

Growing Young Diversity Practitioners at Putney

BY ANN-MARIE WHITE, PUTNEY'S DIRECTOR OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, JUSTICE, AND BELONGING

“We are a group of students who are interested in understanding how our identity impacts the community. We are invested in working as a team to create an awareness of identity in the larger community to build a safe space for diversity and belonging.”

CHARLIE L. '24

The Work: Students

BUILDING THE SKILLS OF A MORE INCLUSIVE FUTURE

On Wednesday mornings, chatter fills New Wing 3 as students work to understand and implement various tools of inclusion and belonging. After lunch, another group of students dives into the same agenda. Same work, but two different groups: the diversity committee and the newly established young diversity practitioners. Despite full Putney schedules, these students meet each week to learn, practice, and develop the tools of diversity practitioners actively and intentionally. So many students want to participate that the only way to accommodate the interest and find common times is through two meetings with identical agendas on the same day. The students are grounding themselves in the essential writers and thinkers—both historic and current—who discuss identity and belonging. It sounds like a class. In a way, it is.

Their work has fueled faculty workshops and reading groups, created student advisory and dorm games from puzzles the working group was trying to solve, generated a full day of Harvest Festival conversations at their student booth, and built campus-wide conversations both on MLK

Day and on all-school Saturday morning DEIJB deep-dives.

Who are the Young Diversity Practitioners, and what do they think of the work they're doing? Zorinah '26 offered, “People know how much work is done. Many people take things away from the Saturday workshops.” “We facilitate spaces for understanding identity and ourselves,” said Owen '23. Judy '24 continued, “We are showing everyone that your voice can be heard and it can create change.”

Moments of Joy

BINGO!

It's fabulous to watch the Young Practitioners actively practicing their skills in a variety of venues. At Harvest Festival, we set up a booth for “Check Your Privilege” BINGO. If a festival-goer were able to check off the boxes and get “Bingo,” they'd get candy and a conversation. For hours over the three previous days, we created and vetted BINGO cards.

We agonized over every word on the BINGO cards (“What does ‘societally attractive’ mean? Couldn't we just say ‘attractive?’” “No, we can't just say ‘attractive!’ What

does attractive really mean? Attractive to whom? Your Mom? Your cat? Vogue?”). Finally, someone said, “Wait a minute! We want people to fill out the cards and ask us questions, right? So, if it's a little confusing, maybe that's okay. Maybe it will encourage people to ask us questions and talk with us! Maybe different people could interpret the box differently!” We continued to hone the squares until we had nine different versions of cards. We learned a lot about privilege and each other just by making a BINGO set.

Early Harvest Festival morning, practitioners set up our “Ask A Young Diversity Practitioner” round tables. This was October. We had barely scratched the surface of The Identity Conscious Educator and had only carefully read a few excerpts from Design for Belonging. Despite this, we wanted to engage in five-minute conversations with the Harvest Festival attendees.

For the previous week, we were furiously practicing and prepping. We skimmed, annotated, discussed, debated, and had a few mock sessions. Each table had a list of topics attendees could discuss with a young practitioner, and each practitioner knew which topics they were comfortable talking about and could customize the topic list for their session. Each table had a kitchen timer. Each table had our books, which we could use as a reference or a security blanket. Each table had an eager, prepared, and slightly nervous student.

Harvest Festival guests loved our booth. Educators, corporate executives, parents, and folks with brand new ideas about conversation-starters at holiday tables asked us for copies of our BINGO boards. People took stacks. They asked questions and engaged in real conversations . . . even some of the little candy-seeking kids shared insights. At the “Ask A Young Diversity

B I N G O				
Cisgender	Can participate in sports	Healthy	Born in first-world country	Born in country of residence
Able to choose educational path	Native english speaker	Access to my own culture	No body dysmorphia	Fit
No discrimination based on skin color	Wealthy	Free!	Amatoromantic	Heterosexual
Sex matches gender identity	Never gone to bed hungry	Can marry the person you love	Not bullied	Study my own culture
Support systems	Not disabled	Holidays off	No addictions in family	Parents have a positive/healthy relationship

Left: "Check Your Privilege" BINGO board.
 Below: "Ask a Young Diversity Practitioner" round tables at Harvest Festival 2022.

Practitioner" tables, Harvest Festival-goers were so excited about the conversations that lines formed. After Harvest Festival, the Wednesday after we all returned from break, we thought about ways we could continue to teach inside Putney, outside Putney, and intergenerationally.

It was then that we decided to host a small student-led, student-run DEIJB conference during the spring of 2024 and invite a few independent high schools from Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. This goal is in the background of all the work we do. Our young practitioners want to work with their peers at Putney and eventually work with peers at other schools. So how are students preparing for the conference hosting goal? By learning how to design, create, imagine, and co-facilitate workshops and activities. Together, we create the content and activities that we use in our all-school Saturday DEIJB events.



At the "Ask A Young Diversity Practitioner" tables, Harvest Festival-goers were so excited about the conversations that lines formed.

The Work: Adults
 A YEAR-LONG ENDEAVOR,
 A LIFELONG PRACTICE

The student agendas often mirror the topics and agendas I work through with the DEIJB working group, ten adults who volunteer weekly to help me craft the adult and student DEIJB programming. Having students and

adults read the same texts has been invaluable. Together, we are doing a lot this year. While it's clear that this is the work of many, it should also be clear that none of this could be done, in this way, without the full support of the administration.

All adults on campus are reading and discussing *The Identity-Conscious Educator* this year. We have formed interdepartmental faculty/staff reading groups so that we, as the complete adult community, can begin to ask questions about how our understanding of our own identities and intersectionalities impact how we engage with each other and with students. This DEIJB working group, in addition to helping me design our Identity-Conscious Educator curriculum, is also helping me craft a school-wide curriculum. It's a lot. Just like with the Young Diversity Practitioners, this commitment is similar to that of a class.

Investing in Affinity Groups

FINDING YOUR PEOPLE

Time is the coin of the realm at Putney. What we value can be seen through what we spend time on. This year, Head of School Danny O'Brien, Dean of Students Tarah Greenidge, and I committed to rearranging the schedule to make it easier for affinity groups to meet. We also committed to having adult-led affinity groups for students. Our Young Diversity Practitioners attend affinity group meetings; often, they are leaders in those meetings and have set parts of the agenda, but it is also a space where they can rest when they need to.

What does that mean in a school that is fiercely committed to student agency and student-led activities? It means that the

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adults will hold the space and will guarantee that regular meetings will be held. Students can come when they can and leave when they must. From a brass-tacks point of view, this format allows students to simply be and not need to lead and organize when they don't have time or energy.

The young diversity practitioners help lead our student affinity and identity groups. They helped craft, curate, and facilitate our MLK Day workshops. In classes, during jobs, in dorms, in evenings, and through activities, they are not simply upstanders; they are students who are willing to listen, engage, and teach. Because of their daily efforts, Putney School community members report feeling more seen and heard, especially when they find themselves having difficult conversations. It's great training for the conference. It's great practice for life.

A closing thought. I began by telling you where to find the young diversity practitioners at work as you wander by New Wing 3 on a Wednesday. If you want to find the DEIJB working group, come to the Library building on Monday morning or find us at lunch on Monday. There are two meetings with the same agenda. Despite busy Putney and personal schedules, these ten adults find ways to make this extra meeting work. As Owen and Judy say, "It's not about the goals, it's about the progress, and we are all learning as we go."

AFFINITY GROUPS @ PUTNEY

Adult-Held

- Asian Affinity Group
- Bi & Multi-Racial Affinity Group
- BIPOC Affinity Group
- Latinx Affinity Group
- LGBTQ+ Affinity Group
- Neurodiversity Affinity Group
- White Anti-Racist Working Group
- LGBTQ+ drop-in group
- SPECTRUM

Student-held

- LGBTQ+ affinity group
- LIME (newly created neurodiversity affinity group)

FURTHER READING

"This is work I can't do alone, and these are some of the authors and speakers I'm curating for my teams and for all of Putney to dive deeply into." ANN-MARIE WHITE

The Identity-Conscious Educator
by Liza Talusan

Design for Belonging
by Susie Wise

DEI Deconstructed
by Lily Zheng

Nice Racism
by Robin DiAngelo

The Facilitators Guide for White Affinity Groups
by Robin DiAngelo & Amy Burtaine

Wise Latinas
by Jennifer DeLeon

As well as Brené Brown, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Tricia Hersey, Sonya Renee Taylor, and others