

# Learning to See with a Third Eye: Working to Understand the Full Impact of Inequity

A Book Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

*This is not a standard book review; rather, it is a glimpse into my transaction with the text Educating Teachers for Diversity: Seeing with a Cultural Eye by Jacqueline Jordan Irvine.*

A few years ago we revised NSRF's mission statement to include language about working to "foster educational and social equity..." and since that time I realize I have often been responsible for trying to just "add on" a focus about issues of equity. The revision of our mission statement makes sense to me as a former Philadelphia Middle School teacher, as a current Urban Education grad student and as a facilitator of CFGs. In each of these roles I have become increasingly convinced that racism and other forms of bias are the greatest barriers we face in our efforts to positively transform the educational experiences of our kids, especially when our kids are poor, inner city, kids of color.

A first step in moving forward around issues of inequity for me has been getting in touch with what I don't know. As a white, female, heterosexual educator, I know I need to consciously incorporate a focus on those differences that I don't "know" by virtue of my own lived experience. In other words, I have to choose to acknowledge the presence and impact of racism, cultural chauvinism and homophobia in our

system and in my own practice continuously. As a facilitator, I have regularly tried to make that choice by adding an activity or protocol here and a reading there, without thoroughly reworking the framework of the coaching support I offer as an external coach in a number of districts and schools.

By treating equity as an "add on" to an already full agenda, I have unwittingly set up the context for it to be "left off." Consequently, when time gets short, the articles and activities that explicitly deal with equity are given less time, or they are postponed, despite my intellectual understanding that these issues lie at the heart of our failure to successfully breach the persistent achievement gap.

Recently, as a grad student, I have been reading Jacqueline Jordan Irvine's book, *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Seeing with a Cultural Eye*, and I have been struck by her analysis that we all can work to see with a "third eye," an eye that "sees a different picture and examines alternative explanations." Dr. Irvine goes on to call for collaborative action research wherein outside/inside

educator-researchers like myself "assume the humility of good anthropologists." By calling myself an outsider/insider I am making explicit my role as a white educator who works and observes "inside" settings where I am the "outsider" from the dominant culture of power, despite my being in the minority numerically in buildings and systems where children of color predominate. I understand Dr. Irvine's call for humility as a demand

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## NSRF Mission Statement

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

## CONNECTIONS

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for active listening and regular reality checks with “insider participants,” those teachers, students of color and their families with whom I’m working. I need to “check-in” about my observations and conclusions in order to examine and assess my assumptions for the inevitable bias I bring to the action-research and change processes. Basically, I hear Dr. Irvine’s words as a caution that I need “to know what I don’t know” before I can learn to co-construct valid meaning and propose positive interventions in support of “other people’s children.”

While Dr. Irvine’s analysis has given me much to chew on as a doctoral student in training, it has also moved my thinking about facilitation in the here and now. So I’m thinking about what I want to do differently this week in my meetings with new coaches of learning communities, and that has led me to revisit the reflective questions that Nancy Mohr penned a few years ago. Nancy wrote:

Reflections: Whatever activity you do, the reflection can be explicitly about equity.

How does this promote equity?  
What does this have to do with equity?  
What does this mean in terms of equity?

And I have added:

Who’s at the table? Who’s missing? Why aren’t those voices included? How can we include those whose perspectives have been silenced historically?

How does the work we’ve just done serve all of our students? How does it serve those students who have been marginalized in the past?

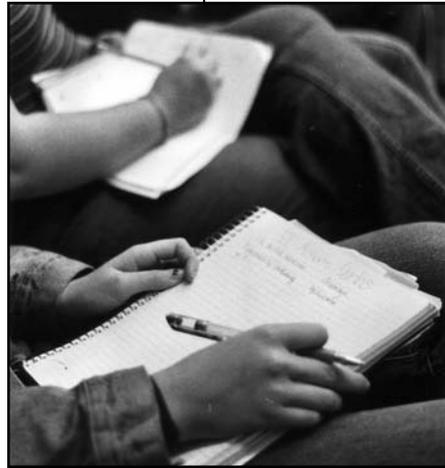
I don’t think these questions are the legendary “silver bullet,” but I do think that regular reflection and debriefing that considers them as possible prompts for every activity is a step that will help me move beyond an equity focus that is only addressed sporadically, as an “add-on”.

Yesterday, I facilitated a series of “Lunchtime Learning” sessions about

content literacy at a Philadelphia high school. As I thought about the reflection questions, looking for the ways these sessions were related to equity, I realized that I needed to go beyond the generic use of metacognitive strategies of reading instruction in order to bring the role of literacy in the struggle for equity to the surface. To that end, I added the introduction of *Reading, Writing and Rising Up* by Linda Christensen to the resources I was using with participants. In her introduction, Christensen quotes Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin, Paulo Freire and a number of prisoners to situate the role of literacy and the impact of illiteracy in our current power structure. Christensen makes a strong statement about the purposeful use of reading and writing skills as tools needed to challenge the inequities our students face daily, in our schools and in our society. My addition of Christensen’s perspective helped me translate what I learned from Dr. Irvine’s analysis and Nancy Mohr’s questions into practice that can help kids. I hope that being given a context for the analysis of how and why these literacy strategies are keys to student success will enable more students to actively buy into their own learning process.

For my part, I will continue to read the contributions of Dr. Irvine and other educator researchers of color as I work to develop the lens of my “third eye” whose vision depends on regular collaboration, reflection and changes in my practice. ■

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## Introducing and Practicing Peer Observation...

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learning of the protocol; and (4) if I take the role of the teacher, make her less confident and perhaps somewhat defensive during the debriefing.

When David and I had debriefed both of our observations, we reflected on the process as a whole. We both found it very valuable and plan to engage in it regularly. David also

noted that the strength of the protocol as we experienced it was in our asking probing questions of one another during the debriefings, yet the protocol itself makes no mention of probing questions as a debriefing

tool. We found that to be a weakness in the protocol and will make that revision when we use it in the future.

We see a number of implications for our peer observation work with a group of new CFG coaches. First, when the 18 students in our seminar begin to engage in peer observations in their schools, we hope that classroom doors will begin to open wider throughout their schools. Second, in our roles as CFG coaches, as NSRF Coaches Seminar facilitators and as instructors in higher education, our own coaching, facilitation and teaching will improve as a result of our peer observation practice. We look forward to our future learning together. ■

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