

Lisa Sun

Personal Statement

When I was a young teacher in Chicago twenty-some years ago, I did not see myself as a leader, and I certainly did not envision that I would become a head of school. My professional journey has been full of unexpected twists and surprising turns, and as I reflect upon the path that has brought me to a place of leadership, I feel thankful and fortunate for the support, affirmation, and mentorship that I received along the way. These positive school experiences, along with some painful ones from my youth, have helped to shape my identity as a school leader today.

When I was six years old, my family relocated to Chicago from Seoul. The city school that I attended was very diverse, and my classmates were from Poland, Puerto Rico, China, Mexico, and other parts of the world. It must have been challenging to teach such a large number of English language learners, but somehow my teacher made it work. Even with my limited understanding of a new language, my favorite memories of first grade were the times when my teacher read aloud to the class. By the end of second grade, I was a fluent English speaker and was reading Dick and Jane books with ease. English became my primary language, and I felt comfortable and had a sense of belonging. I loved being at school. My parents were pleased with my progress, and they were relieved to have someone, even a child, who could translate the mail, communicate with the landlord, and help them understand this complex language. We did not have an entirely smooth transition to life in America, but we were figuring it out.

By the time I entered the third grade, we had acquired the “American dream,” bought our first home in a predominantly white suburb, and I found myself to be one of two students of color in the entire school. I immediately received messages from my new teacher and from the other students that I was a foreigner and unwelcome. I was the object of stares, heard racial slurs, and was made to feel unwanted. The school and curriculum did not offer any mirrors that reflected my experiences as an Asian American or as an immigrant, nor did it offer the white students any windows to learn about the experiences or accomplishments of people of color. Looking back, it was a curriculum that was couched in normative whiteness--the accomplishments of Europeans and white Americans were celebrated while those of people of color were invisible. The lack of representation of people of color, and especially of Asian Americans, had a profound impact on my racial identity development. I learned that school was not a place that welcomed difference; it was a place that demanded assimilation. So, I learned to leave my Korean identity at home and did my best to fit in at school.

It was not until adulthood that I felt affirmed in my Asian American identity, which happened while working at my first independent school. It began with a very persistent administrator and a single conference. My Assistant Head of School, Bill Valentine, offered to send me to the 1999

NAIS People of Color Conference, which was convening in San Francisco. Recalling my previous experiences with racial identity at school, I was reluctant to attend a conference that focused on the identity of people of color. At Bill's urging I attended the PoCC, which ended up being a key turning point in my life. As I listened to Ron Takaki, a distinguished Asian American historian and academic, speak about his efforts in dispelling stereotypes and challenging the model minority myth, I became keenly aware of my lack of exposure to Asian American history, both as a student and a teacher—it was an awakening. I also had the opportunity to participate in an affinity group for the first time. It was empowering to meet other Asian American educators and inspiring to see that some were in school leadership positions. After the conference, I returned to my school community transformed and impassioned about diversity and social justice education, and in 2002, I became the first Diversity Coordinator at my small independent school outside of Boston.

In the same year, Neal Brown joined the school as the new Assistant Head, and through his strong mentorship, I developed many of the skills necessary to be an effective leader. Serendipitously, the focus of Neal's doctoral research had been about mentorship, and I benefited from his expertise. Neal gently guided me through the process of setting goals and thinking strategically. He was a supportive white ally and the model of a generous spirit. As I became more adept in leadership, Neal gradually reduced the guidance that he offered and trusted my judgment. He urged me to take advantage of professional development opportunities and encouraged me to pursue leadership roles beyond the field of diversity work. I learned many lessons about the power of effective mentorship from Neal, and I began to see myself as a school leader and found my leadership voice.

My journey in leadership reflects the transformative power of independent schools. Within these nurturing, tight-knit communities, I have the opportunity to create spaces where each individual is truly seen, known, and celebrated. As a head of school, mentor, teacher, and colleague, it is my responsibility to nurture and uplift the gifts and talents of every member of my community, fostering an environment where students and adults are empowered to realize their fullest potential, embody their finest qualities, and embark on journeys of purposeful living.