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Webcast Reflection: Dr. Dijanna Figueroa, “Curiosity to Careers: Engaging People of Color in STEM”

Dr. Figueroa had such an important and interesting story to share about her own life, and how her experiences have informed her work. Throughout her career as a student and professional, Dr. Figueroa spoke about being one of the only women of color and how as a result, she experienced many barriers including, social isolation, hostile environments, visibility, geographic isolation, loneliness, and economic barriers. I am an elementary school science teacher in New York City, at a school for gifted students. It is a public school, but students test to get in. Given our location in NYC, the school is always striving to have a student body that represents the diversity of the city. Even though that is the ideal, there is an underrepresentation of students of color at the school. Hearing Dr. Figueroa discuss the barriers she faced, made me think of the students and families at our school who may also experience these same feelings and situations, and then how schools can really support all members of the community in authentic ways.

Dr. Figueroa offered many ways to support people of color. Some of her suggestions are things that I have been working on individually or as part of greater school-wide diversity initiatives. These include, recognizing that the environment can be hostile, and be open about having conversations about inequity and racism. Make presentations culturally relevant to support engagement across cultures, and nurture natural curiosity and engagement. It was Dr. Figueroa’s idea of “STEM Stories,” that really resonated with me and has encouraged me to reflect on my own teaching, and curriculum. The idea behind STEM Stories, is that people of color (or other underrepresented people) in STEM fields share their own stories of how they came to be in the STEM world. The idea is that young people can relate to, and engage with, these living, breathing, evolving stories, and feel that STEM careers are current, and within reach.

Today I was able to attend the International Day of Girls and Women in Science at the United Nations. During one of the sessions, a diverse group of accomplished women presented about the state of women in STEM around the world. A few speakers shared the challenges and successes of their own journeys and of all the facts and figures, it was these personal stories that struck a chord with the audience. All of the questions from girls and women in the audience were about the path these women took, and if they ever felt like they were the only woman, or woman of color. I immediately thought about Dr. Figueroa’s STEM Stories, and began brainstorming ways to weave these stories into the science and STEM curricula through interviews, guest speakers, biographies, alumni connections, and more.

Thank you for introducing me to Dr. Dijanna Figueroa and her STEM Story, it was both inspirational and immediately applicable.