

Coaching for Educational Equity from the Inside Out

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Victor Cary, Program Director for Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) in Oakland, CA, has been on a personal and professional journey with equity for many years. Victor, Daniel Baron and others have been collaborating on the first partnership between BayCES and NSRF to design and present a Coaching for Educational Equity Seminar: A Journey of Interruption, Transition and Transformation. A pilot of the seminar will take place in Sonoma, CA the last week in July, 2005.

There is an urgent need to develop school coaches able to support a process of interruption, transition and transformation to small, equitable and high performing schools. Resistance to changing inequity in education, however, is even more widespread than resistance in other areas of school change. There will not be deep and sustainable change if equity is not meaningfully and productively addressed.

The hardest part of coaching for equity is staying inside the struggle. This endeavor is a necessary element of both personal/collective consciousness and deep change. It requires skilled coaching and facilitation to "open space" where trust is established and truth is shared. It calls for compassion to "hold space" where pretense is eliminated, emotions released, new meanings constructed, and new relationships are established. We need coaches and leaders who can hold these spaces so others can do the same. And no one can do it alone. Coaches need opportunities for the self-reflective work necessary to create alliances within and across racial, gender and class boundaries to be effective as coaches for equity.

How does one develop the necessary will, skill and emotional intelligence to effectively coach for educational equity?

At the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), we believe that powerful and effective coaching begins from the inside out. To do this, we believe that coaches should "be the change they wish to make in the world." The work of creating equitable and excellent schools is fundamentally about changing ourselves, and thereby our relationships with others.

What this means for me is that anyone who aspires to coach for educational equity must begin by reflecting critically on their own identity and integrity in doing this work¹. Identity lies in the intersection of the many forces that make up a life, while integrity lies in relating to those forces in

ways that make us who we are or want to become. To grow as a coach in this way asks me to be able to reflect upon and talk about my inner life while also focusing on assumptions about oppression, power and hegemony².

Reflecting critically can happen privately or in a communal setting where we can speak our own truth without fear, as well as listen to the truths of others without rushing to judgment. It is also possible to create open and trustworthy communal spaces within a unifying commitment to establish alliances for the purpose of supporting one another. Few such spaces are created do this work in public education. I hold to the basic principles of no fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting straight. We can learn instead to listen deeply; ask honest, open, questions; speak for ourselves rather than for another; and trust the "inner teacher" to do its work. Attending to the creation of a safe space for this work is essential--a space in which the noise within us and around us can subside and we can begin to hear our own inner voice.

In his book *Courage to Teach*,³ Parker Palmer suggests every person has access to an inner source of truth, named by diverse cultures as soul, spirit, or heart. This inner source of strength and guidance is the place of truth-telling within us where we know the difference between reality and illusion. Preparing to coach for equity is more a matter of "coach formation" than "coach training." The notion of formation recognizes the inner teacher within each individual, and the vital relationship between inner clarity and lifegiving outer work. Where coach training is often about training in methods and techniques, coach formation involves a concern for personal wholeness. It can also be thought of as permanent process, as being an exercise, a critical understanding of what we do. Through work that is at the same time gentle and firm, rigorous and relevant, we can help shape and reshape, to form coaches without being manipulative.⁴ Coach formation and training are both needed, but the concept of coach formation is given far less attention.

At the heart of formation is the understanding that there is a "hidden wholeness" at work in the natural world, in our lives, in our work--a hidden wholeness that often takes the form of paradox. For instance, Paulo Freire, in a conversation with Myles-Horton, said, "We must be free; we must be free to believe in freedom. Do you see

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this paradox? Without freedom it's difficult to understand freedom. On the other hand, we fight for freedom to the extent that we don't have freedom, but in fighting for freedom we discover how freedom is beautiful and difficult to be created, but we have to believe it is possible.⁵ Working with paradox helps us to see how things that seem to be opposites, when more deeply understood, actually complement and co-create each other.⁶ You cannot know light without darkness, silence without speech, and solitude without community.

Understanding and exploring paradox is useful to the pedagogy underlying this idea of coaching for equity from the inside out. For example, the skill and art of facilitation is a key competency expected of school coaches. As a coach you may be called upon to "open space" for dialogue and practices that 1) interrupt inequity and oppression; 2) hold a powerful "proxy" vision for what could be true instead; 3) create alliances across difference and 4) "open space" for new visions to become reality and for new leaders (formal and informal) to emerge. Therefore, it is important for a coach to consider the various forms of nonphysical space that will help a group do its work.

I have found Palmer's six paradoxical tensions of pedagogical space very helpful in this regard and use it as a guide. The six paradoxes of space include:

1. The space should be bounded and open.
2. The space should be hospitable and "charged."
3. The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.
4. The space should honor the "little" stories of the participants and the "big" stories of teaching, learning, identity, and integrity.
5. The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of the community.
6. The space should welcome both silence and speech.

Reflecting on these paradoxes as I prepare to facilitate a group offers clues for creating the kind of intellectual, emotional and spiritual space that invites and encourages the building of diverse and equitable learning communities.⁷

When working with coaches, administrators, teachers, and parents, I often use the process of Constructivist Listening.⁸ This is a particular form of listening that is primarily for the benefit of the talker and not the listener. This is one way to invite

people to reflect on and work with questions regarding issues of equity that arise in their work and in their lives. Creating opportunities to reflect upon our stories and experiences about how racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression have affected our lives as educators, parents and members of the community is vital. This creates a plumb line for dialogue and exploration that is owned by all, providing an opportunity to explore both "personal" stories as well as universal and timeless stories of human life and experience. The practices of critical reflection and journaling, silence and solitude, dialogue and community are part of the fabric of coaching from the inside out.

This approach invites people into participation rather than demanding it from them. Opportunities for sharing and engagement are offered, but each individual is trusted to determine her or his level of sharing and participation. This work affirms that we can join in a respectful, evocative, and yet challenging communal inquiry about the inner dimensions of our work that will not only encourage us, but also stretch us.

In working with people we want to both support space for solitude and surround it with the resources of community. As one example, Constructivist Listening Support Groups, a structure used in BayCES Leading for Equity Institutes, embody this paradox of solitude and community. This practice is grounded in the belief that there are no external authorities on life's deepest issues. There is only the authority that lies within each of us waiting to be heard. A commitment to deep confidentiality and trust is essential to many aspects of our work as coaches. Making space for diverse voices, and clarifying boundaries and guidelines for our work together, helps make the space safe for the human soul.

At BayCES, coaching from the inside out helps to build our alliances across difference, harnesses the power of our diversity and informs a "movement model" of social change. I think that lasting change occurs when individuals choose to live in what Parker Palmer calls "divided no more." Living divided no more essentially means being congruent inside and out, experiencing no disconnect between inner motivations and outward actions. This in turn leads to greater personal wholeness and a changed relationship to each other, to role and to institution. Beginning with the individual, this chain of integrity has the potential to weave

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participants resisted our structure. The resistance was directed mainly toward the limitations of our categories. It seemed difficult for the participants to talk about what it meant to be male, female, black, white, etc. We found that this protocol pushed participants completely outside their comfort zones.

The discomfort was not limited to race. A faction of men broke off from the white group and became a men's group. Some black men joined the men's group and defined themselves as males. There was a black women's and a white women's group. There were no mixed-race women's groups and only one birth order group (which was mixed race). Once the participants had moved beyond their discomfort, however, which usually was moved by someone being honest and coming from their heart, they became immersed in the dialogue. They were so involved in their discussions, in fact, that they resisted again when we began to reconvene the groups to report back.

This experience forced the participants to deal with their good, bad, and ugly assumptions and stereotypes. Their learning was revealed as we debriefed the protocol. A connection had been made. The realization that what we had just put them through was what many educators put our students through every day in our classrooms. We harbor assumptions, and we form relationships and create expectations based on those assumptions. Furthermore, our students rise to those expectations both negative and positive. This is how we manifest success or failure with students. It was an eye opener for just about everyone who participated.

We learned that using CFG practices can help facilitate transformation. In developing safe spaces that allow for discussing difficult issues, if we are grounded, we can make an honest and productive approach to relationship building resulting in reflective practice. Who we are, and what we bring to our work-matters. Sometimes in the process, we experience discomfort, sometimes resistance. The process of improving learning experiences for children and adults requires that we look at our motivation, the assumptions that shape our expectations, and finally at our practice. ■

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together soul, role, institution, and social transformation.

Endnotes

¹ See Parker Palmer, Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, Chapter 1, 1998. In this chapter, Palmer addresses the issue of identity and integrity when it comes to teaching in the classroom. The ideas he puts forward are just as relevant and challenging when thinking about coaching for educational equity.

² See Julian Weissglass, Ripples of Hope, Building Relationships for Educational Change, 1998. My thinking and understanding of the many forms that oppression takes and what can be done to interrupt and heal from it has been deeply influenced by this book and my association with the author.

See also Stephen D. Brookfield, Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, 1995. This book gave me new insight into the connection of critical reflection and the recognition of hegemonic assumptions. Brookfield writes, "The subtle tenacity of hegemony lies in the fact that, over time, it becomes completely imbedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. We cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify any particular group or groups of people actively conspiring to keep others silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony are part and parcel of everyday life—the stock opinions, conventional wisdom, and commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that many of us take for granted. If there is a conspiracy here, it is the conspiracy of the normal."

³ Parker Palmer, Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, 1998.

⁴ Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, 1990, p. 222.

⁵ Myles Horton and Paulo Friere, We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, 1990, p. 220.

⁶ See Palmer, Courage to Teach, Chapter III, "The Hidden Wholeness, Paradox in Teaching and Learning," for an excellent discussion of this idea. Also see Palmer's new book, A Hidden Wholeness, The Journey Toward an Undivided Life, 2004.

In this book Palmer addresses four compelling themes: the shape of an integral life, the meaning of community, teaching and learning for transformation, and nonviolent social change.

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