



Episode 18: Education Evolution: The Community as Classroom with Lillian Hsu

Transcript *(lightly edited for readability)*

Roxy Manning 00:15

Hi, I'm Roxy Manning.

Sarah Peyton 00:17

And I'm Sarah Peyton. We're the hosts of the Fierce Compassion podcast.

Roxy Manning 00:22

In this episode of Fierce Compassion, we talk with Lillian Hsu, founding principal at Latitude High School in Oakland, California.

Sarah Peyton 00:29

In this session, we discover the importance of supporting curiosity, and links with the greater world of adults for high school kids, and how kids desire to rebel can be harnessed to their desire to impact their communities.

Roxy Manning 00:46

We learn about the innovative approaches that Lillian and her team at latitude bring to foster students trust that they can contribute in meaningful ways.

Sarah Peyton 00:55

We explore the ways that equity in education is often missed, by not taking into account the full picture of afterschool activities and connections with adults in the world of work. And we learn how a charter school can craft a whole world of linkages for the kids it serves.

Roxy Manning 01:14

Join us as we explore how contribution, empathy, and community can transform education and build opportunities with Lillian Hsu.

Sarah Peyton 01:35

Welcome, Lillian!

Lillian Hsu 01:37

Thanks for having me!

Sarah Peyton 01:39

We're so glad that you're with us! We'd love to start with a question we ask every guest. How do you define self-compassion? And how has it been a part of your journey?

Lillian Hsu 01:51

Yeah, I would say that, for me, self-compassion is about just giving yourself permission to really feel the full range of human emotion, no matter how complex and how ugly that might be. And then being able to kind of work through that step-by-step. And then also making sure that you're building in a lot of opportunity for joy. In terms of how that's been part of my journey, I would say that is a crucial aspect of being able to sustain in the field of public education. I think the work that we do is just filled with emotion on a daily basis where we have to do our best to bring the best of our social emotional intelligence to each situation. And sometimes we're successful, and sometimes we fail. And so being able to navigate being in a building each day, with so many complex human beings of so many different age groups coming together across difference, inevitably, those emotions clash. And so what that looks like, I think, in terms of how we give ourselves permission, as well as space and grace to process all of that, I think, is a really big part of self-compassion for me.

Roxy Manning 03:06

Very sweet to hear. I love this idea that in some ways, as the field gets more complex, as there are more people with many different viewpoints and ways of engaging in the world, you'll have so many opportunities where you need to have a strong self-compassion practice. So glad to hear you name that. So one of the things that I was really intrigued in talking to you about is I'm an immigrant, and I know that you're a child of immigrants. And so I wanted to hear a little bit about that story. Like, where's your family from? And then, what was their experience as immigrants and then your experience as a first-generation child?

Lillian Hsu 03:39

Yeah, I'm also an immigrant because I was born in Taiwan. And so I moved with my family to United States when I was five, and my parents were roughly 35, right? I was born on the island of Taiwan. And it's resonant that you bring it up, because I just brought my family there for the first time over winter break, and it was the first time in 15 years that I had been back. So it's been a long journey. But in terms of my own experience, as an immigrant and my parents' experiences as immigrants, we moved to the United States for greater opportunity, mostly economic, but also educational opportunity. And I often share that one of my reflections often is that I was - it was an interesting moment to move when I was five, because it was while my language acquisition window was still pretty wide open, and so I was able to English pretty quickly. And I think it was a lot more of a challenge for both of my parents. My mom came to the United States at a time when the computer science industry was just breaking open. And so even though she had studied nothing of the sort when she was in Taiwan - she majored in horticulture - and so to make a living in the United States, she ended up going to get a degree in computer science and that's how she ended up being able to raise a family here in the United States. But I think one of the reasons she chose a very technical field is because the English language was still really difficult for her. And so growing up when she was working, I oftentimes had to translate documents for her. I would kind of review business documents for her; check her grammar and her spelling, even as an elementary school student. And so I often kind of think back to that time and feeling a lot of anxiety when I was little kid feeling like [if I] don't get the grammar right on this memo that my mom has to write, or this kind of performance review, I might end up costing her her job, right? And so I think as young a kid, as somebody who like had the English skills, again, just by virtue of circumstances having been brought over at that age, I just felt a lot of responsibility to be able to navigate sort of bureaucratic systems as well as the English language for my family quite often. And so

that burden of responsibility as a family, I think, was something that I really carried with me as a kid and felt really keenly. I think the other piece is that only our nuclear family was here in the United States, and so everyone else was still back in Taiwan. So feeling really distant, just geographically, from our family oftentimes felt like our existence here was really fragile, right? That like we didn't really a lot of other networks, or kind of other systems to fall back on if we didn't make it on our own. Right? And so I think, also, as an immigrant kid, I felt a lot of... not pressure put on me by my family, but just the sense that my parents left everything behind to give me and my brother kind of better educational opportunities, and so I need to do right by that, right? Because they had sacrificed so much to be here, and suffered a lot of sort of humiliation at the hands of, you know, their employers and just other folks that they encountered because of their challenges with language or just kind of understanding the culture here, right? And so I think those were definitely different pieces that shaped my early childhood.

Roxy Manning 06:56

I know that Latitude High School has a lot of immigrant kids and a lot of first gen kids, and so I could imagine there's a lot of resonance with their experience and what you've gone through. And I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about how your experiences are shaping what you do with the youth, now.

Lillian Hsu 07:11

I think that one of the core ideas behind Latitude was really this sense of; how do we demystify access to the full range of both economic and cultural opportunity that exists here in the Bay Area, right? And I think that there's definitely parallels there, right? Because as a kid having to navigate the American education system for the first time, you know, in K 12, public schools, but then going on to college as well, and having to figure that out on my own, or figure that out by kind of navigating it with other peers, I realized just like how difficult that journey was sometimes, and not always having an adult in my life that I could turn to, to do that. And feeling like I had to be resourceful to make that happen. And our kids, you know, here in Oakland are also incredibly resourceful. And I think that schools can be part of doing some of that work and being, not just kind of having that be kind of a mystery box, but really being able to, while they have those four years in high school, be able to create opportunities for them to connect to the larger adult world and to understand how things work, and then be able to meet really kind of creative, interesting adults from lots of different walks of life and understand how they navigated their journeys, right? And I think that's definitely one of the core threads that's in the DNA of Latitude, and definitely has some connective threads to what I felt like would have been incredibly valuable had I had that as an immigrant kid growing up in the United States.

Sarah Peyton 08:34

Several years ago, the same year you were founding Latitude, The Washington Post said there was a backlash against charter schools, and that backlash certainly continues today. Can you share a bit about why you believe charter schools are necessary and a little about your vision and your mission starting Latitude?

Lillian Hsu 08:55

I think I would say that, for me, it's never about charter schools versus district schools, right? I believe in great schools and whatever form they come in. There are amazing, just like phenomenal, public district schools, and are amazing, phenomenal public charter schools, right? And for me, I really think

it's about people and the work that they're trying to do with their communities. And so what I would say is that the benefit of schools that have the opportunity to be able to innovate is what I really think matters. And that can take the form of sort of spaces for innovation within public district schools, as well as opportunities within public charter schools, right? And I would say that charter schools have historically been a place where innovation can happen, where more of the resources and actually get to the actual students, right? Rather than being sort of siphoned away into different layers of bureaucracy, and where, I think, teachers, those who are on the frontlines, can be empowered to actually make decisions about the evolution of their schools so that we can actually kind of tinker with basic things, like we use time and how we use other precious resources in our schools, in order to kind of think more creatively about how best to serve our students.

Sarah Peyton 10:09

I always think, you know, when somebody starts a new school, they've perceived a kind of a hole in the system that they want to be in response to. And do I understand that the hole you were perceiving was kind of a direct contact between teachers and students?

Lillian Hsu 10:27

Um, I don't know that I would say it's a hole but what I would say is that, being the Bay - I started teaching in Oakland in 2003, so this is my 20th year in education. And I was in Oakland, you know, taught for many years here, and then ended up in San Diego, and came back. And one of the reasons we moved back to the Bay is because I truly believe that it's one of the most dynamic places on Earth, right? In terms of grassroots activism, in terms of a phenomenal aren't scene, in terms of just innovation, and entrepreneurialism. But too often schools never touch any of that. And so what better place than the Bay Area to have a school that really is thinking about how do we get our young people sort of connected with all of these other adults, right?

Sarah Peyton 11:14

It's not teacher and student. It's student and world!

Lillian Hsu 11:19

Yes! Yes, I would say student and world. And, of course, the student and teacher is also a core part of that, and how we sort of see that relationship, and the way we think about how we cultivate those connections within our building, right? So all those layers matter. And we also believe that that outside world piece is a pivotal part in creating kind of transformative opportunities that oftentimes schools are not tapping into.

Sarah Peyton 11:44

We know that latitude students, that more than 90% of them, are global majority students. And more than 70% come from financially under resourced families, and qualify for free or reduced lunch. Given that this significant portion of your students come from underserved backgrounds, how does your school specifically address and support these students' unique needs and challenges?

Lillian Hsu 12:14

Yeah, that's a big question. I think first and foremost, it's about being clear that we are supporting each student to reach their full potential, no matter how they might want to define success, right? And so what that then looks like is really, first and foremost, it starts with the folks that we're bringing into our

building and who we're hiring as teachers. And we're really looking for teachers that see the full humanity of each kid and kind of sees them as more than a number, but really is looking at who is this kid? What are they about? What are they passionate about? What's the fire in their belly? And then as an adult, how am I part of their journey to be able to help them reach that greatest potential, right? So first and foremost, its people and then sort of the stances that they bring in terms of how they perceive working with young people in our building. I think the second piece is structural. So I went to a pretty traditional big, comprehensive high school, and had maybe like seven periods a day where I was cycling through a different class every 45 minutes, right? And so at our school, we are intentional about our structures, where students are only going to really three core classes a day, plus an advisory and a short elective, and they are in those classes for a much longer period of time. You know, closer to about an hour and 40 minutes, right? And so teachers are not seeing 200 students over the course of a day, right? They really are responsible for two core groups of students, right, in terms of their core teaching load. And so it allows teachers to kind of slow down and really get to know those students deeply and form relationships in a different kind of way. And so I would say that, again, how we sort of set up time how we set up our schedule, those are all intentional moves, to be able to get to know each kid, and so that the students can build a sense of trust with their teachers, and, and vice versa.

Sarah Peyton 14:08

It seems like any teacher would, you know... This is why people teach! What's something you're looking for in the interview? How do people reveal that they're going to work for your school?

Lillian Hsu 14:19

I think we're looking for folks who want to teach not just their discipline, but also want to connect with kids, right? I think there's some people who go into teaching because they're really passionate about history, or they're really passionate about math. And that's wonderful because we want them to bring that passion to our young people. And it can't just be solely about the subject, right? It has to be that they want to know the kids and build a relationship with them. Right so I think that is one of the first pieces. And then I think it's also their beliefs about kids, right? And really believing that every kid, no matter what their background, and no matter what their previous education experience has been, has the potential, and they're willing to work with them and meet them where they are. So I think those are some of the core pieces that we're really looking for. But adding on to kind of your question before of beyond the relationships beyond the structure of the day; then it's really about what do we engage our students in, right? Like, because I think that you can engage kids in four years in busy work, or you can engage them in really meaningful projects that transform their sense of who they are and what they're capable of, but also transform their sense of their relationship to the larger community and the impact that they want to make on the world. And so through the projects that we do, through the internships that we give our students access to, those are what we hope are transformative opportunities for them to be able to stretch those ways.

Roxy Manning 15:42

Well, I know that those project-based activities, they sound pretty amazing! Like building tiny homes or designing self-driving cars... I wonder if you can share a bit about some of those projects that they do, and maybe also share a story of where one of these projects has really impacted their community so that students are getting to give back to the community.

Lillian Hsu 16:01

With the projects that we do, as much as possible, we try to find an authentic client or user and the community, a real audience for what they are creating, right? Because I did a lot of projects in high school, but I would have called them "dumpster projects," because once I finished it and got a break, I crumpled it up and throw it out in the trash, right? And what we're aiming for is that students are actually creating something for someone real, because that makes a big difference in terms of the stakes, and they're willing to invest in the project. And it also gives opportunities for multiple interactions and feedback for them to refine their work to make sure that that is actually something of service or of use, right? And so that can take many forms. One example is in our computer science class, our students last semester, and they've done this for the last three years, now partnered with local elementary school, and they designed and coded their own video games for a fourth or fifth grader that is trying to learn a new math concept. They went and did focus groups with them and empathy interviews, they took those insights and then turned it into a game. And then they actually went back and bought the video game that they coded and gave their users chances to try it before they presented them with the final product, right? So that's one small example. I think last year, our students partnered with the [San Francisco Lighthouse](#), where they had a chance to work with somebody who was visually impaired, and then they worked to design a product with an [unintelligible]. So one group designed a haptic glove that would make it easier for somebody who was visually impaired to cut up vegetables without accidentally cutting themselves, because the glove would give them feedback. Another group came up with an intelligent cane that would allow them to navigate the world and actually be able to talk to the user. And then one of the groups came up with an app that would help folks that are visually impaired able to navigate AC Transit more easily, right? And so when we talk to students about hey, which project did you have the most? That was one where they like, "Hey, we're actually creating something of use! We're putting in these skills that we're learning computer science class, but it's not just for some abstract purpose, or just to get engraved on it. Like we're actually using it, designing it and then refining our prototype for someone real." And then, of course, we mentioned the tiny house project. And I think, one of our favorites for some of our students over the years, right, where we partnered with [Youth Spirit Artworks](#), out of Berkeley. But they had a tiny house village, near the airport, in Oakland. And in our physics class, students got to actually kind of design and build tiny homes that were donated to this tiny house village. So I think living here in the Bay, in Oakland, I think we see the challenges with a need for housing on such a critical basis, every single day. And it can be easy to start feeling cynical or jaded, but nothing's ever going to be done about it. And for our young people growing up today, we don't want them to become a new inured to this as a fact of life we want. We don't want them to just feel like well, nothing can ever change. And so, you know, the government's not doing anything. And so like, what can we do? Right? I think that makes a huge, huge difference in terms of their perceptions of how young people can also be involved in trying to shift things. And this particular project, I think, had such resonance that our students were invited to be part of a conference where they shared about this project with other high schools in the state. And then I think they're being invited down to San Diego in a few months to be able to present again. They also got a chance to speak with former Mayor Libby Schaaf and they met them at the tiny house village so that young people could also share the impact that doing this project had on them, right? Because I think for our young people today, "Hey, yes, like in ninth grade, I built a tiny house in 10th grade, I designed and coded my own video game, right? In 11th grade, you know, I recorded my own podcast!" Being able to speak to those accomplishments also makes sure young people feel like we're capable of doing

anything, right? I'll share example story; one of the projects that our students do in second semester of their computer science class, is they build self-driving cars. So they're kind of these mini self-driving cars with ultrasonic sensors that can navigate an obstacle course. But when the students heard about the project, they really thought they were going to be building a full size, giant, you know, self-driving car So they said, "Well, why wouldn't we? Like we built a full tiny house last year. So like, why couldn't we build a full-size car?" Right? And I was like, "You're right, you know, you can!" And so it's that, again, that sense of confidence, right? That like, as a young person, you're capable of doing enormous things and things that can have a real impact on the world. And I think for so many of our students, again, like we're here in the Bay Area, and Oakland, where Silicon Valley without traffic is just over the bridge, not too far away. But it might as well be Paris for a lot of our students, because it's just kind of this whole other universe, right? Because they may not have access and a sense of knowing anybody who works in that world. And so being able to tackle a project where they feel a sense of technical prowess from having done this phenomenal project, but then also seeing the impact it can have, right? I think it gives them a different sense of confidence in being able to navigate that world. And then coupled with the visits that we then do to these different companies in the sense of our career, inspiration visits, with our job shadows and our internships, that's [what] we think ultimately opens doors. It's not enough just to have those jobs be available; we need our students to also build an authentic sense of confidence that they can enter those spaces. That's what we're aspiring to as a school.

Sarah Peyton 21:15

So here you are with this capacity to give the kids a sense of meaning... Are there any strategies that kind of take a kid from a natural empathy toward a deeper understanding of the needs of the community? One of the things you mentioned was that, for example, when the kids who are doing the things for the folks who are visually impaired is they did some time first with the people in their lives. Tell us a little bit about how you evolved this strategy and if there are other strategies that you have to bring this kind of connection about?

Lillian Hsu 21:50

Yeah, absolutely. I think it starts from the choice of the project and the choice of the essential questions that we're exploring and those projects, right? So for example, you know, we have done a podcasting project for multiple years at our school, and in the first few years, it was really focused on connecting our students to change makers in the community. And then since then, there's been kind of different themes each year, right? So one year was really focused on the origins of the housing crisis in the Bay Area and sort of understanding the history of redlining in our community. And then last two years, the focus question has been, what can young people do to disrupt xenophobia in our society? Right? And so, as part of that, I think sometimes, you know, certainly, it's the texts that our students are reading as part of that it's the discussions and Socratic seminars that they're having, but it's also them kind of meeting actual people from our communities to sort of look at this question, again, not just from an abstract place, but actually kind of meeting real people who are experiencing complex issues and being able to understand their perspectives. And so I know that this year in the 10th grade, as part of their exploration, of thinking about how to disrupt xenophobia in our society, our young people got a chance to actually interview folks from a lot of different walks of life, including some of the unhoused neighbors within our local community, right? And so I think the more that we set up, you know, intentional, really thoughtful opportunities for our students to be able to talk to people, right, people that they may not

encounter on a regular basis, and be able to sort of ask thoughtful, intentional questions, and then connect it back to the readings connected back to the conversations they're having in the classrooms, and then ultimately connecting it to creating a product that has value of value to someone, right? I think all of those things sort of come together in terms of building that empathy. But the empathy also comes in other places, right? Even within our math classes. I would say that, you know, in our ninth-grade math class, Mr. Carlos, who was one of our most beloved math teachers, he always says that ninth grade math is not just about teaching algebra, but also about teaching empathy for each other, right? Students are often used to seeing math as an individual sport, where it's about rushing to get to their right answer. And I think the way we do math in ninth grade, where students are working together and intentional groups, and they have specific rules within that group, and students are having the chance to listen deeply to each other and understand each other's thinking and to push each other's thinking. That's also sort of a way that we're trying to bake empathy building into the DNA of the school and having that be part of the rhythms and rituals of the school. So that it's not just sort of paying lip service to it, but the way that we're enacting their learning on a daily basis really infuses some of those pieces into it.

Roxy Manning 24:24

There's something that feels so transformative about this, because I've been in a lot of school settings - like my kids went to parent participation schools when they were younger - and so many adults have this idea that, oh, if we're going to go on a field trip with the kids, they're not going to listen, or they're going to be disruptive. And I'm almost hearing you take a completely other approach; that if we give kids meaning and purpose, they're going to be all in, they're going to be engaged, they're going to want to show up and be empathetic. We don't have to train them. We're just inviting them back to their natural state. Is part of what's true for you.

Lillian Hsu 24:58

Yeah, I love that you have that because it makes me think of a quote that one of my mentors, Rob Riordan, who was the founder of High Tech High, which was the school that I used to work for in San Diego. He always used to say that he feels like adolescents have two competing impulses, right? That one is the impulse to want to rebel, but the other is an impulse to want to contribute, right? And I think that what we're trying to do is tap into a little bit of both, right? That impulse to rebel, I think, comes from a place of like a fierce sense of justice that I think young people have, right? And they feel it even more keenly and more passionately during those adolescent years. But coupling that with a sense of, I think young people want to feel like they can have an impact. They want to know that they can contribute in some meaningful way, right? So if you can bring together their fierce sense of justice with an issue that they can take action on, I think that's where the most powerful things can happen.

Roxy Manning 25:54

I love this piece because even hearing you say with such acceptance, "students have an urge to rebel." It's like, yes! You know, like, we can really celebrate all of the different developmental needs that our kids are going through without demonizing any of them. There's something that you referenced earlier that I want to come back to, which was some of the internships that the kids do. I know that the juniors and seniors spend a lot of the year doing internships, and that might be really surprising for people who think kids should be in the classroom doing, you know, studying reading and writing and arithmetic and

a foreign language. So can you share a little bit more about your internship program, and how it complements the traditional educational model?

Lillian Hsu 26:32

Absolutely, I want to say that, you know, our work with internships has been really inspired by a lot of the pioneering work that Big Picture Learning, which is kind of an international network of schools that really believe in leading to learn - a lot of our foundational ideas came from them, as well as from High Tech High down in San Diego, which is kind of an innovator in project based learning, right? So there's a lot of schools that, I think, have thought for a really long time about, again, like when school feels irrelevant, or when it feels really disconnected to the real world, how do we really disrupt that? And so our internship program - students can do internships, actually, in any year of high school, but 11th grade is where we are requiring them to do a month-long immersive internship where from Monday to Thursday, they are out at their internship sites, and our teachers actually go out to visit our students and their mentors at their internship sites. And so it's a fully immersive experience where the students feel like they are out on the job, right? And they get to go, coffee breaks, they get to, you know, like, have a lunch and you know, all the things that feel so natural for maybe for adults in the working world, our young people get a chance to really immerse in that. And I think a key piece of it is being connected to a mentor, who really wants the student to have a tangible hands-on experience, but again, can give them something meaningful to do, right? Like, obviously, our students might help with making copies or getting coffee, but like, what we're really hoping for is that they really get to sort of have the texture of what it's like to be a recording artist or what it's like to be a real estate agent, or what it's like to be an architect, right, for that month. And I think those connections are oftentimes just so powerful for - we've seen sometimes students who may not always feel the most successful in a traditional academic setting, but in those internships, they really feel in their element. They feel in their bones that like, oh, like, I can see myself doing this, or this is really right for me. Or sometimes they might actually realize like, "Well, no, this isn't actually what I want to do," right? But kind of discovering that sooner than waiting until they've got into college or chosen a major and then ended up in a career field that they don't end up loving; I think a big part of this is being able to let them be able to sort of experience that in the real world, and then have space to reflect on it, right? So our students do have a reflective blog during the time that they're on their internships, and then when they come back, we do these what we call transitional presentations of learning, where we invite the student's parents, but also the student's mentor to be at their presentation of learning to really share what the students took away from that experience. And I think that it's the learning really comes from the experience plus reflection, right? And doing that in unity is then what really helps cement all of that.

Sarah Peyton 29:11

This is so fun! And amazing! But then you're getting kids into college; how do you negotiate that interface between this very experiential based stuff and what colleges often are looking for on standardized tests and so on?

Lillian Hsu 29:29

In California, in particular, we're so lucky that our students have access to the UC and the CSU system and a robust community college system as well. All of our courses are still A-G aligned, so we make sure that you know, all of our students are taking the courses that they need. By the time they're senior, they're all eligible to apply to a university. But I would say that, you know, the higher education system

has been shifting away from just looking at grades or standardized tests, right, in terms of college admissions. And I think the way that we do high school, where students have an advisor that ideally stays with them throughout their four years of high school, and then can write them a really personalized letter of recommendation that speaks to seeing their growth over time. But then also their internship mentors, oftentimes our folks are able to speak to the immense strengths that each student brings. And then the students themselves, right, the internships are oftentimes that place where they can write about that in their college applications. And so I think all of those things also really serve to help our students stand out their college resume, right? Like what they send to colleges also being able to speak to the leadership that they took on in the projects that they did throughout high school, and, again, being able to say, like, I built a tiny house, or I built a self-driving car, or, you know, I published my own book or magazine, right? Those are all accomplishments that all of our students can speak to. When I went to high school was oftentimes, like, those were the things that you would have to accrue on your own time after school, or you'd have to pay for programs to do those things, right? And I think in terms of equity, it's really important that our students have access to that in the core school day, right? And so all of our students have access to that, all of our students have access to internships, as opposed to it being only for the students who are privileged enough to be able to, you know, stay after school for extended hours for after school programs, when they might have to care for a sibling or get an after-school job.

Roxy Manning 31:16

Just hearing you talk about this equity piece, I remember this is one of the things that I realized was really amazing about Latitude. It's now, I guess, a couple of years since the pandemic, but a lot of schools struggled with being able to provide some of the core educational experience that was equitable for kids who maybe didn't have computers at home or didn't have access to the resources would let them continue to stay engaged when they were offline. And I understand Latitude did a great job and weathered that. So this idea of part of bringing equity is also thinking about providing opportunities inside the school, instead of expecting people to have it outside feels so much a part of building Beloved Community, creating opportunities for people to thrive. Really exciting to hear about. Mentioning, Beloved Community, some of the work that Sarah and I do is really focusing on kind of creating Dr. King's idea of Beloved Community, right? So a community where everybody thrives, where everyone has the resources that they need to succeed, and can also have the resources to deal with conflict. And so when I think about, you know, any diverse, like intensely diverse student body, I can imagine there's a lot of conflict. High school, for me was very conflictual, and now you're bringing all of these kids with different experiences together. So what are some of the examples of the tensions that you see at Latitude? And then how do you address them? How do you help the students build Beloved Community with each other?

Lillian Hsu 32:41

Yeah, I think this is something we grapple with continually, right? We are one of the most diverse high schools in the Bay Area, because I think we're the only high school in Oakland, and maybe even in the Bay that has a zip code-based lottery. And so you know, most public high schools, the way that's determined which high school you go to, it's based on neighborhood boundaries, right? And given how, you know, the cost of housing in different neighborhoods, our schools are deeply segregated in the city because of those neighborhood boundaries. Right? So when we started Latitude, we were really intentional from the get-go about saying like, no, we want to make sure that students from every single

zip code in Oakland and beyond have access to being able to come to Latitude. And so our students are currently coming from 50, or more different middle schools from across Oakland and beyond, and some of our students have been in very much segregated previous K-8 experiences, right? And so this might be the first time that coming into ninth grade, where they're in community with folks that are really different from them; in terms of race, in terms of class, just in terms of lived experience, right? And so I think that this is a kind of question that we are continually living with, and continuing to, again, think about, like, what does empathy really look like in terms of building those connective threads, in terms of having students who may never have been in community with each other, be able to really work with each other, have patience with each other, be able to understand each other? And there's inherent tensions in that in terms of just student's own understanding of their own identity, as well as other identities as well.

Roxy Manning 34:17

I'm actually curious to hear some of the ideas, like, what does it look like? What does empathy look like? What are some of those threads that you've been building with them?

Lillian Hsu 34:25

I mean, I think that, you know, first and foremost, like this year in ninth grade, we've seen a lot of students who have come in and oftentimes are like making jokes that are racially based or that are kind of using different aspects of identity to roast each other. And sometimes it's not done from a place of malice or trying to be harmful, but almost as if it's like, it's not a big deal, right? And that was the way that maybe they were used to joking in their previous middle school experiences. And so I think there's a lot of work that our deans have to intentionally do with our students in terms of helping them to understand like, when you use language like those, or when you make jokes like this, it's reinforcing, right, a lot of the negative stereotypes and a lot of the oppressive ideas that exist in our larger community, right? So I think it's a lot of those intentional conversations that we're having were - and maybe some of it is based on sort of memes that kids see online, or just kind of what they see in terms of what feels like acceptable content. So I think a large part of that is being able to kind of, you know, help our students understand some of those different pieces.

Sarah Peyton 35:32

Do you find that these discussions are enough to turn kids around? Are you able to avoid the punitive approach altogether?

Lillian Hsu 35:43

I think that our first and foremost approach is always dialogical. Right? And I think that the two deans that we have - both Dean Kareem, as well as Miss Ortega, who is our new ninth and 10th grade dean that joined us this year - both of them, their first impulse is always really educating through dialogue, right? And so I think we spend a lot of time - whether it's an official sort of restorative process, or it's more an informal dialogue; a large part of the way that we approach things is in an educational way. Of course, if something persists, and you know, students are sort of despite those different pieces, insisting on being really harmful in that way, right, then we may need to kind of try other approaches. But I would say that our approach, first and foremost, is always dialogical. It's always educational. And it's always also being attuned to sort of where students are in their development, as well, and their

neurodiversity. Because sometimes those pieces also sort of intersect in terms of their capacity to really fully understand some of these elements. But yeah, I would say that those are some of the core pieces.

Sarah Peyton 36:44

Do you have zero tolerance policies for things? Or, like, how do you approach that?

Lillian Hsu 36:50

Well, you know, we've never named it as a zero-tolerance policy, but I think that our staff, and students, are really attuned to when things are said that are harmful, especially when they're identity based, right? Just bring that to the awareness of an adult so that we can have that dialogue, and not just sort of living with it and sort of accepting it or turning a blind eye to it. Right? So again, we don't call it kind of a zero, you know, zero tolerance policy. But I would say that just in terms of the way we respond, and kind of sweat the small stuff, even if it seems like a passing joke, right? I think that is to sort of look at those different pieces.

Roxy Manning 37:00

Well, everything that you're talking about sounds super amazing, and I imagine - because pretty much every one of our guests who's doing this kind of amazing work is experiencing some backlash. So I'm kind of wondering, is there any resistance to the framing of the school to what you're doing into schools? And what do you say to those who are resisting this approach?

Lillian Hsu 37:49

Um, I don't know that we've gotten - I think that when we were trying to start up, that's where we were facing probably the biggest backlash. And I understand that, right? Like, I know, the dynamics of charter schools and district schools can be complicated. Again, like for us at Latitude, it's never kind of an issue of charter schools versus district schools, I think that there's room for both. And I think that there are ways that we can really learn from each other and share with each other as well. I've worked hard to actually like build relationships with a lot of the middle school principals and middle school staff previously, because a lot of them are actually agnostic about what high schools they go to; they want their students and up at a high school that's going to care for their kid and continue to give them the best opportunities going forward. Right? And so I think that if you actually talk to people at the school sites, I think that a lot of times, those politics are not maybe what is most prominent. And I know it's complicated, right? I know that in a field where resources [are scarce] that's where a lot of these tensions can arise. And so I have a lot of empathy for that, and I understand those different pieces, but that's not where I choose to put my energy. Right? I think, what we are really challenging one of my previous mentors at High Tech High, the founder there, Larry Rosenstock, would say that the thing that you always need to guard against is a regression to the mean. So I think oftentimes, when you are trying to be innovative, it can be easy to be like "We need this, and we need this" and that ends up pulling you back towards the more traditional. And so I think the big thing for a school to be able to stay nimble and to be able to stay innovative is to always be reflecting and always be trying to look for our blind spots and to try to figure out [when] we're not living up to the values that we want for ourselves. And also like as the school grows, and as it scales, and also circumstances change, whether it's with the pandemic or kind of just what's happening internationally, right? I think being really attuned to the emotional nuances of the people in our community and what folks need. I think that's sort of ongoing work that we need to do in order to make sure that we're still living our values.

Sarah Peyton 40:01

Here you've got this amazing program, but you have less than 400 students in the program. And if there are other people like me listening to this whose mouths are kind of watering for all the students that they know, what could youth and their parents who are in more traditional schools and who might be struggling to find meaning and inspiration in their academic settings, what could they do if they don't have access to a school like your school?

Lillian Hsu 40:31

I'll refer back to a time during the pandemic. So you know, because our school is so much about being able to get kids out in the community, when during the pandemic, that was obviously really hard, right? And so we did have a big campaign to have our students connect and do informational interviews with just adults from around the world. And we had our kids kind of take these pictures that said, like, I want to interview a social worker, I want to interview an architect and, and then we kind of share that out. And then amazingly, we got responses from all over the world, like people from Suffolk, England, and Florida would reach out and say, "Yeah, I'm a social worker, I'll talk to one of your kids!" Right? And so I think that just connecting our young people, even if it's just a zoom call, or just a phone call! Like if you have a kid that's fascinated by graphic design, connect them with a graphic designer that can talk to them, and maybe let them come and just visit their office for a day, or even for 30 minutes, right? I think that our young people are just so curious about how the world works, right? And even me, as a lifelong educator, sometimes when I'm on the BART, I look around at all these people commuting, "Where are you going? I just want to follow you to your office for a day and see what you do all day!" Right? And like, I think our young people are curious about that, too, right? So I think for any kid for any parent, that's one way of igniting our students interests and not feeling like, "Well, they have to wait till after they get into college or after they get all their degrees before they can do that." No! Actually, sometimes making that informal connection might lead to an internship, right, or might lead to a mini project that our students can take on! And I think those can be really transformative, just getting our kids access to being able to understand and demystify how the adult world works, I think is a huge part of that. And I think this is true for teachers, too, in any school. I recently was invited to speak with some pre-service teachers who are doing their student teaching, and who are teaching in very traditional spaces, and they said, "Well, how could I do this, you know, as a student teacher?" And I think with any project you can do, if you can bring in a guest speaker, if you can do an interview with somebody in the community, as part of that project, have your students ask somebody's opinion about the issue that you're studying. I think those things just bring in more light and perspective into what it is that they're studying. And I think just opens up new ways of thinking about things that oftentimes just learning something from a textbook wouldn't do. So I think there's many ways of doing that, but first and foremost, is the connecting with adults.

Roxy Manning 42:53

Lovely. This has been a really, really, really inspiring conversation, and we going to come to a close, but I'd also love to find out what our listeners can do to support the work that you do at Latitude. What would you want to see both community within the Oakland area, and then our listeners worldwide, do that could be supportive?

Lillian Hsu 43:13

Yeah, I think for any adults that live in the Bay Area, we would love to be able to just connect! Again, whether it's for a student to be able to interview you for, you know, 15 minutes or 20 minutes, or if you're open to welcoming a small group of students into your workspace for an hour or two, that's so powerful. Just this last week, we had our students connect with a financial advisor, we had our students connect with local school counselors and psychologists, also went to a kind of a technology advanced manufacturing plant, right? Like each of those experiences for that group of students was so powerful. And so if you're willing to sort of, again, just open up your office and just show us what you do on a day-to-day basis, that makes a huge difference. And then definitely, if anybody's interested in taking on an intern, and mentoring a young person, that is of the utmost impact in terms of transformative possibilities for our kids. For folks who are from outside of the Bay Area, we welcome visitors also all the time. I think over the last few years, it's been so fun! We've had visitors come from Chile, from Mongolia, from China, and I think just this week from Germany, who came. Our students love sharing their work and feeling like what we do is interesting to other people, right? And so if there are folks that are from outside of the Bay Area, but want to just stop by for a visit, our student ambassadors would love to greet them, and love to just be able to be in dialogue about what does school look like here versus where they're coming from, and just being able to have those questions about what school should look like.

Sarah Peyton 44:44

What an inspiration! This has been a wonderful conversation! The audience can't see me but I'm beaming at the thought of all of these kids receiving this kind of... like being plants that are getting watered and have nourishment for their roots. What a sweetness! Thank you so much for being with us, Lillian!

Lillian Hsu 45:04

Thank you for having me!

Sarah Peyton 45:05

And now I'll just turn to our listeners and say please support both Lillian's work in the world, but also our work in the podcast with Roxy and me by going to our website antiracistconversations.com, where you'll learn how to purchase our books, *How to Have Antiracist Conversations*, and *The Antiracist Heart*, get inspired by interviews with previous guests, and learn about new events and classes and new podcasts that will be coming out. Lillian, thank you, thank you, thank you!