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Deepening Our Dialogue About Equity

When educators share personal stories about prejudices and biases in safe settings, the results can be far-reaching.

"You can't change human nature." "I don't see why you're so upset about something that happened so long ago." Comments like these illustrate some of the barriers to dealing with equity and diversity issues on more than a superficial level.

During the past 13 years, my colleagues and I have attempted to help teachers look more directly at issues of racism and inequity through a series of professional development projects.[1] In the process, we have come to understand the varied and complex ways that bias and prejudice have become assimilated into our educational institutions—how they affect curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, relationships, school organization, parent involvement, allocation of resources, and policies.

This complexity and the painful emotions surrounding equity issues often make it difficult for us to go beyond superficial dialogue. For example, many people fall back on the following types of unproductive responses in conversations about equity:

■ Denying the effects of prejudice and discrimination. (For example, "If we had a good curriculum, it would work for all children." "It wasn't so bad. I made it through.")

■ Intellectualizing and making pronouncements ("All children can learn"), and focusing on statistics or abstractions rather than addressing someone's personal experiences.

■ Confusing—and sometimes unconsciously equating—an individual's painful experience with societal oppression. ("It may be tough for blacks and Hispanics in school, but I also was treated unfairly.")

■ Expressing hopelessness or despair or being overwhelmed by guilt. ("I can't do anything about racism. My parents were racists.")

■ Confronting and blaming. (For example, "Men are insensitive.")

■ Comparing. ("Jews don't have it as bad as blacks. They can always pass for white.")

■ Gossiping. (For example, "Do you know what ___ did?")

■ Teasing, ridiculing, or refusing to acknowledge a person's painful emotion. ("Don't be such a crybaby.")

Risk is always involved in addressing bias and discrimination, but the risk for our schools and our society of not doing so is even greater. In our work with educators, we use three structures to ensure that people stay focused on their personal stories; respect one another; avoid blaming, criticizing, and analyzing;

and are free to express their feelings in a constructive manner.

Some Guidelines to Follow

Effective use of the three structures—dyads, support groups, and personal experience panels— depends on adherence to the following guidelines:

1. Each person receives equal time to talk.

2. The listeners do not interpret, paraphrase, analyze, debate, give advice, or break in with a personal story.

3. The listeners keep what the speaker says confidential. They don't talk about what the person has said to anyone else or even bring it up to the speaker afterwards.

4. The talker does not criticize or complain about the listeners or mutual acquaintances.

In addition to these guidelines, groups can often avoid unproductive situations if members recognize that inequity and prejudice have grown out of societal oppression or distressing earlier experiences. People need opportunities to work through the feelings from these hurts. It is important that someone (not necessarily the whole group) listens to every person talk about his or her own experiences and feelings. Participants also need to be reminded that emotional release (through tears, trembling, laughing and talking, for example) is the natural healing process from the distress they have experienced (Weissglass 1990, Weissglass 1996). It is also important for people to be able to talk about the first time they encountered prejudice

and inequity and their feelings at the time.

Short dyads of one to three minutes are used frequently in the course of an inservice day. When participants are comfortable with the listening process, we increase the time spent in dyads. Support groups may meet once a day or two to three times a week. Personal experience panels are used no more than once a day.

Dyads

A *dyad* is the exchange of listening between two people: I agree to listen to and think about you for a fixed period of time in exchange for you doing the same for me. I listen attentively and allow your expression of feelings. I keep in mind that I am listening for your benefit, so I do not ask questions for my information. Any questions I ask are to encourage you to talk more or to reassure you that it is safe for you to express your feelings. For example, I might ask, "How did you feel about that?" or "What are you feeling now?" If my questions are interfering with your expression of thoughts or feelings, I cease. Even when a workshop leader has suggested a topic, the talker ultimately decides what to talk about.

Dyads are useful for examining experiences in depth and working through feelings that confuse us, foster passivity, undermine confidence, or interfere with relations with students or colleagues. For example, we ask teachers to talk about their school experiences: their history as learners of mathematics, how competition affected

their learning, how schools affected their self-confidence as learners of mathematics, and what it was like as a male or female in school. The words of one participant—a European-American male—indicate the power of the experience:

> The critical aspect for me was remembering an event that happened to me that I thought was sort of a joke. When I expressed it, it wasn't a joke anymore.... This experience will influence me to think more about people, think before I speak, because I don't want to hurt anyone—especially my students. They might not express it, but I don't want them to feel like I did.[2]

Support Groups

A second structure, the support group, convenes for a fixed amount of time, which is divided equally among its members (Weissglass 1994). A support group leader sees that members follow guidelines and asks questions when necessary. These groups build a sense of community, help people learn how to listen, and provide safe settings in which to begin to look at an issue that they will examine more deeply in a dyad.

In addition to the questions suggested for dyads, we usually ask participants to tell how their backgrounds (racial, religious, gender, class, rural or urban, and nationality) have affected them as learners and (at a different meeting) as teachers. The leader may end the support group meeting by asking participants what they like about the group, something they are looking forward to doing, or another question that will focus their attention in a positive direction.

Following the guidelines in support groups makes it safe to address controversial topics productively. During reflective writing time a Mexican-American bilingual teacher with 20 years teaching experience wrote:

Support groups build a sense of community, help people learn how to listen, and provide safe settings in which to begin to look at an issue.

I've never had the opportunity to talk about racism with people of different cultural groups than mine. I was very concerned about making them feel alienated, I guess because I've often felt that way and know how difficult it can be. It has been very encouraging to see that it is possible to address these issues in a sensitive and respectful manner.

From a Japanese-American female teacher:

This is the first time I have ever shared my background with anyone.... I have never felt as lucky to have two cultures blended in the total being that I am than I have this summer.... I've also never been asked to look back to the past to try and remember feelings and experiences. It brought back so much I had forgotten. I've thought of myself as a sensitive teacher, but I know I will be a better, more confident one when I return to the classroom.

Personal Experience Panels

In the third structure, a small number of people (3–5 works well) spend a limited amount of time (4–8 minutes each) sharing their personal experiences on a particular topic (for example, gender bias, leadership, teaching in diverse classrooms, competition, forming alliances across racial lines, or bilingual education) to a larger

learned and to talk about their feelings. It is also helpful to provide opportunities for people to set both long- and short-range goals (in their personal lives, classrooms, or schools) and to share some of these with one another. (Small steps are sufficient. Remember the Chinese proverb: "Even the highest tower begins with a stone on the ground.")

For the panelists, telling their personal stories to a larger group promotes self-understanding and empowerment. After a panel on experiences that influenced the panelists' ability to develop trust with people of different backgrounds, a European-American woman wrote:

It was difficult for me to be on the panel. I felt as if I had exposed so much of myself—insecurities, self-doubts, pain, hurts. But I am so glad I did it. I want people to know the real me. Actually, I think it helped me get back in touch with the *real me*. Thank you for providing that safe place.

Some of our most successful personal experience panels have been on how racial, gender, or class backgrounds have affected us as learners; what it is like for teachers of color when they assume leadership in educa-

audience may feel like "spectators." Ideally, the experience should lead them to become a community of educators striving to increase understanding and grow together.

The greatest gains come from using these three structures to talk about and make sense of early experiences with inequity rather than trying to solve existing relational difficulties. As we better understand ourselves and others' experiences with inequity, we will be able to improve our present relationships. When educators have attempted to tackle current situations directly through the structures, they usually do not receive good attention, and people often feel criticized or attacked.

Is All This Necessary?

Because race, class, and gender biases have become institutionalized in a variety of ways, achieving equity will require more than eliminating individual prejudices. In order to make progress on the institutional level, however, we must begin on the personal level. A European-American teacher put it this way:

I used to think that I was aware and considered myself a pretty good teacher [crying].... but I don't care how good a teacher you are—unless you take it to a personal level, you're just on the surface.... I think there's a lot of lip service. To really be conscious of equity and effectively deal with equity in the classroom, you have to open yourself up and look at yourself.

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group of people. They do not discuss one another's experiences, nor do they make judgments about one another's actions or strategies.

Each personal experience panel is followed by dyads and then support groups. This is important! Such opportunities enable those listening to the panel to reflect on what they've

tional reform; and what has been helpful and harmful in forming alliances across racial lines. We recommend that educators use personal experience panels only in the context of a group that is working together over an extended period of time. If this is not the case, panelists may feel exploited by "being on stage," and the

I understand people's fears about sharing deeply personal feelings. Doing so is often uncomfortable, and some people may become upset with the approach, the leader, or both. I, too, am sometimes anxious and uncomfortable. Such sessions do not resemble the model of professional development that I carry around in my head. They do not feel "academic" enough.

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Further, there is always the risk of the situation being unproductive, of someone being unhappy about the experience.

Millions of young people, however, are unhappy in school, so it is important to take that risk. Using the structures (and following the guidelines) described above can help lead to the personal transformations that are necessary for progress. A Mexican-American educator expressed it this way:

> I have tried good curriculum, I've tried good teaching strategies, and I've worked with teachers who are passionately committed to working with students, and who are blind—as I have been blind, to some of the ways I continue to promote inequity in the classroom.

> In these workshops, I've had to deal with issues that were not easy to deal with... It has taken a lifetime for me to get to where I am now. It is not going to take only good will to make me change my own feelings. I have to deeply reexamine what brought me here—and it doesn't come cheap. ∎

[2] Edited transcripts of personal experience panels appear in *Many Waters*, a newsletter on equity in mathematics education: Issue 1 (Panel of Bilingual Teachers); Issue 2 (Panel on Gender Equity and Panel on Trust/Alliances); and Issue 3 (Panel on Confidence in Mathematics). Copies are available for $1 from the Center for Educational Change in Mathematics and Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93105.

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