

# “It’s important to talk about these issues”:

## The Need for Leaders to Establish Connections and Address Students’ Experiences and Concerns

In late summer 2021, I had spoken with Sofia Díaz and her mother about their experiences with Sofia’s transition from middle to high school during the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and ongoing racial injustice. As a follow-up to that conversation, I spoke again with Díaz, currently a high school sophomore, in January of 2022, after she had returned to in-person schooling for a semester. Here, she shares her experiences with racial and gender inequity over her first year and a half in her high school, as well as ways that she has established connections with others within her school and sought to support peers. In discussing ways that educators at her school have responded to racist incidents and conflict in her school, Díaz provides insights regarding how leaders can nurture relationships with students to promote students’ sense of well-being.

I conducted several rounds of editing of the original conversation transcript for length while seeking to maintain the essence of Sofia’s experiences and to focus on the parts of the discussion most relevant to the issue theme of leadership for racial equity and social justice. While the issue is not directly related to gender equity, this was clearly an important aspect of social justice for Díaz and one that points toward the intersectionality of ethnicity, race, and gender. Díaz’s experiences and observations highlight the myriad issues students and families face and the need for leaders to consider their schools beyond a focus on academics to support students by increasing awareness of resources and developing coping skills. Díaz provides insights on how educational leaders and staff can build relationships, set a foundation for having meaningful discussions, and reach out to students and families to foster student well-being and safety. Díaz’s story underscores the need for educators to explicitly discuss and address issues that arise to improve schooling experiences for students, especially those who continue to experience marginalization. Díaz’s thoughts on incorporating student choice and recommendations for greater outreach to families reflect the importance of establishing dialogues and beginning with families (Ishimaru, 2019) and integrating learning about healing centered engagement (Ginwright, 2018) as an approach to address the collective trauma experienced over the last several years.

**ELIZABETH GIL:** To get us started, can you please state who you are?

**SOFIA DIAZ:** My name is Sofia Díaz. I am currently a 10th grader at [a Brooklyn] High School.

**EG:** I want to start with a little background. Last summer before your school year started, you and I had a chance to talk about your first year in high school, about transitioning to high school while attending school virtually, dealing with pandemic conditions, and grappling with the racial unrest and injustice that has been going on in the country. How would you summarize your first year of high school?

**SD:** Chaotic, specifically because I think we hadn’t really figured out how to do remote learning just yet, and the teachers were struggling with how to connect to the students and how to teach [online]. I think it created a sort of disconnect in the sense that it was definitely harder for the teachers and administration to deal with different issues, like the bits of racism that I experienced and a little bit of the sexualization that happened. It was definitely hard, especially because there was so much happening everywhere. I had a few friends who went through similar situations like I did but didn’t



AKINA CURLEY, 9TH GRADE

say anything because they didn't know if they would be taken seriously, or if it was something worth talking about, because it was online. So, yeah, it was definitely hard.

**EG:** Why do you think some students weren't sure if it was something worth talking about, whereas you found it was important to address with administration?

**SD:** Well, I was raised in a household in which my mother has always told me that if I am treated in a way that I find disrespectful, that I should talk about it, and she's always taught me how to address certain issues like this. I also feel I am a little bit more vocal. I do a lot of participating. I feel very strong about certain issues. Some of these friends are more shy and another part is they felt

that since it was online and it wasn't in person and had nothing to do with actual physical violence against them, that it wasn't worth talking about. I'm like, "Well, it is because you are upset by this and it's also not okay, for them to be displaying this type of behavior," especially for [this school] which was supposed to be such a diverse school. I was expecting more of a better approach to racial slurs and degrading of different races, in a sense.

**EG:** How has the transition been from the remote context last year to the in-person situation this year, especially being in the school building for the first time this school year?

**SD:** It's a little hard to explain because there's a couple of mixed emotions around it. Part of me is very happy that I'm back because I think that the connect is a lot easier to have with the teachers and the students. Being back in the building, I would say that people are a lot less bold as to what they were online last year. I still have experienced a couple of situations that have been handled by administration, but I would say wasn't the best way of handling it or reprimanding the other students involved. In terms of learning, I am feeling more challenged than I was last year. I feel like they're also adding a lot more work because they feel they have to compensate for last year through adding more rigorous material for the kids to do.

**EG:** Can you tell me about some of the experiences that you've had this year still, these racialized incidents and how they've been addressed?

**SD:** Within this school year there have been two incidents in the lunchroom. I was sitting with my friends and one of the boys from last year approached me and my friend. I decided, rather than engage him, because he was a lot bigger than me and I was a little scared, I got up from the table and I addressed one of the teachers in the lunchroom. That teacher pulled this student to the side and basically told him to leave us alone. It worked in the sense that he didn't come near us in the lunchroom again. However, there were moments in the hallways when we were switching classes, that if I were passing him, he pushed me a little, like he shoved me. I didn't say anything about those because I didn't know for sure it was targeted, or if it was accidental. I haven't seen him in the building since last, I'm going to say November. I am grateful that I'm not really seeing him or interacting with him.

**EG:** You mentioned that this year it's been a bit easier to connect to teachers and students and also told me when we spoke previously that in some ways, connection with teachers felt a little bit stronger due to teachers paying attention to students' emotional well-being. Is that something that has continued in the current school year?

**SD:** I want to preface by saying that I understand that, because it is still a pandemic, some teachers have their own circumstances at home and some of them haven't been in the building as much because they had to quarantine and everything. The connectivity is better in that we have more interaction when it comes to lessons, and it feels a lot easier to stay engaged. However, I would say that I only feel like I have one or two teachers that really do care about how I'm doing. The rest of them it feels like it's enough, like obligatory for them to ask every so often, "Oh, how are you?" but it doesn't really seem like they really care what the answer is.

**EG:** [Regarding] racial incidents that have happened nationally, are these conversations that are had in class? For example, more recently, the Ahmaud Arbery case was decided. Are those conversations happening in any classrooms or are those things that happen more informally with students?

**SD:** In my AP World History class, we have my teacher [who's] very big on associating what's going on in the real world into some of our lessons, because history has a way of repeating itself, right? So, we have definitely spoken about different national movements, not just racial equity, but also gender equality. He's been very big on talking about not only the Black Lives Matter movement; he did bring up the Arbery [case] a couple of times, as well as Breonna Taylor and other names that we now know, sadly, because of what happened to them. Other than that classroom, it seems like a subject that is avoided. My AP World History teacher has established a very, very good foundation in the sense that the first day of class, he was very clear that he was going to be bringing up stuff like

this, and that there was no tolerance for any kind of [disrespect]. He was very strong on that, and I think that's probably why it was a safe space to have those conversations in that classroom.

I would say that the other teachers have not done so. In [another] class, we brought up a question about whether or not we felt like the justice system, how they were treating Latinx people and minorities in the country fairly. There were certain students in the classroom snickering and saying things that I heard, and I know the teacher heard, about how we're actually more privileged than white people are, apparently, and that the justice system is and always has been fair to everybody. My teacher did not address it and we continued with lessons. In that regard, I did feel kind of angry. However, I didn't know how to voice that anger without sounding as though I was trying to start a fight. I thought that the best way to deal with it was to keep my mouth shut, especially because those kids in that class are upperclassmen and are very intimidating to me because they are also football players, and they are big, and I really don't want to accidentally be caught outside and have something happen. My other classes haven't touched the subjects.

My principal, however, I would say—this was a nice little moment for me—I have a mask that says, “Black Lives Matter,” [that] I wear daily to school. You can say that I'm very loud about what I feel. I was in my algebra class and the principal walked in and was like, “Oh my God, I really like your mask.” So, it was it was a good thing for me, because it felt like, “Okay, I know where the principal stands at the very least.”

**EG:** So, even though that may sound like a small thing, it sounds like it had a big effect for you. It's a message to you, in a sense.

**SD:** It definitely did because I wasn't quite sure where she was on the spectrum in regards to the stuff that has been happening in the country, especially with the Black Lives Matter protests and everything that had happened last year. Even though our school has signs all over the place that says they don't tolerate hate of any kind, every school has that. You don't really know where the individual principal or staff member stands until you have certain conversations like that. That was a big part of why I feel a little bit safer at my school, because it told me that she views it as something that's important to talk about—that it's important that it's addressed. So, that also led to a couple of conversations that I've had with her one-on-one that have made me feel that if I do have an issue, and I find her, I think that it will definitely be handled, like I'm confident in her capability of handling things like that.

**EG:** I appreciate that you just brought up the principal, because one of the things, and again it doesn't only have to be the principal, how educational leaders can sustain authentic relationships with families and the communities in times like this, when there is crisis and conflict.

**SD:** I feel like the movements that are happening around the nation aren't really addressed as much as they should be in our classrooms, especially with the statistics of my school. I'm a Student Ambassador, so I know exactly the statistics of how many of each group of ethnicities there are in my school. We have a very big percentage of our population that are from different countries and that are of minority ethnicity. Specifically, I believe there's 71% of our student body is Latinx or African American and I think it's a bit of a disconnect for us when we are thinking about what we're seeing on the news. And we take that to school with us and it's not addressed; it feels like we're kind of alone in it, in a sense.

I think that's a big way to open up communication between staff members and students, which could lead to talking about other stuff like how the pandemic has affected us. It's a good segue. I think it's important to talk about these issues. In regards to checking in for the mental stability of the students and checking in with each other, my school has tried to incorporate social-emotional learning into lessons. However, it was one week in the beginning of the school year, like a mood meter and anonymous little things on Google classroom, filling out a form like, “What are you feeling?” Other than that, we haven't really done anything social-emotional learning-wise and it's important, especially because, even if you're not talking about how are the students doing in particular, you could always bring up something like, “We're going to do five minutes of medi-



tation,” giving different ways for us to figure out how to cope, even if it’s not us talking about it. I understand that there are certain students that sometimes don’t want to really respond. Things to help about anxiety, about depression, it’s important because, then at least, even if the kid doesn’t feel like talking about it, they know that they have resources.

**EG:** As a Student Ambassador are these some conversations that you are having in terms of trying to have some more sustained SEL [social-emotional learning] support?

**SD:** As a Student Ambassador, we were having weekly meetings from September to November. But afterward they decided we were going to move to once-a-month meetings. Now that we meet once a month, it’s kind of harder to get that out.

As a Student Ambassador, it does help when it comes to trying to figure out how to help certain students. I give tours, so when we have new students or we have people who are interested in our school, I let them know what’s going on in the school and how everything’s going. It has given me the opportunity to give out help to some specific students that I’ve toured around who have definitely not been in a good headspace. I was able to bring them to the guidance counselors I trust and know will definitely handle situations better so that they could feel a little bit of relief. We do have social workers at our school and therapists that are there 24-7, even throughout the summer, so if a student does bring it up to one of the guidance counselors, there is someone for them to talk to and it’s free. So being a Student Ambassador has given me a little bit more power in the sense that I’ve helped individual students.

**EG:** You said that you direct people to particular guidance counselors. How do you know that those are the guidance counselors you want to direct students to?

**SD:** The Student Ambassadors’ office is in the guidance office and through that I was able to establish connections to a couple of the guidance counselors. The more I learned about them, the more I felt like these are people who really care. Especially when we had our orientation for 10th graders and 9th graders before the school year started, I was also there because Student Ambassadors were helping out with the guidance counselors’ workshops and giving a little bit of my experience with the school and the teachers and everything. I was also able to establish connections that way, and the more I learned about how they address situations, about how they deeply ask more questions if they feel like you’re not okay. They led me through meditation before, and so it gives me confidence in those specific counselors that I have had interactions with—that I know that they they’re going to address situations the way they need to be.

**EG:** It does sound like some of what you’re talking about is authentic relationships that get formed. Is there a way that you see responses looking different when people do not have those relationships?

**SD:** Yes. I have a few friends who haven’t established any sort of relationships with any of their teachers or the guidance counselors. I even mentioned, “Maybe you want to talk to a guidance counselor or a teacher about this.” They’re like, “No, no, no, no, I don’t really know them like that. I’m not very comfortable.” Some of the students don’t talk and some of the teachers don’t reach out. It could also be partly how people say [about] first impressions; there are some of our staff that I don’t even talk to because they’re just very cold. It makes it harder for students to feel like they want to approach those people. Very few feel authentically friendly and like authentically, “I’m here,” “Hi, how are you?” Maybe they are nice, and they do want to know, but they’re also not putting an effort to make it known if they are. It’s just definitely each side has a little more work to do.

**EG:** You’ve mentioned different experiences where you see the authentic relationship and places where you don’t see that established. What are some effective strategies and practices that you’ve seen used by school leaders to foster more family engagement, student engagement, community engagement, and collaboration?

**SD:** Within my school there have been a couple of different events, not only workshops, for mental health. We have had a couple of fun events, like we've done scavenger hunts and we have had after school Zoom meetings that were yoga sessions. I know the students that participated felt that was a great way for them to not only have more experience with the staff, but they also felt closer to some of the student body that they see on a daily basis that they didn't really know. Within the school days, there has been an announcement that my principal makes; it's another reason why I love her. She sometimes makes announcements randomly to thank the students and the teachers for their cooperation and letting them know that it truly does mean a lot that we're showing up.

The orientation that we did prior to the beginning of this school year, even though it was kind of stressful for the people who are running it, was very much worth it when the 9th graders and 10th graders seemed to be alleviated in their fears and a little bit of their anxiety about coming to school. Some of them got to meet their teachers before going to class. It was good that some of them established connections. There is a podcast we have at my school called "[School] Quick Talk," which is ran [sic] by our student body president and vice president who interview people on that podcast weekly. My friends have said that they talk about some really good issues that are happening within the school and they've talked to a couple of experts on how to deal with issues in the school. Thinking about it again, I need to reach out to the president, because maybe they could do a Quick Talk about social-emotional learning that should be added into the school.

**EG:** Have you seen different ways that the leadership has tried to connect with families? Were families involved in the orientation?

**SD:** The families were invited and were also toured around the school and given the rundown of how we were going to try to work this year. We have had family nights at the school. I think we've had one every month, some of them being movie nights, some of them being like a sip and paint. I've heard from a couple of friends [who attended a pumpkin painting event] that there wasn't really a very fun environment. If you want to have the student body and their families engaged in stuff like this, you definitely need to have engaging things that are going to make somebody like to come. There are ways to create events that are fun and also engaging and look nice, even on a budget. I have been thinking about if I should propose to the Student Ambassadors that we create a student committee that works on events like this, so that it also has student choice in it. So that there's more involvement and then students can add more, fix, tweak, whatever they think needs to be more engaging, more fun, more appropriate for our age group, maybe. And pertaining to some of the families, we can get some input for this, maybe siblings or parents of those who are on the student committee. It would probably rack up more people coming to these events and adding more of an actual community that's united.

**EG:** One of the things we had talked about when you and your mom and I had talked previously was that your mom did join the PTA. Do you know what her experience has been with that and how their interaction is with the leadership?

**SD:** My mother is the secretary of the PTA; she was voted [in]. The PTA is supposed to be raising money for the school's budgets and figuring out how they can beautify the school and add more to the school. My mom has been talking to me about what me and my friends think should be added to the school, what I thought we needed. A couple of the things I've told her are lockers, we could do with a fun event, we could do with like a nice dance or something.

**EG:** You don't have lockers?

**SD:** At my school we don't have lockers.

**EG:** So, you have to carry everything with you throughout the day, your jackets and everything?

**SD:** Yeah. And it's a pressing issue because it's kind of hard for students to lug textbooks, notebooks, and assignments that they have to do with a laptop, plus. So, my mom has been trying to figure out how the PTA could raise money for lockers. And she's been doing research and she's trying to find lockers that are cheap and figuring out how they would install them and stuff. My mom definitely wants to do more for my high school experience and for the kids at my school.

**EG:** Have they [the PTA] gotten involved in SEL or racial conversations or other conversations about the pandemic or anything like that?

**SD:** I feel that my mother has wanted to talk about certain issues that are pertaining to the pandemic, to students' mental health well-being, but she hasn't really had the space to talk about it. I do not know for sure if that's how she actually feels, but that's what I got.

**EG:** If you had to give advice to the leadership at your school, what additional advice would you give them for forming relationships with families at your school and continuing to make the school a better place?

**SD:** I think there needs to be more outreach to parents. We have PupilPath as a way for the teachers and parents to connect, also with the administrative staff, and there are emails that are sent out almost daily about coming tests and stuff like that. I think that that could be used also, maybe send out surveys like "What do you want to see done in your child's school?" "What do you want from us?" "How do you think we have been doing?" Schools across NYC, the most I've seen is a once-a-year thing they have to send out, that one survey and that's it. There could be more outreach specifically for this kind of issue, "We want to know what you think."

**EG:** Is there anything else that you want to add?

**SD:** Yes. I know we didn't talk much about gender equality issues, but I feel like it's a social justice issue. Within my school and I know schools across New York City, there have been incidents of girls feeling uncomfortable within the school environment. It doesn't make you feel good, and even though I'm somebody who prides myself on talking about situations like that, I haven't said anything to my school staff, specifically because I know that that student has power with the student body. And also, because when it comes to sexual harassment and assault issues, based on the stuff that I've heard from girls who have attempted to say something, it does not seem as though it has been addressed the way it should be. I have had a moment in the lunchroom and one of the upperclassmen—it seems like the upperclassmen boys think that they have the right to abuse the freshmen and sophomores because they're older—he had an entire group of friends with him who were all upperclassmen, all very tall. I've had several cases of upperclassmen approaching me, some of them getting handsy. And I feel powerless in this situation, which makes me feel even worse because I'm somebody who prides myself on bringing things like this to people's attention. I feel like I'm letting the other girls down, especially because I'm usually the one they turn to but, in this moment, I just feel like I don't.

**EG:** You're bringing up really important issues. Also, you talked about the SEL and coping; this could be another issue to address in that podcast as well. You made a point that you can talk about racial issues, and you've brought up racial issues, but this is not a place where you feel that you can speak in the same way.

**SD:** This isn't just my school. I have had friends call me because they needed me to be on the phone with them in case something happened because this boy was harassing them at school and is now following her home. I feel like there should be assemblies. We need to talk about consent. I think it's a big issue, because girls are being put into situations that are scary and traumatizing for them. I don't want to say that the boys haven't been put in situations like that either, but I haven't [heard].

**EG:** Thank you for sharing. I'm sorry that this is something that you even have to think about. Being from a different generation than you are, I would have the hope that we'd be doing better than we are.

**SD:** The excuse “boys will be boys” is still a thing.

**EG:** I agree with you, the assemblies [could be a way to address the issue] and also for the teachers to learn about how they can address these things because sometimes they don’t know how either. There’s also the physical intimidation factor you’re talking about with these larger kids. You’re right; it is another social justice issue—gender issues—and then not even to mention the racialized gender aspects.

**SD:** It’s another thing, actually; it’s a good thing that you bring it up because I, specifically, haven’t had bad interactions with any of the upperclassmen that are of color. It is always Caucasians. Not to sound stereotypical, but it really seems like they know that they have more power. Not only because they are older than us, and because they’re bigger than us, and because they’re guys, but because in today’s society, it’s in our justice system too. It’s very likely that the white male will be more believed than the minority female.

**EG:** Thank you again for your time. I appreciate your candor and sharing. The fact that you’re giving these issues voice is important. By talking about it, you’re giving folks a greater opportunity to have it on their radar and to be able to think about how we talk about these things and act on them so that schooling experiences can be better, not just for particular individual students but across the board. Like you said, this is a justice issue that needs to be addressed. Thank you for bringing your voice in and for adding this dimension to our conversation.

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