

BoggsCast Episode 7: Regina Rodriguez Sisneros

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JAIME ZAHID: Welcome to the BoggsCast, where faculty and staff at The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities explore best practice, showcase success stories, and help listeners envision possibilities for innovation through interviews with state and national experts. Part of Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, The Boggs Center is New Jersey's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities program. I'm Jaime Zahid, Training and Consultation Specialist at The Boggs Center. In this episode, we'll be discussing equity, diversity, and inclusion with Regina Rodriguez Sisneros. Regina is currently the Director of Equity Initiatives and System Innovations for the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities.

In this role, she works to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion within the Association, and supports members in similar efforts. Mrs. Sisneros spent 14 years at the Colorado Department of Human Services as the contract manager and equity, diversity, and inclusion manager for MINDSOURCE Brain Injury Network. She's a graduate of Georgetown University's Leadership Institute for Cultural Diversity and Cultural and Linguistic Competence.

Her experience related to disability started personally because of individuals with disabilities within her family. And her professional experience related to disability began in 2008, when she became a certified brain injury specialist. I'm joined by my colleague today, Raneta Anderson. Raneta, would you mind introducing yourself?

RANETA ANDERSON: Hello, my name is Raneta Anderson. And I'm proud to be accepted and appreciated for my diverse attributes as a mother and a person of color, a woman, and also a student working to get a master's degree in social work. And I'm very, very excited and happy to be here.

JAIME ZAHID: Thank you, Raneta. And just sort of establishing where we all are coming from, I, myself, am a sibling of two individuals with disabilities who receive services through the state of New Jersey and I have a history of professional experience in the field, currently doing trainings for our support coordinators in New Jersey around person-centered planning.

And so on that note, Regina, welcome, and thank you so much for joining us today. And I'm hoping, Regina, you might just start with a little bit of an introduction about what brought you here? Tell us about your lived experience and what brought you to a career in diversity and equity and inclusion? And how have those experiences shaped you personally and professionally?

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: First, thank you both for joining me today and inviting me to this conversation. I really appreciate it. So, I thought really carefully about this question. And as I think back, first of all, you mentioned that I have family members in my family that are living with disabilities. So there's that piece of that lived experience.

But I want to take it even bigger than that in talking a little bit about that I have a mother who was a teen mother, and a phenomenal, well-engaged, and very resourceful person. And what she did when I was in my junior high years is she looked for an opportunity for me to start to gain some experience in different professions so that I would value and seek higher education. So what she did is she found an organization—

the former Colorado Senator Ken Salazar at the time was our director of natural resources in Colorado. Now, mind you we're growing up in an inner-city population. And we're really in some areas that are underserved and have a significant disparity and economic— it's a poverty area. So anyway, what Ken Salazar was doing at the time as the director is he was attempting to hire people in professional positions within natural resources, and was consistently given applications that were predominantly white males.

And when he would push back at HR, HR would say, “well, I'm sorry but this is who's applying.” And he said, “well, recruit better, recruit better, push back and forth, back and forth.” And the result was only white males were applying for these positions.

So it was important to him if diversity didn't exist, he was going to create diversity — and especially in women applying for jobs in natural resources. And so what he did is he started a program called Youth in Natural Resources, where he recruited inner city youth and rural youth to be paired up for the summer with a professional who would teach them about geology, biology, working in zoology, whatever related to natural resources. And we would work for them Monday through Thursday. And then on Fridays we would study STEM science and we would study math and science related to the field that we were supporting so that we understood the connection of education to natural resources.

I was 14 years old when I did that. And that was my first introduction to seeing a disparity, seeing a need, seeing an underserved population, and figuring out how we're going to do that effectively long term. That's what Ken taught me. He taught me that if it doesn't exist, then we have to figure out a way to create it.

So that was my first experience. Then I mentioned a little bit about my mom being a young mother and navigating systems. She was a really, really hard worker, but she still needed some support. She needed some housing support. She needed some support with food stamps, that kind of thing so that she could keep us healthy and strong. And we used inner city clinics for our health services, which created some barriers to access for services for my brother, who had a disability, and later on in life for my stepfather who has a disability.

So watching that process and watching those barriers, seeing those doors close, and even seeking the right words of what we needed to ask for, I watched my mom navigate that as a young woman. And that strengthened my skill in my mind to pay attention to that when I entered into health and human services on my own. So when I entered into health and human services, it was a result of my employment as a 14 year-old kid. And I stayed with state employment for 20 years and kind of moved up the ranks. As I was moving up the ranks and learning the state system, I was watching people in board meetings and in administrative meetings make decisions about communities that I felt like they were disconnected to in terms of really understanding the priorities, the social determinants of health, understanding what was really being impacted in these communities and what these communities needed. So I started chiming up. I started saying, “eh, I don't know about that one, and I don't know about that one. And maybe we should engage the community and ask them if they really want that or need that or what their priorities are?”

As I was doing that, my former director, Judy Dettmer said, “Reg, you're working EDI at its core. That's exactly what you're doing.” And this was about 15 years ago. And she said, “let's formalize it.” And so I started looking for programs and I found Georgetown.

I found the National Center for Cultural and Linguistic Competencies, and started working with them. And particularly, with Tawara Goode as my mentor, who does a lot of phenomenal national work— worldwide work, actually, to be honest— and formalized my training that way and formalized my network that way, and saw how when you take lived experience and you take the education that's needed to work on DEI, they complement each other immensely and you're able to see a perspective that's genuine and that is very well thought out.

JAIME ZAHID: Absolutely. Thank you so much for that response, Regina. I couldn't help but pick up on you were talking about experiencing populations that didn't necessarily know the words to ask for. And I feel like that is such a big concern for people who are of minority populations, perhaps first-generation Americans, or recent immigrants even. That's a topic I've definitely chatted with some of my colleagues about before, how it can be so difficult to navigate the system for people that are somewhat advantaged, if you will, and do have the words of what to ask for.

So that really stood out to me as my point, I guess.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Yeah, and I think it's really important too. I appreciate, Jaime, that you talked a little bit about that, because many cultures don't have the words for disability. Just that one word. They don't have that word. It doesn't translate. Autism— they don't have a word in their culture. And big picture — their concept of how they care for the individuals with the disability, that are living with disabilities in their communities, is very different.

And so now to be in a situation, especially if you're first generation, to be in a situation where you're navigating a system you don't even quite understand, that's a huge barrier. And it's one that we have to really think about and maybe even reflect on. What if it was me and I was trying to survive in another country and I was learning new systems, and new words, and new concepts that I had never known

about, and that I have a different perspective on?

If I have a perspective in my culture that disability, especially individuals who respect cultures where it's part of reincarnation and it's part of what we have to endure in our lifetime, and so not a penance, but it's part of our life, and it's something that we have to go through, and we have to honor that. Or someone who doesn't think disability, and has the perception that disability is not a barrier. It just makes you more beautiful, and more different, and more unique, and more wonderful.

And that's the perception that many cultures have for us to come in and say, oh, but we need to fix you, and we need to fix your child, and we need — that is a disservice. It's a disrespect. And so we need to think about those things.

JAIME ZAHID: Absolutely. Regina, for those that might not know, can you give us just a definition of what does equity, diversity, and inclusion mean?

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Yeah, and I start off by giving, you know, Merriam-Webster style definitions because I think it's important, you know? Because people are going to go back and reference. And then I give you my opinion around it.

And so equity is when every person has the opportunity to attain services and supports in a way that they need and want them, and to attain his or her full potential of quality of life. And I think you can tell where I manipulated a little bit of this definition. And that would be where I'm talking about the way that they want them. That's important for us to consider, is that a service that we may be delivering may or may not fit the community that we're working with.

And so we may need to take a step back and rethink that. It's really an injustice to standardize our processes. We have to be flexible. We have to know that some communities just can't wrap their head around some of our Western influence decisions. And so really teaching and learning is where I think it comes into play.

Diversity is a practice of including people from a range of different social, ethnic, economic, geographic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations. And again, I really think that you can tell where I influence this a little bit, where I add in economic and geographic, because I think that's really important. What you have access to in terms of your resources, especially your financial resources makes a big difference in how you're going to show up at a meeting and how you're going to represent what you, your family, yourself, your community needs, because you have less resources. It's a reality.

And I also think that geographic influence is huge when you think about diversity. And I think we eliminate it. And I think it's important because a person who grew up in an inner-city, metropolitan city versus someone who grew up rural versus someone whose parents were part of the military and they're moving all over the place, we all have really different experiences, and we navigate systems differently, because

they're available to us differently. And we have different words.

We even have our own words and we even have our own cultural norms. So I add geographic. And then I think that we forget more often than not to include in diversity individuals with abilities, and all different levels of abilities, you know? And recognizing that we all have abilities, and we all have contribution, and we all have value, and we all have priorities, and we all have a voice. So people looking at abilities and the different levels of abilities is really important.

And then I also think that we're not very careful at including in diversity, age. And I say that because even if I were to look at the experiences of myself, my mother, my grandmother, and being a Latina woman in the United States, we all had different experiences. We all have intersectionality of some discrimination and some oppression that we experienced. And we've all experienced it, but we have different ways that we experienced it.

Some of it was more in our social dynamics. Some of it we experienced it more in institutional, systemic situations. So I think it's really important that age come to the table as well. And then as far as inclusion, inclusion is the action of including. And I really try to focus on the verb to include — including, and what that means, and how it feels to especially include populations who have been traditionally marginalized or underserved and really empower people to feel safe to be included, and to continuously show up. And when we're considering inclusion, I think it's really important that we don't ask people consistently to show up alone. There's a lot of hard questions and hard conversations. And to be able to show up in unity together with one or two people who represent your community, that's a big deal. And you know, I have a couple of gals who are from Somalia who work in Minnesota. And they consistently get told you have one seat at the table. And the two of them consistently have to advocate. Somalia has a lot of tribes. There's a lot of different languages. There's a lot of different cultural norms. And so for just one person to come and represent everybody, that's a lot. So when we think about inclusion, I think it's really important to think about even diversity within that inclusion and considering different voices.

JAIME ZAHID: Excellent, Regina. You're talking about people — you don't want them to show up alone. And that kind of brings me to the idea of tokenism. We've included a particular population, but we've really only included a handpicked person from that population. And is that really inclusion? Are we really truly being diverse when we've only invited that one person? Because that one person, like you said, they only have their experiences.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: And it will create exhaustion in that person.

JAIME ZAHID: Right, absolutely. Make them burnt out, for sure.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Because it's exhausting to always be in a seat where you're the one that's creating the exposure and the vulnerability.

JAIME ZAHID: Mm-hmm.

RANETA ANDERSON: We've heard the terms cultural competence, cultural humility, and cultural responsiveness. Are they the same?

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Well, so I would start with cultural responsiveness. I mean cultural responsiveness is really just promoting and understanding, right? You're responding and creating understanding.

Cultural humility is actually developing a skill set within yourself to stay humble. Cultural humility is recognizing and honoring that we don't know everything. And what we're trying to get to is cultural competence. But I think that we interpret it that cultural competence is the mastery of knowing all about culture, all about the various cultures and all about their cultural norms. I don't believe that that's what cultural competence is.

I believe cultural competence is mastering the awareness that cultural humility and cultural responsiveness are muscles in us and that we have to master the commitment to always exercising that muscle and recognizing that humility is the biggest strength. Humility and empathy are the biggest strengths in responsiveness, humility, and cultural competence. So I think we think we're mastering cultural competence like we are the masters of culture.

In reality, what we're mastering is our commitment to the long-term lifelong generation after generation commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, because it's a slow process.

RANETA ANDERSON: Definitely. Definitely. Thank you so much for putting more of a perspective on that, because acknowledging and understanding a person's racial and cultural identities is essential for providing proper supports, better supports.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Right. It's person-centered, right?

RANETA ANDERSON: Right. Right, right, right.

JAIME ZAHID: And I appreciate that description around cultural competence. And I've heard a number of people speak about it. And I'm sometimes almost disappointed to hear that cultural competence has to be so finite.

And your explanation around that makes me feel a little less stressed out around that term.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Yeah, I think because it makes you feel like I've not quite mastered it.

JAIME ZAHID: Right. Right. Like I would hesitate —

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: It never will. That's the beauty.

JAIME ZAHID: I have hesitated to even use the term because I feel like I'm putting myself on some sort of a pedestal of claiming that mastery that you spoke of.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Right.

JAIME ZAHID: But of course, I'm not. I know very well there's cultures that I'll never even know about, let alone have an understanding of them.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Mm-hmm.

JAIME ZAHID: So Regina, how do we infuse conversations about equity, diversity, and inclusion into person-centered approaches within our everyday work? And so specifically, I'm thinking about those who might be listening and they spend their day doing the day-to-day case management work, or direct care worker, teacher, job coach. How do we infuse this conversation into their work?

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Well, I would say that it's really important first to take on some responsibilities, right? Don't put all the burden of learning about a new culture that you may be presented with a new family that's on your caseload. Don't put all that burden on them to tell you about the history of their state, the history of their community. Go learn. Go learn about them as much as you can.

Then, recognize that their experience is not necessarily a mirror to what you just read, right? Consider that there was some complexity and some diversity and some influences in their experience. And then start to ask some questions. Pull the culture wheel out and start to ask some questions and start to engage.

But the only way that you're going to be able to get to any of those things is if you create first, before you even engage on your person-centered practice, your checklists, and all those things, is you have to create a safe environment for someone. People know— and I will challenge many people to recognize that especially individuals who are of the African American community, the Asian community, the Latino community, I believe that we even have a stronger muscle of recognizing when somebody is not genuine. And so we will, as a survival of what we've endured in our surviving, we will put up a barrier that says I'm going to just tell you just a little bit about me.

And that's part of the intersectionalities of the experiences of oppression and racism that we've gone through so that we're careful to protect ourselves, our family, and the community that we represent. So we have to come with humility. We have to come with genuine intent of really trying to support that person in front of us. And then get to know that person.

Start asking questions and know that if you want vulnerability from someone, you have to offer vulnerability to someone. It's human nature. Now, I'm not saying that we cross barriers, cross lines related

to our profession. But I can tell you what my favorite foods are and why that's my favorite food without crossing any barriers related to my profession and show you how I celebrate culture by modeling it and showing you some different dynamics of cultural characteristics. Introducing that starts to create a safe place for someone else.

The other thing I will say if you really want to be considerate and be at your strongest form when you're executing DEI and person-centered services is to be considerate about the cultural norms you enter into. So if you're entering into someone's family's home and they offer you food, it's OK to take that food. Because first of all, there's many cultures who are giving you their last meal. There's many communities who are offering their last meal to you.

And it's very disrespectful for you to not take something, to not accept water, to if they're sitting on the floor, to not sit with them, to not remove your shoes when you walk into their home.

Pay attention to what their cultural norms are and pay attention to how you can respect those and how you can enter in. Because a lot of the work that we do— now, obviously we weren't doing it during COVID— but a lot of the work we do, we go into people's homes.

And also ask people if they feel comfortable in their home having these types of conversations? And for many communities, it's really important for us to live together. I grew up on a block where all of my aunts and uncles lived on the same block in four houses. And that includes my grandparents and my great grandparents. So there was no privacy.

If I'm having a meeting, I would be like can we meet at the library because everybody and their mama is coming to see me. So think about how people are representing to you. You know, no, I don't really want to have this conversation there. Or whatever, you know?

JAIME ZAHID: Such an insightful answer, Regina. I'm over here taking copious notes, because I do person-centered planning training for support coordinators in New Jersey. And I feel like in the past even just two years, I'm doing so much better because of this conversation that we're having around culture and making sure, like you said, around giving people space, around offering up something about yourself, about your own culture.

And I always emphasize to support coordinators, you know, don't get too personal. But offer something. You're human, too.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Right. Even if you talk about music, you know? And if you start to notice that the person that's in front of you really values music, you can start to introduce some music. And especially if it's got some influence to your family and your culture, you'll see eyes light up. Oh, we connect there. I can see on our humanness, we're connecting there.

RANETA ANDERSON: Absolutely. I agree so much. And this is definitely a perfect segue way into the next question I have for you is, what can an organization do to make everyone feel included?

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Well, I think we first have to recognize that the individuals that we employ and that we work with, and that our colleagues, and our subordinates, and our supervisors— we all have culture. And so we have to value that, right? We have to value that internally. And we have to acknowledge that.

And we can't walk in and say, "I don't see color." I mean, how do you not see this on me? I can't take this off. And I don't want to take it off. And I see it and it's really beautiful, and I love it.

And so those kinds of things, creating those kinds of cultural norms that separate us instead of embrace us into being able to bring our culture. You know, there's a big movement right now around hair and what professional hair is coming into our world. And that's really difficult.

My children are Lakota and my boys have braids. And you know, African-American women wear their hair in different styles and African-American men wear their hair in different styles. And it's very cultural. And for many of us, it's also part of our spirituality.

And so when we start putting all these roadblocks in our way, we don't let people be their true and authentic selves. And how are they going to allow the individuals that we are serving to be their true and authentic selves if they, themselves, can't be? So we have to work internally. That's important. DEI has to be internal and external.

RANETA ANDERSON: Absolutely. And I can relate to that in so many different ways. Just with me coming out of college and about to enter the workplace, I think about it all the time. When I'm going to my interviews, I stop and think, should I straighten my hair? Can I keep it my natural state? And I'm so happy in my natural state. I find it beautiful. I find it real. I find it this is my authentic self and I really, really want to embrace that. And I find it hard sometimes to even think, like, why do I even have to stop and think about it? Why do I have to stop and try to make this decision on whether or not this is going to be appropriate for this interview?

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Mm-hmm.

RANETA ANDERSON: Me being my natural self.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: I do that with earrings. I do that with earrings all day long. Because, like, the bigger the earring, the better for me. My jewelry can — some people may even view it as obnoxious.

Because I wear very colorful earrings that are just beautiful, and their beaded, and they're heavy, and sometimes I think, am I crossing a line? Is this not professional? And I think, I love what it represents. And I love the people and the reason they made them for me, and what every single bead represents. And they're conversation starters, right? People obviously ask me where I got them and that kind of stuff. So I appreciate that, Raneta.

JAIME ZAHID: So what is your approach to understanding the perspectives of colleagues and clients from different backgrounds? And you've definitely touched on this topic already in your conversation. How do you get to that point of having that understanding?

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: So this question excited me, because there's a project that I left behind when I left the Colorado Department of Human Services that I was sad to leave behind because I loved participating in it. A few colleagues of mine, we created what was called the Belonging Project in Human Services. Now, Human Services in Colorado has about 13,000 employees. And we're spread out all across the state, right?

And so we started working on DEI and we realized that to really start to work on what we needed, which was courageous conversations, right? We needed to be able to have courageous conversations. Things were happening in our world that were scary and extremely painful for us to watch and just watch it unravel in front of us.

So what we did with the Belonging Project is we mapped out a year and we looked at different cultural celebrations, holidays. We even looked at different disabilities and when those disabilities were had on the calendar, awareness dates, and that kind of thing. And so with that, we took each month and we had a podcast, we had a webinar, and we had a book, and we had readings.

And so what we did is, if we were talking about LGBTQ-Plus awareness in that month, we'd have a book that we were all collectively reading, and people could choose whether or not they wanted to participate. And we would have a podcast that we would record. And we would have resources available. And then we would have a webinar. And in the webinar, we invited staff to teach staff. And so the staff who were comfortable exposing their sexual orientation, their gender identity, and/or parents who were comfortable talking about their experience of their kiddo coming out to them or their family member coming out to them, we let them talk, and we let them present, and we learned from them. And that evolved month after month after month.

And it created that vulnerability — I'm going to share my vulnerability and then I'm going to honor you when you share your vulnerability. It created that dynamic. It created interest. People really wanted to be engaged more often than not. And it created people to feel empowered to raise their hand the next time an opportunity came up. And they could do it even with an article. They could write an article and share an article. Whatever way they felt most comfortable with.

And then it started to when we got into courageous conversations and started to have conversations that could potentially be a conflict, people felt comfortable in that they could say what they wanted to say

without other people assuming negative intention because they knew where that person's thought process was coming from and that they really weren't a bad human. They were trying to understand and they were trying to learn.

So that Belonging Project, even doing it on a smaller scale with a smaller group, I think makes a big difference. Because there is power in being a teacher, yes. But there's power in being a student. And humility, which is I think the strongest muscle of DEI, stays strong in that humility.

JAIME ZAHID: Thank you for that, Regina. Unfortunately, we don't have an endless amount of time to talk to you. Even though I feel like Raneta and I can talk to you all afternoon. I'm wondering if you have any parting words, specifically for those of us who are serving people with disabilities in the state of New Jersey and beyond. Because obviously, this conversation is not specific to New Jersey by any means. Any parting words for us?

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: I would say what I think is the best way to strengthen your own cultural awareness and cultural humility muscles is to get engaged and get out there and start participating. Show up. It's really hard for me to go into a community and ask if I can— participation on a big research grant or whatever if that community doesn't even know me. They've never even seen me. They don't know what I represent and what I'm about. And they have their surviving barriers in front of me.

Get involved and expose yourself to other cultures and other communities and start to see the familiarities that we have as humans, of wanting to feel included, wanting to feel loved, wanting to feel belonged, wanting to feel safety. Watch and start to observe the many similarities that we have in common. And then when you start to see that and you start to experience and you start to see the joyfulness of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and see that fruit come to life in front of you, it's going to fill your cup. And that's what you need, because DEI is exhausting.

The work can be exhausting. It's very enjoyable. It's very rewarding work. But it can also be exhausting because we are up against some barriers. But to stay connected with one another and to support one another is a big deal.

JAIME ZAHID: Absolutely. Thank you so much for this conversation, Regina. We really appreciate it. And Raneta, thank you so much for co-hosting with me.

RANETA ANDERSON: Oh, absolutely. It was my pleasure. I enjoyed myself and I learned so much from the both of you. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Sure. And thank you both. And I'll just say I wish that this was a recording that included the video, because you are beautiful women. And for the world to see this work being done by beautiful women is phenomenal. And I say that and I'm glad to be sitting here with the two of you.

JAIME ZAHID: Oh, thank you so much.

RANETA ANDERSON: Thanks so much, Regina. Thank you.

REGINA RODRIGUEZ SISNEROS: Sure.

JAIME ZAHID: Thank you.

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