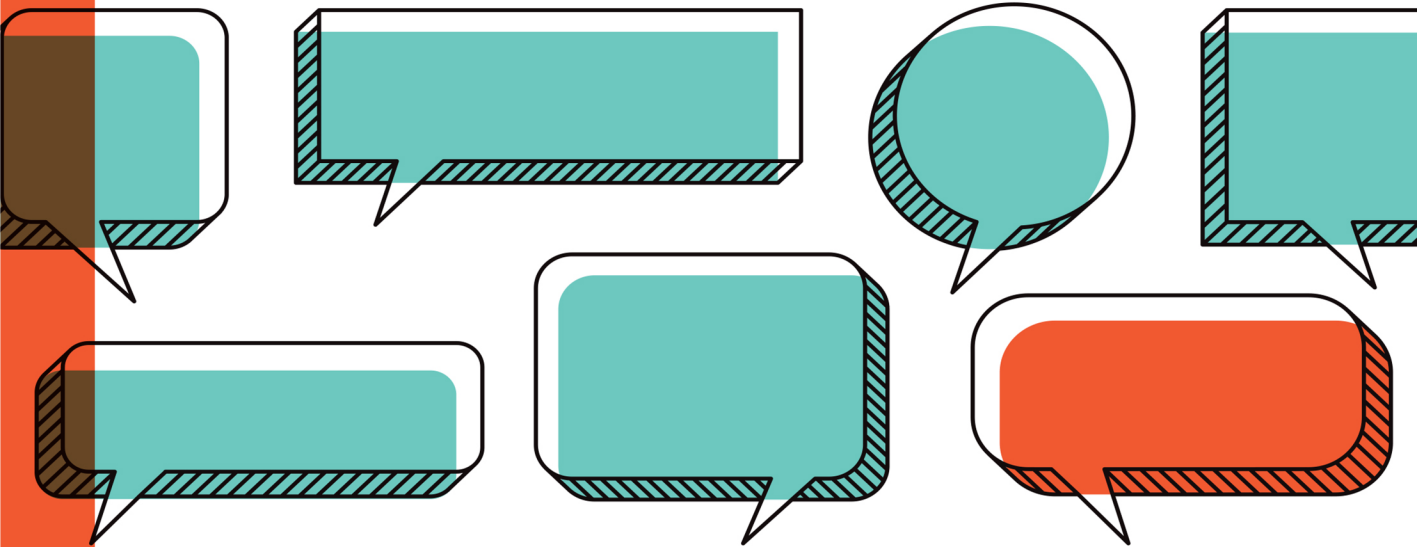


# CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE *Conversations*

CONNECTING *with* YOUR  
DIVERSE SCHOOL COMMUNITY



MARINA MINHWA LEE  
SETH LEIGHTON

**JOSSEY-BASS™**  
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## Praise for *Culturally Responsive Conversations*

“Marina and Seth’s wisdom and stories helped me better understand what I’ve seen and heard in classrooms around the world, and reflect on how I can be better with kids of every background.”

—**Mike Goldstein**, Founder, Match Education, Boston

“Scholars have dissected cultural responsiveness, alerting educators of its importance, but educators are still left with the question of ‘how do we actually do this in schools?’ The authors extend current knowledge into practical, digestible nuggets of wisdom that concretize and demystify cultural responsiveness for educators.”

—**Josephine M. Kim**, Senior Lecturer on Education at Harvard University

“In this engaging and highly readable primer on cross-cultural communications for educators Marina Lee and Seth Leighton offer an original synthesis of knowledge based on scholarship and on practice with practical exercises that can help the reader become more self-aware and competent in navigating cross-cultural exchanges. Their own lived experience, as a multicultural family and as global educators, uniquely qualifies them to speak with authority and authenticity about the potential of true communication that bridges cultures. This book will empower educators to realize the potential that lies in culturally diverse classrooms and schools.”

—**Fernando M. Reimers**, Ford Foundation Professor of the Practice of International Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education



# **Culturally Responsive Conversations**



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**Connecting with Your Diverse School  
Community**

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Seth Leighton

**J** JOSSEY-BASS™  
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*For Madeline Eung Raehui*



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**B**orn in Incheon, South Korea, **Marina Minhwa Lee** moved to the United States at a young age, gaining an early perspective on the role of students in serving as cross-cultural “brokers” for families. A former biological researcher, Marina earned her Master of Education from Harvard Graduate School of Education, where her studies focused on immigration, education, and identities.

Marina went on to found Cogita Education Initiatives, a leading provider of educational advising services that empowers students to connect together for the common good. Cogita is committed to enlightening and educating global leaders by cultivating their potential to be changemakers for their generation. Through Cogita, Marina has worked with hundreds of immigrants and international families on transitions to the U.S. educational culture. She is a professional member of the Independent Educational Consultants Association, the National Association of College Admission Counseling, and The Association of Boarding Schools. She consults regularly with leading independent schools on international student support, cultural competency training, and global education curriculum. She can be reached at [marinalee@cogitaeducation.com](mailto:marinalee@cogitaeducation.com).

**Seth Leighton** grew up in a small town on the coast of Maine, regularly exploring the outdoors with his friends and family. After attending the local public school in rural Maine, his desire for adventure and exploration has led him around the world, and he has lived, worked, and traveled across North America, South America, Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia.

Seth co-founded Envoys, a unique organization that partners with innovative teachers and schools to push the boundaries of possibility for global education. Using a blended model of online courses and focused international travel programming, Envoys builds the skill sets associated with global competency. Seth graduated cum laude from Harvard College and has earned advanced degrees from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Seth can be reached at [Seth@envoys.com](mailto:Seth@envoys.com).





## PERSONAL NOTES FROM THE AUTHORS



### PERSONAL NOTE FROM MARINA LEE: THIS IS MY WHY

At five years old, I immigrated to the United States of America from Incheon, South Korea.

It was very clear to me, even at that age, that there were certain gender expectations within my family, no matter where I lived. I distinctly recall my parents scolding me for not pouring the water properly into the glasses or setting the dinner plates down delicately. As per their training and patterned behaviors, each time they were prefaced with, “Girls should . . .”

I didn’t realize until college that many of the gender expectations from my family and my school community contradicted each other. Each seemed to define what successful members of a community looked like:

- If I followed one set of expectations, I would be considered a disempowered woman.
- If I followed the other, I would be a bold, unrighteous woman brought up without manners, therefore shaming myself and my family.

Even as young as 10 years old, I cut up fruit and made coffee for my father’s guests and friends of his or the family who visited our home. I often sat with them for a few minutes and asked about how they were doing, allowed them to ask me questions about school and grades, and then went upstairs to my room to study.

Schoolwork was the only excuse that would be a good enough reason not to stay long with the guests. I excused myself politely, indicating I had a lot of schoolwork to do. I’d get kind nods and enthusiastic “of course, of course” and other words of approval. In retrospect, they were expressions of appreciation for following a culturally conditioned norm everyone could rely on.

Even if a child providing snacks to guests was not expected in some households, it was worthy of praise when she did. *Yejul ee joh tab*, meaning I was brought up with such strong etiquette, reflecting the good family upbringing and being a good girl for following their norm.

Almost any Korean household would agree that my role at the time wasn't surprising to them and would receive a lot of micro-gender-specific admiration. If one of my brothers were to set up fruit for the guests, the praise would have been different, expressing an out-of-the-ordinary surprise and novelty.

### FRIENDS OPENED ME TO ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

When my friends came over and saw me prepare these snacks, they were confused. Most feminists among us, or what we thought of like feminism, said I was a servant to men. They did not understand why I needed to bring my parents' guests anything. There was no praise from them. I felt embarrassed by what they thought of me, whereas I thought I was doing the right thing in my family.

Antithetical to this is how girls are brought up in the United States. Here, being bold, independent, and even fierce is a good thing. Not speaking up means you don't have an opinion of your own, which means you don't think critically or have a strong sense of self, not that you were gracious enough to let others speak their minds and listen to them.

It was not surprising then when my primary school teacher asked my parents to meet her, that although I was top of my class in grades and getting an A, she told them I was too quiet. I needed to speak up in class and share more of my opinions. This was what would jeopardize my grade. My father told me I needed to do better in school. Without realizing the impact of her words, my teacher just made my father speak with me about values that seemed to go against those I was brought up with. I was told conflicting messages, and I didn't know how to reconcile them. This started a spiral of identity questioning that inevitably pitted two parts of my identity against each other, and it felt like there could be only one winner.

### WITHIN CULTURAL CLARITY: WHAT IS GOOD AND BAD

What I thought was "good" was "bad" and propagated disempowerment of women in U.S. society. I was a part of a regression seen through the lens of my friends'—and many other—"white" adults' eyes.

As I grew older, I didn't fully understand the complexity of cultural contexts beyond our linear color graph of good, bad, and grey areas. The grey area implied it could be good or bad depending on the context. I have now discovered that culturally influenced behavior, customs, and traditions don't fit into these bipolar, two-dimensional extremes with the grey area in between—that is, there's no possibility of many traditions having the potential to be either good or bad, right or wrong.

I hope this book allows others to see instead that these traditions are, on the whole, linked to another plane of existence that is deeply meaningful to the individual and families. They are tied to the practice and historical connections that have shaped our values and, thus, influenced our identity.

### PERSONAL NOTE FROM SETH LEIGHTON

My childhood was characterized by a distinct lack of cultural diversity. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s in the largely homogenous state of Maine, my interactions with cultures different from my own were limited to the stereotypes portrayed through American entertainment and media at the time.

While my parents, teachers, and greater community, by and large, provided consistent messages for sensitivity and tolerance, like many white Americans, I grew up in a context that supported a sense of my culture being the fundamental “correct” one, and the basis for comparison between all other ways of being. College provided one immediate shake for this perspective, but it was not until I was able to put myself into a wholly new situation that I began to truly appreciate the challenges of living in a cross-cultural milieu.

### BROADENING MY WORLD, AND MY WORLDVIEW

My international career began shortly after college when I took a volunteer teaching assignment at a rural high school in the Rayong Province of Thailand. The first few weeks of my time in Rayong were a whirlwind of work at the school, fighting through the normal experiences of any first-time teacher trying desperately to stay ahead with lesson planning and classroom dynamics. I was very lucky to have experienced colleagues to rely on for the basics of student management and to listen to ideas for creative lessons and activities. Very gradually, I built a degree of confidence in my own identity as an educator and took heart in the real progress I saw in my students.

While at the school, I was placed with a host family who owned a large furniture factory. My one-room apartment was perched inside the factory, and my door opened out on 400 people crafting, assembling, and boxing rubberwood furniture for shipment around the world.

While my host family was incredibly generous and amazingly kind, my hometown community seemed far away, and I felt a real disconnect from the people in my immediate surroundings that was hard to manage. Having grown up in a small town in rural Maine, I was accustomed to a sense of neighborliness that was hard to picture occurring in my present circumstances. The physical and cultural distance from those around me seemed impossible to bridge—how would I ever be able to start a conversation?

However, my feeling of connection would come back from the strangest set of circumstances, as one night I got a knock on my door from the brother in my host family. There had been a delay in manufacturing, and an order had to be shipped out immediately. Could I help with the packing?

Feeling a bit awkward, but eager to be of use, I took a spot on the factory floor. I was greeted not with wariness, or even ambivalence, but instead with warm smiles and a happy sense of camaraderie. I was handed a roll of shipping tape and given the task of closing off the box of folding wooden chairs, destined for the shelves of Crate & Barrel.

That experience gave me a true immersion into the Thai concept of *sanuk*. More than having fun, *sanuk* is about finding a gentle humor and pleasure in any activity. Jokes, songs, and consistent friendly banter were the norm on the assembly and packing lines, and made the hours fly by.

Soon I was on the factory floor on a regular basis. Welcomed in no small part as a teacher of many of their children, I developed a real sense of belonging with the factory workers. My Thai slowly improved, and the reality of this “far end” of the global supply chain became very real for me, forever altering my perception of how products are made and how benefits of employment and trade are distributed around the world. Most importantly, it was quite humbling to feel such openness from people whose backgrounds were so different from mine.

### CONTINUING MY JOURNEY

Since my time in Thailand, my experiences interacting with people with views of the world that are radically different from my own have only grown. When I was 26 years old, I received a fellowship from the U.S. Department of State to teach at a university in the city of Gondar in northern Ethiopia.

This was a metropolis of some 250,000 people, with barely a handful of foreigners living full time, mostly involved with the university and medical school. Gondar itself was a former capital of Ethiopia, with the massive fort still standing as a symbol of the Emperor Fasilides’s seventeenth-century kingdom that stretched over most of Northern Africa. By the time I arrived, the city (and the country) had suffered through a combination of drought, corruption and misrule, and foreign occupation that had devastated its economy for years. Things were (and are) incredibly difficult for my students. Incredibly bright, talented, and hardworking, they faced daily challenges of supplies and materials, yet they preserved and served as a daily source of motivation for me.

Roughly two months into my time in Ethiopia, I developed a cough and mild fever. What might have kept me home in bed for a morning in another place felt like a major cause for