dr. Love.

Community building is often discussed in education as something we do for our students. We create safe spaces for them, foster connections among them, and teach them the importance of supporting one another. However, community building is equally crucial for us as educators. We need strong, intentional communities where we,

too, feel seen, heard, and valued - not just for the diversity and competencies we bring, but for our humanity. Without this foundation, building prosperous educational communities for our students becomes increasingly challenging.

The reality is that community building in schools cannot happen in isolation. For students to thrive, their educators must also feel supported and empowered. This requires systemic change - change that goes beyond token representation and addresses the unique challenges faced by educators from marginalized communities. We need structures that allow us to grow, lead, and model the very success we hope to cultivate in our students.

When students see their teachers fighting for survival, it sends a poignant and troubling message. They learn an understanding of success steeped in neo-colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist standards - an idea that equates thriving with constant struggle. A struggle that is, in turn, overshadowed by the immediate

need to navigate systems not built with the most marginalized in mind. Conversely, when we, as educators, feel a genuine sense of belonging within our own communities, we have the opportunity to model a kind of success rooted in [Indigenous knowledge](#) (Ravilochan, 2021) and a chance to fully embrace our humanity, embodying self-actualization as perceived by [the Blackfoot Nation](#) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).



Eight Tenets in Building Authentic Community

To build truly intentional communities in schools - where all members - students, educators, and support staff alike - feel valued and empowered - we must shift our focus from traditional top-down structures to more inclusive and collaborative approaches. Here are some practical ways to authentically build such a community:

1. Involve All Members of the Community in the Curriculum

To foster a holistic learning environment, we must actively involve all members of the school community in shaping the curriculum. This includes maintenance staff, cafeteria workers, and other support staff, especially in international schools, where these individuals often come from the local community. Their lived experiences and perspectives can be invaluable.

Example: Host a community event where staff members share their cultural or personal stories, which are then incorporated into lessons. For instance, a local staff member could teach students about local history, traditions, or language, enriching the curriculum and modeling respect for every role within the school.

2. Model the Importance of Acknowledging All Adults With Whom We Interact

Educators can model inclusive behavior by acknowledging and engaging with all adults in the school, regardless of their role. This behavior shows students the importance of recognizing the humanity in everyone, reinforcing a culture of respect and dignity.

Example: Make it a daily practice to greet and converse with staff members in front of students. Include their contributions in school-wide acknowledgments and celebrations. Encourage students to express gratitude to those who support their learning environments, like janitors, security staff, and office personnel.

3. Seek Meaningful and Substantial Time with Other Educators

Time for educators to collaborate is crucial for professional growth and the creation of a unified community. We must advocate for structured, intentional opportunities for educators to engage with one another intellectually.

Example: Advocate for professional development days focused on peer-to-peer learning and discussions around pedagogical challenges and innovations. Create cross-disciplinary study groups where teachers can share best practices, discuss challenges, and co-create solutions. These meetings should allow ample time for deep intellectual exchange.

4. Enlist Support for Building Relationships with Caregivers

To truly center students' needs, educators should be supported in building strong, trusting relationships with caregivers. Co-constructing a child's learning experience with caregivers ensures that education is not just something that happens in the classroom but is an ongoing, community-wide effort.

Example: Advocate for structured time for home visits, regular family conferences, or virtual meetings with caregivers. Schools should provide training and resources to facilitate meaningful dialogue between educators and families, empowering caregivers to contribute to and understand their child's learning journey.

5. Build a Mentorship Program within the School

A formal mentorship program can provide much-needed support for new educators and staff, especially those from marginalized communities. Mentorship fosters connection, reduces isolation, and helps educators feel more integrated into the community.

Example: Advocate for a mentorship program that pairs new or less experienced educators with seasoned staff. This mentorship should extend beyond traditional guidance to include emotional support, professional development opportunities, and assistance with navigating the school's culture.

6. Adopt a Collaborative Teaching Model

Collaborative teaching - where two educators share responsibility for a classroom - enriches the learning environment by providing more opportunities for differentiated instruction and teamwork modeling. It also allows teachers to share the emotional and practical burdens of teaching, creating a more sustainable work environment.

Example: Advocate for a co-teaching model where two teachers, possibly with complementary skills or from different disciplines, collaborate in every classroom. This could mean a subject matter expert working alongside a special education teacher to ensure all students' needs are met, providing more individualized attention and fostering deeper connections and support.

7. Insist on a More Humane and Co-Constructed Professional Development Program

Many traditional professional development programs are top-down and can feel disconnected from educators' real needs. A co-constructed, trauma-informed, and responsive approach to professional development will [empower educators to engage deeply with their work](#) (Gonzalez, 2024), leading to a more compassionate and resilient teaching community.

Example: [Advocate for professional development that is co-created with educators](#) (Aguilar & Cohen, 2022). Offer workshops on trauma-informed teaching, emotional resilience, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Bring in speakers who reflect the diversity of the school community, and ensure collaborative reflection where educators can share experiences and learn from one another.

8. Implement Culturally Sustaining Restorative Practices

To cultivate a truly supportive and equitable community, organizations must implement [culturally sustaining restorative practices that prioritize healing and accountability](#) (Project LIFT, 2023) for those who have been harmed. Traditional disciplinary actions often fail to address the root causes of conflict, particularly for students and staff who hold historically marginalized identities. A restorative approach ensures that all parties involved are heard and respected, fostering a sense of belonging and safety, especially for individuals who have been harmed or systematically discriminated against.

Example: Advocate for integrating restorative justice circles into the school's discipline system, where students and staff come together to discuss conflicts and find solutions rooted in empathy, accountability, and cultural awareness. Ensure facilitators are trained in culturally responsive practices, so conversations honor the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. These restorative practices should be proactive, embedded in the school culture, and regularly utilized, not just as a reaction to conflict but as a means to strengthen relationships and community cohesion.

Intentional community building is critical. It's not just about ensuring our students feel connected and supported; it's about creating spaces where we, as educators, can "do more than survive" (Love, 2019). When we are strong in our own communities, we can better serve our students, showing them what it means to build, nurture, and grow within a system that values every single one of us.



Conclusion

To truly cultivate thriving educational communities, school leaders must model the very practices and values they expect of educators. Leadership cannot be a distant or top-down directive; it must embody the same intentionality, empathy, and collaboration that we strive to nurture in our classrooms. If leaders want educators to build supportive, inclusive, and thriving communities for students, they must first create those environments for the staff.

Leaders must actively demonstrate how to involve all members of the community, advocate for equitable practices, and prioritize the well-being of every individual. They should foster meaningful dialogue, provide time for educators to grow intellectually together, and ensure that restorative, culturally responsive practices are embedded into the school culture.

When school leaders model these actions - authentically embracing the values of equity, inclusion, and support - educators will be empowered to do the same for their students. This top-to-bottom commitment is essential. Only when school leaders embody the principles of intentional community building can we create truly equitable systems that benefit both educators and students alike.

We are committed to this work, not just for ourselves but for the generations of learners who look to us for guidance. We will continue to fight, advocate, and build - using every channel available to us, even if those channels were not made with us in mind. But let us also demand more. Let us demand that the structures and systems within which we operate be rebuilt to serve everyone equitably. Only then can we truly say that we are modeling something worth striving for.

And until that day, we will continue to work toward creating communities that allow both educators and students to thrive because we know that the foundation of all learning is a strong, intentional community - one where everyone is seen, heard, and valued..

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Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.

