Coaching for Educational Equity: A Joint Effort of BayCES & NSRF

Kim Feicke, Oregon

When we talk about that which will sustain and nurture our spiritual growth as a people, we must once again talk about the importance of community. For one of the most vital ways that we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone.

- bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress

There is an endless list of skills, tools, and knowledge that a small schools coach uses on a daily basis in his or her work. But if the focus and purpose of that work is not to interrupt and transform inequitable practices in schools, and to put in their place a more equitable system where a student's achievement is not predicted by any demographic indicators, then ultimately our skills, tools and knowledge are for naught.

I am a small schools coach and an NSRF national facilitator. In the six years that I have been doing this work, and my previous ten years in the classroom, I have struggled with what it means to be a white woman working for social justice and equity in public education. I have struggled with understanding, and revoking the privilege I was born into to address and *interrupt* inequities in American society. I have struggled to develop a deeper understanding of systemic institutionalized oppression and how it operates in our schools and with our children.

It's a challenge to accept that I/we could actually contribute to the ongoing oppression of our students, but it is an even bigger challenge to take the next step to *interrupt* inequitable practices when we see them. Beyond recognizing the baggage we carry, we also need to have a clear sense of what we will replace inequitable practices and conditions with within our schools.

On July 25-29, 2005, 26 of us, coaches and seminar facilitators, came together to pilot the Coaching for Educational Equity Seminar. We came to the seminar committed to going deeper in our understandings of what comes after the interruption of inequity. Throughout the week, we were able to begin creating, as bell hooks so eloquently stated, a community of resistance, a place where we knew we were not alone, a diverse community to which we could return again and again. We left with tools to create other communities of resistance in our local contexts in order to change the experience of school for our students.

Our week in Sonoma helped us to look inside and at each other in order to see further ahead on our journey toward intentionally equitable schools. Our experience clarified how deeply issues such as race and class are intricately woven into the fabric and structure of our schools and society, and how intricate and complicated our work of interrupting those structures has to be.

In creating the seminar, we were intent on creating a safe and provocative space for participants to explore and share their personal stories. In that process, we were very explicit from the beginning about our expectations and goals (see insert). We began the week with safer, foundational questions about our own experiences and built throughout the week to deeper, more personal inquiry questions and activities that addressed our own experiences in our work around issues of equity. We believe that this inside-outside work is a pre-requisite for coaches committed to facilitating transformative work in schools.

Consider attending this seminar if you are:

- *willing to address equity issues on a personal as well as intellectual level*
- *concerned about how race, class, gender and other forms of bias affect the process of school change, teaching, learning and achievement.*
- *looking for a high leverage strategic opportunity to reflect, share and learn with colleagues about coaching explicitly towards achievement and equity goals in small schools.*

- From Coaching for Educational Equity Seminar flier

Within our theory of action, we had four goals for the week that we hoped participants would accomplish.

1. Develop awareness of and reflect upon who and how they are in their work (in relation to oppression, privilege, accommodation and transformation).

The seminar was designed to connect the personal and the political, the emotional and the intellectual, in ways that allowed participants to acknowledge and assess where they were in their own journeys and connect that understanding with their work in schools.

We intentionally assembled our diverse *(continued on page 14)*

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group, which represented 11 different organizations doing small schools work from all geographic areas of the country (northwest, west, midwest, east, northeast, south). We had an almost equal gender balance, a representation of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals, and represented Asian, Latino, African-American and Caucasian ethnicities. As a part of the seminar, we held a cultural sharing one evening. Every participant was invited to bring an artifact that represented their culture and on Tuesday evening we gathered in a circle and shared these artifacts and what they represented for us with each other. Through this experience we learned more about how both our own cultures impact us and about each other.

2. Collaborate with diverse people and divergent ideas as resources.

As facilitators we were explicit about inviting and supporting a diverse group of small schools coaches from around the country**.** Our diversity gave us an opportunity to find new places both within our comfort zone and in our risk zones throughout the week. We shared personal and painful experiences, read and discussed research and theory, developed theories of action and bonded around a collective responsibility to take

The idea that I cannot separate the mind from the heart and soul of this work toward equity was reinforced for me this week. I know that change is hard. I saw a community transformation where we said the words-racism-out loud, where we addressed the issues of oppression, systemic oppression, reproducing classism and the feelings attached--anger, frustration, isolation. We tried to find a balance. We still have a long way to go.

Bobbi Aguero
TALC New Vision, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

on the work of interrupting inequities in our lives and in our work.

We unpacked the ways in which the way we talk impacts how we act using the text "Changing the Discourse in Schools" (by Eugene Eubanks, Ralph Parish and Dianne Smith) and the language of Discourse I and Discourse II. We explored how the language we use in schools too often reproduces inequity and keeps us from transforming both our thinking and our schools. Through our exploration we became more aware of how we too often talk about symptoms rather than causes, rely on single truths rather than multiple stories, and focus on ability and supposed merit rather than privilege and oppression. By breaking open this paradigm and beginning to provide the language to discuss the difference between these two types of discourse, we made progress in recognizing and using Discourse II to transform our thinking and action in our schools.

What is the connection between small schools and NSRF?

Over the last 5 years as the movement to break down the size of high schools has grown, NSRF has been involved in the practice of small schools coaching, beginning in 2000 with the formation of the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative (SSCC) in partnership with the Small Schools Project (SSP) and Coalition of Essential Schools NW (CESNW) to support the professional development of small schools coaches working with Bill & Melinda Gates schools in Washington. A part of the grant received by SSCC to coach towards small schools was a piece known as "And Beyond" which was designed to capture learning on the development and practice of small schools coaches in order to transfer that learning to other settings around the country. This seminar is a direct result of the work of "And Beyond."

3. Leave with tools, skills, knowledge and life experiences that help identify multiple entry points for the work.

As a part of the personal transformation work

in which we engaged throughout the week, we explored a myriad of tools, activities, and resources for taking this work back to our schools and organizations. We practiced various protocols, read provocative texts, used BayCES' work on assessing our work through different lenses, and explored different entry points in the work with our schools. We also attempted to write Theories of Action to guide us in our work. A "theory of action" is a hypothesis about what will happen when a set of deliberate strategies are employed. Developing a theory of action requires making an educated guess - using critical judgment - about which strategic actions will lead to what desired results. It is the process of explicitly connecting what you plan to do with what you hope to get. Having a theory of action and making it public allows for greater reflection and collaboration as well as deeper accountability.

Systemic Oppression: The systemic mistreatment of a group of people by the society and/or by another group of people who serve as agents of a society, with the mistreatment encouraged or enforced by society and its culture.

4. Commit to interrupt and transform inequities in their local context and engage others in this process.

By the end of the week, we were all inspired and tired. We turned toward home with heads full of new ideas, new perceptions, and much unpacking still to be done. We left committed to taking our learning back with us to engage in our work in a different way. We formed strong bonds throughout the week (our community of resistance) and are hopeful that we can come together again as a group sometime soon to reflect on our experiences, support each other in our local work, as we continue to grow in our understanding and practice.

Sometimes when we attend a transformative seminar or training it can be difficult to share it with anyone who didn't experience it with us. And often, at such times, we turn to poetry to bridge the gap between inner thoughts and language. Below is a reflection on the week from one of our participants, which resonated with many of us who were there.

How to Coach for Equity
Have courage
Listen to the voices of those at the table and those
Who never get invited to the table
Be empathetic
Be strong
Have voice
Use it
Live in a large risk zone
Wear 8 colored hats
Remember your life
Forgive your fear
Be resilient
Be like Velcro
Share readings
Connect people
Bear witness
Be yourself
(with no apologies)
Keep your sense of humor
(Laugh at yourself-laugh with yourself--)
Take the stuff you don't like about yourself
And shake it up
Take the stuff you like about yourself
And shake it up
Be water
Be persistent
Have a map
Make it go where it doesn't now

-Alex MacPhail, Southern Maine Partnership □

For more information on future Coaching for Educational Equity Seminars please contact Kim Feicke at feicke@lclark.edu