



Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #12 - Lauren Mascareñaz (Wake County Public Schools)

Laurn Mascareñaz: We meet the needs of students rather than meeting ours. So it's about them. We say over 90% of classrooms are culturally responsive, but they're responsive to the teacher's culture. It's what the teacher likes in the classroom, it's their color scheme, it's the books that they like, the things that they like, the layout that they like, it's all about what is natural and comfortable for them. Culturally responsive said it's not about what's natural and comfortable for me, it's about what's natural and comfortable and reflective of you and your culture in your life.

Speaker 2: The results, they've been immediate and, we have one of the biggest shifts in the state.

Speaker 3: It's almost magical when it all comes together. And I think to myself, this is what education is about.

Speaker 2: There were inequities everywhere. My students in South Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Speaker 4: Over 40% of our students were leading third grade with less than proficient reading skills. And that was just something we had to stop.

Speaker 5: The bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure, we can change the trajectory of these students' lives. And I just want to shout from rooftops, it can be done.

Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education, this is Ed Leaders in literacy, a podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, and school systems, to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy.

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Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education, and today we're talking with Dr. Lauryn Mascareñaz, Director of Equity Affairs in Wake County Public Schools and founder of RISE Equity Consulting. She has a Masters degree in Culturally Responsive Teaching and recently earned her Doctorate in Education, focused on leadership and organizational systems from Vanderbilt University. A nationally board certified teacher in the area of literacy and language. She started her career in elementary education before moving on to become a literacy instructional coach and culturally responsive teacher trainer. Lauryn is passionate about teachers with a particular focus on closing the opportunity gap for young males of color. Lauryn, we are so excited to have you here today. Thank you for joining us and taking time out of your busy schedule.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me.

Jessica Hamman: So I saw that you received your Masters in culturally responsive teaching from the University of Colorado. Can you tell us a little



bit about what culturally responsive teaching is and what drove your interest in this area?

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Absolutely. So I come from, my mom is a teacher and so I grew up in her classroom and my mom was kind of one of these early masters of kind of like the multicultural movement as it would've been the late 80s, early 90s, right. And she taught in an area with a huge title one population, and we were from the Central Valley of California so there was Hmong population there. And my mom was adept at all of these things that we asked teachers to do and tried to train them to do. She was so natural about bringing in their culture and celebrating the Hmong New Year and having them teach and learn about it. And so I grew up in that environment, visiting her classroom and her bringing that home, literally her students home, they were at our house all the time.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: I saw that model, and so I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. And then very early in my teaching career, I decided I need to get masters degree for all the reasons that educators go forth and get their masters degree, mostly in terms of being able to make some money. But I went to University of [inaudible 00:04:50] for my undergrad and decided to get my masters. And at that time, I was just looking for something that actually would be literacy based so I enrolled in the program and it was mostly around literacy. And as I enrolled in it, they started shifting it to include culturally responsive teaching. So this is, 2007, maybe, when I enrolled 2008, which feels like a very long time ago. Now in the early days of culture responsive teaching, that was kind of just coming onto the forefront.



Lauryn Mascareñaz: I actually, kind of just, was led into it by that way and kind of fell in love with it. Started to realize the connections between what they were talking about to what my mom had done and what I was trying to do in my classroom. And realizing that it was so much more than just what books were in front of kids. That kind of launched me on this path of looking at education in my career and my job that I was doing and loved so much, but in a very different ways and with a much more critical lens.

Jessica Hamman: So for teachers that are listening and hear the term culturally responsive instruction, it can kind of feel like something nebulous and kind of above the reality of practice in the classroom. So can you tell us a little more about what actionable things teachers can do to implement culturally responsive teaching?

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Yeah, it's a great question. I think it does feel very pedagogy heavy, it's very theory when you hear it. I boil it down to the nutshell, the easiest way I can think about it is that we meet the needs of students rather than meeting ours. So it's about them. We say over 90% of classrooms are culturally responsive, but they're responsive to the teacher's culture. It's what the teacher likes in the classroom, it's their color scheme, it's the books that they like, the things that they like, the layout that they like, it's all about what is natural and comfortable for them. Culturally responsive said it's not about what's natural and comfortable for me, it's about what's natural and comfortable and reflective of you and your culture in your life.



Lauryn Mascareñaz: And so once you start to start making that shift, you look at everything, even what you have on your walls, you think none of my kids really like that, or even know what that is, why is that up? It doesn't, it's, it's a wasted wall space, right? And so certainly have your little corner with your things that are important to you. But think about when one of my professors, I adored said, "I should be able to walk into your classroom and know who the kids are, even if the kids aren't in the room", and that was one of the most powerful things I ever heard, and that's what I [inaudible 00:07:27] to do in my classroom as I looked at everything from their perspective and had them tell me and had them create it with me because I wanted them, I wanted anyone to be able to walk into my classroom and know who was there. Not that it was my room, but then it was their room. [crosstalk 00:07:40].

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Some of those, yeah, those great, like, just thinking about those different types of things makes you think, what poster am I putting on the wall? What, how are my directions laid out? Are they at my eye level? Are they at kid eye level? Just very basic things like that can make huge shifts. And I tell people the easiest thing you can do in your classroom to make it culturally responsive is to put up pictures of your kids. It's such a very small thing, but it's, I took pictures of them, cheese in with big smiles on the playground, their writing and doing different things or their pictures would be in the directions, of them doing different things. I taught elementary school, but they saw themselves there literally in that space and it belonged to them.



Jessica Hamman: I love that. And I love the idea that it's celebratory too. Just going back to how your mother took the Hmong culture and brought it kind of a pull through all the way through her life, but really to deeply understand where they come from and then celebrate it too. I think that's so important. Not only recognize it, but validate it through celebrating it.

Lauryl Mascareñaz: Absolutely. And so many of my students, I taught in populations where most of my students were black and brown students, and I didn't want them to always be in a classroom where the only black face they saw was Dr. Martin Luther King, right? There's, I mean, he's brilliant, there's so many other incredible black faces that they could see and brown faces they could see. So we had Tommie with his fist up at the Olympics on the podium, in one of my classrooms and then my kids would say, who is that? So they can learn the history of these other brilliant people who are a part of their culture and who do you want to see, who are your heroes and asking families and including that, and really coming from a place of black and brown people are not just this, monolith of, civil rights, heroes and holidays, but they're real people and everyday life, and they're here, our ancestors and all of that. So I tried very hard to celebrate who they were and a lot of that had to do with the culture and the environment of the room.

Jessica Hamman: Mm.(affirmative)

Jessica Hamman: Can you tell us a little bit about how it dovetails with literacy instruction? As you said in your degree program, it started as a



literacy and then increasingly it became an element, elements of culturally responsive teaching, and it feels like a very natural fit in a lot of ways, but it may be kind of a confusing fit to other people. So can you tell us how literacy instruction can align well with culturally responsive teaching and even how it makes literacy instruction more effective if a teacher uses culturally responsive teaching?

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Absolutely. So I think, when I was getting my national board too, I think this also went into it with my literacy instruction, thinking about how I was going to kind of display those two worlds that I had in my classroom together, how am I going to show how I'm culturally responsive, but also earn this certification in literacy, because it can be very academic and it can be very white centered English academic language.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: And so I went to a training when I was working in Hunters Point, Bayview in San Francisco, and it was by Dr. LeMoyne Owens. And she talked about the difference between academic English and like standard African American vernacular. And this was also the very beginning days of how we're having these conversations, that, how black culture spoke was not [inaudible 00:11:09] as a quotes, air quotes around, how people referred to it and working with my students to understand that their home language was not wrong. It was just different than standard academic English that we were using at school. And I was super explicit about it. I mean, I made tea charts that would say, home language said this standard academic language said this and my kids, one of their favorite words was 'finna', "I'm finna go to the store", right? Or maybe in Texas, they say fix into, right? There's different words that people use. And



so finna, and then we would say, what could academic language be for this, it's going to, I'm about to, or I'm ready to, and showing them that there is a difference, but not one is better than the other.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: And I think that's where kids get hung up, especially, when we're talking about literacy instruction, they get all these red marks on their paper that say, that's not how you say it, or this isn't the right word, or this is how you pronounce it, when you know, that subtracts their, their culture from school and they feel like they have to arrive as somebody else, even in how they are speaking and writing, rather than showing them the direct correlation between the two.

Jessica Hamman: Very cool. So now you hold a position, that is, the Director of Equity Affairs at Wake County Public Schools. And I'd love to hear a little more about the work you do in this role and what it looks like.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Sure. So I'm in Raleigh, North Carolina now, which is a very different climate than the bay area, which I'm used to and so it has been quite a learning curve in terms of learning the politics and the history of the space. We are a massive district with a 14 largest district in the country and that means we have over 170,000 kids. So one of the things that we grapple with all the time here at scale, because everything is so big, it's 200 schools, it's 20,000 employees. It's easy to say, oh, let's train everybody. How, when, why, where, it's just, it becomes, it's massive, literally massive in scale is everything that we're trying to do. And so that also could mean that the work



that you're trying to do can have big impact or you feel like you're doing a lot of work and it just feels like a little tiny drop in the bucket.

Lauryn Mascareñas: So I've surrounded myself with a great team of people that are doing this work. We're a small but very mighty team. And we really work in certain buckets, such educator, speak bucket to kind of say, I spend a good majority of my time with people who are leading equity work in our district, meaning principals, assistant principals, district administrators, teachers at schools who want to start equity teams or equity work. I'm really, how can I help build your capacity to do this work since we are such a small team, how can I go out and train you, work with you, coach you, consult with you so that you are able to carry out this work either in your department or in your space. And then we also have incredible people, there's a person who does family and community engagement, someone who works with teachers, someone who works on student engagement.

Lauryn Mascareñas: And so we all kind of come together, through our multiple stakeholder lenses to kind of, attack it from multiple sides. The difficult part about what we do not only is scale, but is also politics as everything is in equity work. And it can be very difficult because there's a quite a bit of detractors anytime you try to do equity work. Anytime you try to make change, there's always going to be pushback to that. And so everything we do is under free [inaudible 00:14:41] information act, we have quite a bit of emails that come our way and whatnot. And so it's finding that balance to be able to say, I'm so strong in my convictions about what is right for all of our kids, but also how do you change a system when you're in the system itself, right? And trying to change a system, but I'm a big



piece of this huge cog. And so that's the kind of delicate balance that we walk the line back and forth between those two worlds.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah. A lot of times it seems like when people talk about equity in education, I mean, things, it's so hard as you said, to turn the huge ship of the government education system. And then a lot of times people say that doing diversity and inclusion work is like ticking a box. And they have this thing that they're told they have to do so they do a training, tick the box and move on. I would love to hear your thoughts on that. And then what do you do at Wake County schools to make sure that it's not just a box to be ticked, but that the work that you're doing is actionable, and how do you measure that impact?

Lauryn Mascareñaz: I see the criticism, right? I think that people who have been in education for a long time see equity or anti-racist work as the newest iteration of multiculturalism, or then it was affirmative action, so people kind of see, oh, it, it was affirmative action. Then it was multiculturalism. Now it's this, you know, it's just the newest thing on the block. And I try to tell people all the time, it's not the, it's not the next thing. It is the thing, right? It is. It's the, it's the center of all that we're trying to do and it can easily be relegated to, oh, if I send my staff to, you know, an equity, then we're good. And I think one of the things that my boss has done very well is he was here years. You know, he was a one man show before the rest of us showed up and he did very well.



Lauryn Mascareñaz: Is that he made equity training, not compulsory. It was not mandatory. We can't compliance people into equity work. It's a shift of heart. It's a shift of mind. It's a shift of values, right? This is how we feel about kids and what we think they deserve and families and how we interact with them. You can't say, I now urge you to go forth and, you know, take this and be compliant and have to go take this training. So I think people get frustrated and say, shouldn't everyone have mandatory training. Well, if I have people in mandatory training, there's people who are not there, they're going to be resistant to everything we have to say. And they're just there because they have to be, we've set up a model where people come to us when they are ready and when they want to do the work. And so we work with them and we talk with them about 20,000 different frameworks.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: But one of about how we shift, you know, the momentum in this school, and we talk about, you know, here are the people that are on your crew. Here are the people that you need to get on. Here are the people. And I lovingly call them not your people right here are the people that we spend a lot of time worrying about and spending energy on that we don't need to. And so talking with them about how you shift culture and different things like that. And so we're largely a coaching office. And I think the idea that he set it up, like that means that people really come to this work in a ready and open and willing space. And because we're so large, we're never had a loss for people coming to us and saying, okay, I'm ready. And then I think as things happen in our world, more people become ready. And more people like this summer, all of the things that were happening in racial uprisings Raleigh was not immune. There was Confederate statues toppling, right. A couple blocks, you know, down downtown. And so when things like that are happening,



people, you know, the urgency rises even more. And so I think if there's an option for that, certainly it seems it's, it's not, there's no one solution, but I appreciate that. It we're set up like that.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah. And I love that people come to you ready for the work because that's how you know the work will have an impact. So in addition to coaching leadership coaching, it sounds like, what trainings do you provide? In addition to the coaching?

Lauryn Mascareñaz: That's a great question. There's so many, and it looks so different. Of course, right now, what, what we're offering and what we're able to. We largely gave our staff just time to kind of breathe right now. And most of us did not offer most of our departments to not offer anything right now, just to give everyone a chance to get their, you know, their lives together.

Jessica Hamman: And just for our listeners who may be listening down the road, this is a conversation we're having in the middle of the COVID pandemic, where schools are shut down, and teachers are taxed, and life is upside down.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Absolutely.



Jessica Hamman: So in giving them some space, it's a reaction to that. And so [crosstalk 00:19:31] what were you doing before? How has it changed and how will you move forward on the trainings?

Lauryn Mascareñas: So I spent a lot of time in my car going to schools and meeting with teams, meeting with principals, meeting with APS. Our district is not only big size wise, but like such land wise. And so I got a more fuel efficient car and spent a lot of my time going to, because I felt like these are conversations that you have to have in person with people and running trainings and saying to people, "are you ready?", "Here's how we do this" and really inspiring people to the work. And so I spend a lot of time going to schools and meeting either with teams or with individuals who are looking to kind of have those initial coaching conversations.

Lauryn Mascareñas: A lot of our training had to do with just basic equity competencies. We developed a framework that kind of said, what does one need to know in order to start equity work, right? You have to have some ability to understand privilege and power and identity, and you have to be able to kind of wrap your head around what all those different things are. And so we started offering different courses that would apply to those. So my brilliant colleague, Christina did asynchronous and synchronous course on a podcast around whiteness and educators could join in on that and spend time in discussion and earn credits and spend time like that all the way to, in our summer leadership conference with all of our leaders in one space, which ends up being, 800, 900 people, we'd have huge rooms where we were just talking about how do we, what does equity look like in action? Okay. Let's say we're ready for equity, but what does



that look like? What does that actually tangibly look like inside of a school and what should you be looking for?

Lauryn Mascareñaz: So it is largely again, responsive to what our stakeholders need and largely responsive to what our different areas are working in. So our APS might be saying, oh, we need work with our professional or, and teams this summer. I'll say, I'm your person here. Here I go. So largely waiting for people to reach out to us. But then each semester we would come up with kind of like a menu of professional development that we were offering and the greatest boss in the world. And he would say, what do you want to teach? What do you want to go out there and tell people about, what this is your chance to research something and present it and give it a try. And so we've been very lucky to have him be able to say, go forth and teach and train and do. And we have guiding principles, we have in our district, six core beliefs that we tie everything back to, and a few of them are specifically equity, and that's largely how we anchor our work, especially in the face of naysayer.

Jessica Hamman: Where would you like to see your work, either through your equity consulting business or through Wake County Public schools? Where would you like to see it going in the future? What's kind of vision that you have for what shape your work could take in the future?

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Well, the ultimate vision is that school districts don't need equity offices is that equity offices, equity and anti-racist values and beliefs are so firmly embedded in the fabric of the district that we don't



need to be a side office. And I would say the same for schools, right? You don't need equity team they're if your school is operating at a level in which all your decisions and teams are being made at that. So that's my pie in the sky dream of what that might look like my work here in the short term of goals of what I'd like to see happen here is how we move the conversation from just about racial equity to other are marginalized groups that are struggling in our public school system and or in our school system in general. And so I'm thinking about our LGBTQ community, our refugee community, our English language learner community.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: How do we start to expand the conversation about bias and prejudice in inclusion when it includes other marginalized groups, not just their racial dynamic and how do we talk about the intersectionality of all of those? And so I'd like to see our work go that way at the district. And we just included protections for transgender students and community in our policy, which is a huge win based on the Supreme court fourth circuit decision. And so I see us moving in that direction more so over the years, and then for equity consulting, it's, it's, how can I help as many people as I can with the knowledge of what I'm already doing? I think it's, it's an incredible opportunity and I feel very lucky and fortunate to be able to have of people say, can you help us? Yes, I would love to. How can you know, I'm not the expert, but I am someone who's doing this every day and I can tell you what has worked and what it hasn't.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: And I can help you, kind of dream big and also kind of create actionable goals. And I think that's something that my doctorate drilled into me was kind of this planning and systems learning about how we kind of make change. And so it's been fun to work



with schools, especially that aren't public schools, I've been working with like independent Montessori schools or, associations of independent schools or different colleges or university. And it's interesting just, it broadens my perspective to be able to see what this looks like when it's not necessarily the K12 setting. And so it's largely the same. I have to say the things that we struggle with or the things that independent schools are struggling with universities are struggling with, we're all trying to figure out how do we have these honors conversations and how do we make change for our kids?

Jessica Hamman: And so before we go, I'd love to hear one example, if you have one, of a teacher or a leader that you've worked with that really kind of changed in their beliefs or made an impact in the organization, that they were a part of, as a result of the equity work done.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Yeah. And thinking about an amazing principal that I worked with, who in my very first few months here, her name's Holly and she came to me and Holly is a white woman running a school that is largely black and brown students and a huge title one and English language learner population. And she said, "I just kind of want to see what this is all like, what's equity about. Let's just have a conversation because I don't think I need it at my school because my kids are black and brown like that is something that I really need to do or look at? Cause we're already diverse", and we talked about the differences between diversity versus equity versus what that might look like. And it's almost like you could literally see the light bulb happening above her head as we talked.



Lauryn Mascareñas: And she has just ran with the at concept. And she, we did training out there for home visits and like over half of her teachers went and started doing home visits in her community. And she wrote a grant to get money, to build a parent in community center at her school that has food and clothing and computers to help with job. I mean, she just went huge. And I think from someone who is just kind of like, what do you think about this to someone who is just fierce in their ability to not only say I'm going to do something about this, but write the grants, train the teachers, put the people out there. And really she's one of my favorite, like boots to the ground, people of, she didn't say, oh yeah, that might be a good idea. What do you think about this? And those are difficult things to do, but wow. When you think about the impact that has had on her community, just those two things it's been really wonderful to see.

Jessica Hamman: I think it's a really nice example of how someone can come to you with an earnest, lack of awareness and how just a growing awareness of what there is to know can bring a lot of change from their actions along the way after their awareness is peaked.

Lauryn Mascareñas: And it shows us when we enter conversations with those open minds, right? What we're really able to say and learn and be able to act upon. It's pretty cool to see what she's doing at her school.

Jessica Hamman: Well, Lauryn, I can't thank you enough for taking this time to share your experiences with us. It's such an important work, and I agree that I hope someday we will be able to undo the structural and systematic racism that's embedded, and lead with that openness and



understanding and kind of awareness that makes school safe and welcoming and validating for all students.

Jessica Hamman: So thank you so much for your time.

Lauryn Mascareñaz: Absolutely. Thank you for having me. It was wonderful to have the conversation.

Jessica Hamman: To learn more about Lauryn Mascareñaz you can find her on Twitter @laurynmaia, That's L A U R Y N M A R I A, or check out Wake County Public schools @wcpss.net or on Twitter @WCPSSEquity.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you for listening to our Ed Leaders in literacy podcast. To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to gleaneducation.com/ed-leaders-podcast and access them in the show notes.

Jessica Hamman: Bye for now.

