Are We Ready to #MeetTheMoment?

Maisie Chin

A community-based organization frames its collaboration with multiple stakeholders around changing from a "culture of discipline" to a "culture of dignity" within the Los Angeles district.

Michael (all real names have been changed) is an African American eighth-grader in South Los Angeles. His mother Diane is a widow, and he has a twin sister and three older brothers. Last year, one of Michael's brothers was shot and killed by the Los Angeles Police Department. His other brother is paralyzed from the neck down as a result of a drive-by shooting nine years ago, when he was on the way to a family party. His third brother is in the detention center Sylmar Juvenile Hall.

Michael likes school, especially science class. But like lots of middle school boys, he doesn't shy away from a fight if one is started. Although several of his friends are "affiliated," Michael is not. He has been in a few fights with other students, but has no continuing beef with any other kids. In the fall of 2014, during PE class, Michael's teacher asked him to put away a bag of chips he was eating. Michael said that he had just bought the chips and wanted to finish eating them. The PE teacher came over to Michael, took the chips, and threw them away himself. In frustration, Michael told the PE teacher, "My brother is going to get you." The teacher took the matter to administration and asked that Michael be removed from the school because the teacher feared for his safety.

Maisie Chin is the executive director and co-founder of CADRE (Community Asset Development Re-defining Education) in Los Angeles, California.

Michael was given an opportunity transfer (OT) from his home school in South Los Angeles to a middle school in Watts. An OT is when the district or school initiates a student transfer to another district school for remedial or corrective reasons, as an alternative means to address "problem behavior." All OTs are recorded in a student's file but are not recorded in school disciplinary data as a suspension or an expulsion – two common indicators of how well schools are managing discipline and which students are being pushed out.

When Diane was called to the school to sign the OT paperwork, school staff gave her little information about the chips incident. She thought Michael had been suspended because he had been in a few fights and was now being transferred. When school site staff explained the transfer to Diane, they did not tell her she could appeal the decision.

On Michael's first day at the school in Watts, three other students jumped him. On his fifth day, he got into a verbal altercation with the principal and cursed at her. His OT was immediately canceled. Under Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) policy, that meant he could no longer attend the school in Watts and had to return to his home school "for immediate enrollment with no instructional days lost in the process." Diane returned to Michael's home school to reenroll him. The home school principal explained that Diane had signed "withdrawal" paperwork, that Michael was no longer her student, and that she didn't have to accept him back into school. After a few weeks the pupil services and attendance counselor called Diane and explained that she could work on enrolling Michael in a continuation school that serves students at risk of dropping out. Michael explained to his mom that he didn't feel safe going to any other school besides his home school because he was worried about getting jumped again.

Michael has now missed over two months of school. He has not been recommended for expulsion but his home school will not reenroll him. This now jeopardizes Michael's education – just one suspension, which in LAUSD is often 1.5 days, doubles a student's likelihood of dropout, and triples the likelihood of entry into the juvenile justice system. Two months of missed school is equivalent to more than thirteen suspensions.

It was hearing stories like this from parents year after year that prompted CADRE, the organization I lead, to begin our Human Right to Education Campaign.

DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES IN LOS ANGELES

Between 2005 and 2013, CADRE played a lead role in using grassroots organizing and leadership development to create a seismic shift in public policy, debate, and narrative around school discipline, racial disparities, parents' roles, school climate, and closing the achievement gap for low-income students of color. Through our parent organizing and coalition and movement building, we ushered in major new educational policies locally, statewide, and nationally that have fundamentally changed the landscape and raised the expectations and standards by which we assess our responses to student behavior, their root causes, and the inherent biases that accompanies them. By 2013, an LAUSD high school in East Los Angeles achieved the unheard of standard of *zero* suspensions. A South Los Angeles high school that CADRE focused on brought suspensions down from 100 to 7 in one year.

In 2013, in coalition with youth organizing groups and advocates, CADRE ushered in LAUSD's adoption of the School Climate Bill of Rights,

making it the first district in California to ban suspensions for "willful defiance." This victory was just after the state of California passed six major pieces of legislation that Governor Brown then signed into law, changing the state's school discipline landscape fundamentally by, among other things, making suspensions the last resort. In 2014, California also legislatively put a three-and-a-half-year moratorium on suspending students out of school for willful defiance in grades K–3 and on expulsions for the same reason for all grades.

But despite these victories, Michael's story was still all too common. The hard truth was that despite these dramatic declines in the number of suspensions overall, CADRE and our allies continued to see that African American students were still the ones most frequently being expelled and suspended in LAUSD. Of the seven suspensions logged by the South Los Angeles high school in 2014, three of them, or nearly 43 percent, were of African American students, who only made up 9.5 percent of the students at the school that year. This pattern held true for school after school, regardless of the number of suspensions. And CADRE's African American parents still had stories of their children being pushed out in multiple ways, including OTs and having the police called on their children. These practices kept suspension off the rolls, but it still removed a child from school, perhaps permanently.

Organizing parents and youth to take on the school-to-prison pipeline had seemed like a winning strategy for policy change. But improving conditions for African American students *in actual practice*, so that they truly benefited from each policy victory, proved to be elusive. We saw the need to fundamentally transform school climate.

We then found ourselves with the opportunity to co-anchor the PASSAGE project in Los Angeles through the Annenberg Institute of School Reform at Brown University. We would bring together district and school representatives and community partners and stakeholders to participate in a year-long collaboration that would highlight the success of LAUSD discipline interventions and identify additional opportunities to continue to reduce and eliminate disparities. (For more on the PASSAGE initiative, please see the preface of this issue.)

This was a complex opportunity for CADRE, as a community-based organizing institution, particularly as one that organizes parents. Would we have to roll back our focus on race, and specifically on the persistent disparities experienced by African American children? Our work over fourteen years had already shown us the extreme political discomfort and recalcitrance within LAUSD in matters affecting African American students. Would parents – African American parents in particular – be respected at the table as equal partners, when they are often the first to be blamed, and often demonized, for the community's challenges at large? Would our organizing allies join us at the table? Many of them were demanding additional reforms, and many might not have the capacity or have made the political choice to monitor implementation of our shared policy victories. Would LAUSD refuse to work with us because of our track record of persistent monitoring and holding its feet to the fire? Would our community organizing values be compromised in working with the district, school sites, teachers, and even service nonprofits that provide valuable student supports yet depend on service contracts from school administrators? Would the truths that we learned make everyone too uncomfortable?

THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

We realized in the planning stages of PASSAGE that we would need a sophisticated new capacity – to convene multiple stakeholder groups and generate the conditions for courageous collaboration to end racial discipline disparities. This meant trying to replicate how we built bold, shared interests among our South Los Angeles parent leaders over many years, adapting our model to build shared interests between a much broader range of stakeholders and power holders. It also meant that we had to let go of a few things and identify new ideas and strategies for addressing a persistent problem.

We also understood that we had to build a movement grounded in the School Climate Bill of Rights and other previous campaigns that would go beyond compliance and numbers to create new experiences, new stories, and new possibilities for students. Demanding change would have to be nimble enough to both hold ground and model the courageous reflection and dialogue from CADRE staff and parent leaders, which we now expected from educators and administrators. We framed this project and our role in it as an opportunity to "meet the moment" – to confront persistent racial disparities, inspiring the project name #MeetTheMoment.

An approach to taking collaborative action known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provided a framework for moving forward.[1] AI uses data, stories, case studies, and different levels of participant dialogue to prompt questions that bring out analysis of root causes, diverse perspectives, and self-reflection in order to uncover biases, assumptions, beliefs we may be holding onto, and responsibility we may not be taking. Most importantly, this inquiry is intended to create opportunity to re-frame how we see situations and our response to them, often leading to recognition of strengths and humanity versus deficits and judgment. AI has been used to train educators to shift classroom culture and set and teach to high expectations. Exploring the complex and provocative topics that lie at the heart of discipline disparities clearly needs this kind of rigor and persistent practice.

In five sessions from February to May 2015, we convened nearly forty community- and school-based stakeholders, including parents, students, organizers, advocates, educators, school operators, and a district administrator in a dynamic, groundbreaking process of self-exploration, discovery, and dreaming to ensure more racially just, culturally respectful, and healthy schools for all students. We sought to identify bold and courageous actions and strategies for fundamentally transforming school climate in South Los Angeles.

The first session offered a data-based orientation to the historical roots of discipline disparities and an introduction to AI. The second addressed the inescapable but difficult-to-discuss role of implicit bias, which led to a deepened inquiry of the root causes and community impact of race- and gender-based discipline disparities.

The third session focused on storytelling – a vital part of the AI process that illuminates what participants experience when the system is not working well and when it is working at its best. We heard from a student who had been

1 Appreciative Inquiry "is a method for studying and changing social systems (groups, organizations, communities) that advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus, does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur" (Bushe 2013).

pushed out of school and miraculously found an alternative, supportive learning environment; a Latina mother who had taken a stand and requested that a school *not* suspend an African American boy who allegedly had gotten into an altercation with her son; and two teachers at schools committed to restorative practices who shared the highs and lows of modeling that commitment in the face of peer resistance, isolation, and lack of resources. We also used stories to document the revelations, lessons learned, and appreciation for when the system of discipline is working at its best.

Perhaps the most revealing moment in our process was in the fourth convening, when we practiced applying these new lenses and considered the real-life story of Michael. It was an example of the human experience behind the data – what the numbers do not tell – and of how the way we frame a situation alters a life, often irreparably.

We were in small groups organized by stakeholder – parents, educators, and administrators. All three groups quickly realized that re-framing any number of details could have meant all the difference in a school's disciplinary decision and its huge impact on a student's life. Each group considered powerful questions:

> *Where are there pivotal opportunities to reframe the actions taken by this stakeholder?*
>
> *What actions could this stakeholder take to exhibit a shift from a "culture of discipline" to a "culture of dignity"?*
>
> *What values and beliefs would be present in this school climate if there were a culture of dignity versus a culture of discipline?*
>
> *In shifting towards a culture of dignity and striving towards the most ideal outcome, what decisions can this stakeholder make that would serve as a best practice moving forward?*

The most pivotal question, the one that led to the most pause and introspection, was:

> *What would this stakeholder need to let go of in order to embody those values and beliefs?*

It seemed difficult for everyone to answer, and the subtle habits of questioning the story's details and blaming or defending another stakeholder still happened. Despite the three previous sessions of inquiry and re-framing, a high-stakes situation or example still tested the best of our intentions. Students in the process identified with Michael's story and realized that they had similar experiences with different outcomes. Parents struggled with each other about whether or not the parent was to blame and Michael was wrong. Educators and administrators felt they needed more information and did not want to make presumptions about the PE teacher's access to support or training.

But this is exactly why AI is valuable. It presents an opportunity, especially for parent- and student-led organizing groups, to level a playing field that often does not even let us in. We are often resigned to collecting story after story like that of Michael and his mother from our parent and youth members, when it is too late to ask questions or re-frame or see the root cause of Michael's reaction to his teacher. We often have little recourse but a legal one, which does not guarantee resolution or reparation in the least bit, given the power differential between school staff and students and parents.

AI builds our capacity to link these stories to data and aggregate them to a collective problem that requires a collective solution. It equips parents and

students, especially, with the practice of asking questions in order to identify beliefs and assumptions that cause the reactions and decisions which might decide a child's life. It gives parents ways to enter into difficult conversations with other adults on campus and position themselves as change agents and leaders, where everyone's perspective can add rigor to the analysis of the problem and the solution.

Our fifth and final session featured the personal story of a high school dean-turned-principal who transformed from a die-hard believer in punitive school discipline to an inspired champion of positive behavior support and restorative practices, an administrator who now does whatever it takes to prevent a student from going into the juvenile justice system, even in situations that lead most to overreact. He described how he had to let go of his guilt over the instances in which his punitive approach did not work, because this guilt often manifests itself as justification to continue doing the same thing regardless of the results. In fact, a key part of his transformation was no longer seeing school-wide positive behavior support as a central office mandate that he had to implement, but rather as part of his core practice as an assistant principal and then a first-time principal. The result? In his first year as a first-time principal at a racially diverse school of 1,400 students, suspensions plummeted from 89 to 3.

For many of us, this principal's personal transformation story was AI in practice, whether he called it AI or not. And while his suspension numbers are certainly impressive, what are more so are the practices that generate those low numbers. His story demonstrated how discipline disparities are best addressed in schools through intrinsic motivation, recognition that relationships matter, paying attention to student connectedness and belonging, and interrupting cycles of negative feedback towards students of color.

In bringing #MeetTheMoment to a close, we focused on fostering that intrinsic motivation that sometimes only rigorous self-inquiry can generate. As we reflected on what we had learned or believe to be true about discipline disparities, we asked ourselves the following questions:

What contribution can you make towards the elimination of discipline disparities in South Los Angeles schools?

Where do you have the discretion and freedom to act without more resources or authority, and what can you do?

What do you need to let go of in order to face the obstacles and act anyway?

NOW WHAT?

In truth, there is no real end to #MeetTheMoment. No matter what the suspension numbers say, discipline disparities run deep, especially those based on race and gender. Faithful, respectful, courageous implementation of the policies we have won, along with a culture of dignity in our schools, will only be possible if we find yet another new north star – the elimination of race-based discipline disparities and the biased practices that drive them.

Appreciative Inquiry and the habits of self-reflection and collective spirit help us liberate our minds and hearts from thinking in the status quo, translate personal stories into systemic change possibilities, and take responsibility for creating transformative alternatives. AI has provided a broader framework that encompasses and embraces the practices that CADRE has always used to carve out a groundbreaking political role for grassroots parents in this struggle: storytelling, truth seeking, and using our values to discern what

is strategic, possible, and purposeful in the long term. The struggle remains open-ended and generated by those who participate in it.

We leave you with our key takeaways as we move forward:

Unearth the deeper barriers to eradicating discipline disparities.

Pressing social conditions coincide with and impact spikes in school discipline. Mental representations of stigmatized groups often contribute to contemporary racial bias, inequality, and disparities in discipline practices. Race-based biases impact increased levels of irritation and resulting punishments. Authority and power dynamics impede relationship-building with students.

Surface imperatives and look for new opportunities to reduce discipline disparities.

Disparities in suspension rates by race, English learner status, and disability start as early as pre-school and increase exponentially in secondary school. Across all educational levels, African American boys and girls experience the highest rates of discipline disparities – the rates of disciplinary actions against African American girls are higher than the rates for boys in all other ethnic groups, excluding African American boys. Embracing a culture of dignity, instead of a culture of discipline, can help to foster positive and healthy school climates for all students.

Build the political will for a sustained movement to achieve a long-term vision.

The AI approach is a strategy to foster relationship-building between systems leaders and community advocacy groups. Continuing to deepen relationships among teachers, administrators, students, and parents will build critical mass to ensure a more fortified movement behind implementation of new school discipline policies. Intersections with other social issues are opportunities to develop new movement allies.

To quote our colleagues in the Research to Practice Collaborative, "you can't fix what you don't look at" (Carter et al. 2014). We can compel compliance and forced implementation of positive behavior support, restorative practices, school police training, or diversion programs at schools. We can even celebrate major changes in the data. But unless we dig deep and look underneath the surface, our myriad policies, trainings, and public declarations of ending the school-to-prison pipeline will be, in the words of Angela Davis, "the difference that makes no difference, the change that makes no change" (Younge 2015).

For more on CADRE's work in South Los Angeles, see http://www.cadre-la.org/.

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