

## Fenn Participants Reflect on the 2016 NAIS People of Color Conference

**Kristin FitzGerald**, Lower School Teacher

*Name and describe one workshop or session you attended. What stood out for you? What were the different perspectives you came away with?*

"A Guide For White Women Teaching Black Boys" with Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr. He will be publishing, along with Ali Michael and Marguerite Penick-Parks, an ever-evolving guide (work in progress right now) of the same name as the workshop. He hopes it will "sit in the lives of people as a guide throughout a career." Right now, 48 chapters, 5 pages each, with vignettes - real stories about real people. It will be divided into three sections: **Understanding** who we are as white teachers and what baggage we bring to the classroom, that we exist in a larger social context, no matter how good our intentions; **Respecting; Connecting**. Dr. Moore, as an educator and a father to a black son, poses the questions: can we educate Black boys in a system designed for their destruction? Are there healthy predominantly white spaces in education for boys?

He and his co-authors posit that as white teachers, we need to think about: How to talk about race; How to do anti-racism work alongside PoC without accessing our internal superiority; Seeing the unquestioned biases fed to white women without questions; Undoing our socialization as white women; How Black Lives Matter in our curriculum; Changing / interrupting the narratives of black boys - "spreading positive rumors.

*What are the two main takeaways that you learned at the conference?*

- Teachers can't be professionally competent without being culturally competent. (As asserted by David Johns, executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans.)
- Proximity is essential in changing the world; we must get closer to people who suffer from injustice the most. Proximity = power. (From Bryan Stevenson)

*How are you planning to incorporate these new ideas to your work at Fenn?*

All that I experienced and learned weaves so well into the windows and mirrors lens through which I already filter my teaching. I am continually learning and growing as a white ally, and I have already shared new data, insights, and personal narratives from presenters and speakers with my fifth graders and with colleagues. Being at PoCC has also given me space to really work on active listening.

*Based on your experience at POCC this year, do you have any suggestions for Fenn as far as diversity is concerned? Do you have any comments on our diversity program?*

1. Students should attend SDLC at PoCC so that we can further empower them as change agents.
2. Fenn should incorporate affinity groups in some way.
3. Multicultural curriculum does not equal anti-racist teaching / classrooms. We need to be even more intentional in examining our own biases as white teachers and incorporating anti-racist practices.

**Virginia Morales**, Director of Instrumental Music

*Name and describe one workshop or session you attended. What stood out for you? What were the different perspectives you came away with?*

I enjoyed all of the general sessions that I attended the most, because of the sense of

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unity and also the guest speakers who shared their stories. In particular, the talk by Zak Ebrahim, whose father is a convicted terrorist. I think the message he spread really resonated with a lot of the current events facing our nation/world. He grew up basically being trained to hate, and yet, he chose his own path, proving that we do not always have to be defined by our circumstances. He chose the path of love and peace and makes it his life work to spread that message now. It was a very moving experience.

*What are the two main takeaways that you learned at the conference?*

The biggest take away for me was simply that everyone has a story that they want to share, and a deep desire to feel included and that their stories matter. This is true of us as faculty, and for our boys. Also, Bryan Stevenson's talk about being proximate, which I believe is unbelievably true and so important if we want to see positive changes in our country. The power of simply being proximate to some of these communities that so often feel left out can have an immense impact on reducing violence and seeing real positive change. As a society in general, our nation seems to do the opposite, which does not help the real issues at hand. Also, being proximate to our students, knowing their stories, their struggles and their needs is extremely important.

*How are you planning to incorporate these new ideas to your work at Fenn?*

In David John's master class, he talked about simply asking students what their needs are. What do they need to feel safe, engaged and supported. This is something that seems so simple, and yet in the moment, whether in band rehearsals or trying to get the class organized for an assignment, it is something that easily slips from my mind. I will make a conscious effort in my classroom to be better about this. It is such a simple task, and yet, after much reflection, I believe it is one of the most fundamental things we must do as educators.

*Has there been any personal transformations/insights/revelations for you? How will that change or influence you as a person and as a teacher?*

In addition to everything I wrote above, I believe that attending POCC has given me a much deeper understanding of empathy and what it means to be a culturally competent educator and human being. I was able to gain so much perspective and I feel that I was able to grow as a person.

*Based on your experience at POCC this year, do you have any suggestions for Fenn as far as diversity is concerned? Do you have any comments on our diversity program?*

One workshop I attended was "Refugee and Immigration Stories: Strengthening Inclusive Community and Identity in a Polarizing Time." It was about a private school that made an entire yearlong service-learning project for 4th based on a social studies immigration unit. The kids got together with kids from a local refugee camp to share letters, stories, and such. Its main goal was to grow empathy among its students. The school also worked together with the community organization as well as a public school district to help make this happen; it was a further example of a fully inclusive community that collaborates to benefit everyone. I would love for Fenn to do something like this, if there are any refugee schools in the area. I think the whole program they talked about was the true definition of service learning.

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**Osa Osagie**, Diversity and Teaching Intern

*Name and describe one workshop or session you attended. What stood out for you? What were the different perspectives you came away with?*

I went to **Navigating “Ouch” Moments: Dialogue and Listening Tools for Microaggressions by Rosetta Lee**. For me, I appreciated the insight of the facilitator. Her presentation was both lively and informative. And in many ways, it helped me reconcile with some of my shortcomings. It can be difficult to talk about microaggressions because oftentimes they are taxing or painful and they can be incredibly tricky to navigate. But she gave us some really good techniques that I am certain will help me in my professional and personal journeys.

*What are the two main takeaways that you learned at the conference?*

For me, I took away the importance of reaching out to other people in the community (other schools, local organizations, etc.) in order to help create a village of support for our students, as well as the need to listen to our marginalized students and to respond courageously on their behalf—no matter the discomfort or sacrifices necessary.

*How are you planning to incorporate these new ideas to your work at Fenn?*

As the diversity and teaching intern, I plan on being more deliberate about the work that I do with the students and faculty. I want to make sure that here at Fenn, we are cultivating an environment that caters to the needs of every student, not just a particular type of student. I fully expect there to be some resistance, but being at this conference has reaffirmed that we have to maintain this type of work in order to validate the humanity of our marginalized students, faculty and staff.

*Has there been any personal transformations/insights/revelations for you? How will that change or influence you as a person and as a teacher?*

Being in these types of spaces really helps influence my type of work because it gives me a time to flesh out some very difficult conversation, connect and galvanize with a community of likeminded, determined people, allows for me to undergo self-care, and challenges me to set goals that will ensure that our campus is indeed a model for inclusivity and equity.

*Based on your experience at POCC this year, do you have any suggestions for Fenn as far as diversity is concerned? Do you have any comments on our diversity program?*

At Fenn, I believe that our Diversity Department has done some great work, for which we should be very proud. While, I recognize the successes of the program, I still believe there is much room for improvement. In the future, I would like to see a conscious effort on behalf of all faculty, to ensure that our curriculum and instruction are based on a multicultural approach. Additionally, I would like to see more students and faculty members of color present and visible on our campus in the next coming years. Lastly, I think we would benefit from revisiting our community's conceptualizations about gender and gender identity, as well as accessibility for the differently abled (e.g., emotional, physical, and developmental).

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**Jennifer Youk See**, Assistant Director of Diversity and Mathematics teacher

*Name and describe one workshop or session you attended. What stood out for you? What were the different perspectives you came away with?*

I attended a workshop called “The White Women’s Guide to Teaching Black Boys” The workshop was led by Dr. Eddie Moore, founder of the White Privilege Conference, which is held annually in the spring (usually, if not always, in April). The description in the program is as follows:

Meet the forthcoming White Women’s Guide to Teaching Black Boys. This online workbook was created to help white women teachers engage in concentrated, focused inquiry around their relationships with black male students and the impact that race and racism have on those relationships. Attend this experiential workshop – which uses video footage from interviews with both white female teachers and black men and boys – see how it helps generate new avenues of reflection and action for white teachers.

This particular workshop really had me thinking about whether or not a majority white school is the best institution in which parents can educate black boys. Race in our schools is a very complex thing, and one that is not recognized enough. Much of society doesn’t recognize the magnitude of impact that race has in our daily lives. White women do not move through this world in the same way that black boys do, and it’s an interesting question: whether or not teachers who cannot fully empathize with the experience of their students, should be teaching them in the first place.

*What are the two main takeaways that you learned at the conference?*

**The struggle continues, and journeys sometimes take two steps forward, twelve steps back.**

Students are ready for more than we give them. They like to talk about the real world and dig into the messiness of it.

*How are you planning to incorporate these new ideas to your work at Fenn?*

I’m going to try and use the down time I have with kids to get them thinking about things outside of themselves and Fenn.

*Based on your experience at POCC this year, do you have any suggestions for Fenn as far as diversity is concerned? Do you have any comments on our diversity program?*

Fenn needs to double its diversity efforts. There is so much that we could be doing, especially with sustainability and community service.

**Tete Cobblah**, Director of Diversity

### **A Reflection**

At this year’s People of Color Conference, I was most struck by the keynote speakers.

The first such speaker was Zak Ebrahim. When Ebrahim was seven-years-old his father, El-Sayyid Nossair, shot and killed a leader of the Jewish Defense League. His father went on to co-mastermind the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Ebrahim spent most of his life moving from city to city, trying to disassociate himself from his father’s actions.

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At this conference, Ebrahim told a story about the power of redemption and how fathers' behaviors and ideologies influence boys. His father taught him how to hate Americans when he was a child. After his father had committed these acts, Ebrahim saw his father wheeled away to prison. His life quickly changed, and he was filled with anger because 'society had taken his father away.' After some time he realized the importance of community and now tours the country talking about fighting terrorism and spreading messages of peace and nonviolence.

Conference keynote speaker Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, asked us to think about marginalized people in our society and how we interact with them; moreover, he recommended that we get close to beloved community members so we can help those suffering.

The conference also featured remarks by Robert Blanco, a gay poet who became the fifth inaugural poet in U.S. history. He talked about community from the perspective of a gay immigrant from Cuba, and he believes that his description of the human spirit is why President Obama chose him.

After listening to these presenters and attending workshops, every Fenn participant came together to reflect on what we learned, how we felt, and how we could bring these new ideas/approaches back to Fenn. I have always felt that an important aspect of this conference is the reflection component, for it gives one an opportunity to sustain the energy of the conference and bring it back to campus.

As a teacher, I believe it's crucial to think about how we can bring a multicultural perspective, which reflects real life, to all academic subjects. Effective teachers are ones that are multiculturally competent, and by this I mean we need to know how to lift up the identity of all students. This competency can be expected and made part of a teacher's evaluation process. Until there is multicultural competence, it will be difficult to develop and maintain a beloved community. And so I hope that more members of the Fenn community can participate in this conference in the future as it is a transformative experience.