

Equity in Education

Learning to See with a Third Eye: Working to Address Inequity Effectively

by Debbie Bambino

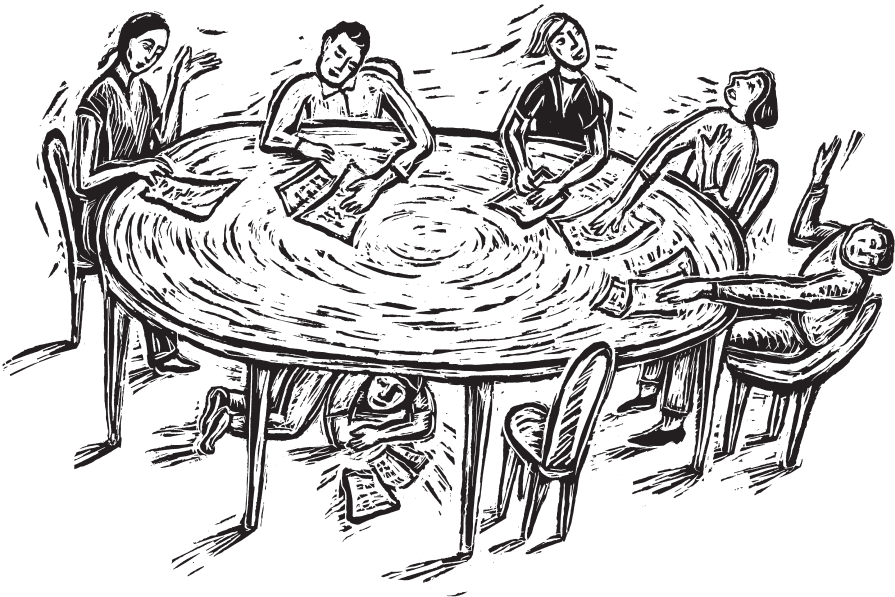
A few years ago the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) revised its mission statement to include language about working to “foster educational and social equity.” The revision makes sense to me as a graduate student in urban education and a former Philadelphia middle school teacher, as well as in my role as a facilitator of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) and CFG coaches. Each role has convinced me that racism and other forms of bias are the greatest barriers we face in making a positive transformation in educational experiences, especially when they involve poor, inner-city kids of color.

The key to my becoming more effective in addressing issues of inequity was getting in touch with what I don’t know. As a white, female, heterosexual educator, I knew I needed to work consciously to incorporate a focus on differences foreign to my own life experience. In other words, I continuously had to acknowledge the presence and impact of racism, cultural chauvinism, and homophobia in our system and in my own practice.

In the past, working as an external resource person who supports CFGs and their coaches in several districts and schools, I have tried to make that choice by adding an activity here, a protocol there, perhaps a reading or two, but without thoroughly reworking the framework of the coaching support I offer. By treating equity as an add-on to an already full agenda, I in practice unwittingly set up the context for omitting the new material rather than adding it; when time became short, the articles and activities that dealt with equity explicitly were given less time or postponed, despite my intellectual understanding that such issues lie at the heart of the persistent achievement gap that keeps urban students of color at such a disadvantage.

In my graduate studies, I have been reading Jacqueline Jordan Irvine's *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Seeing with a Cultural Eye* (Teachers College Press, 2003). Dr. Irvine suggests that we all can work to see with a "third eye"—an eye that "sees a different picture and examines alternative explanations." She calls for collaborative action research in which inside-outside educator-researchers like me "assume the humility of good anthropologists."

I call myself an "inside-outsider" because I am an insider (an educator working in schools) and also an outsider (a guest facilitator in schools where I formerly taught). As a white teacher I am likewise a cultural outsider in schools where children of color predominate. I understand Dr. Irvine's call for humility as a demand for active listening and regular reality checks with insider participants—teachers, students of color, and their families. I need feedback about my observations and conclusions in order to guard against the inevitable bias I bring to the action-research and change processes. Dr. Irvine's words caution me that I need "to know what I don't know" before I can co-construct valid meaning and propose positive interventions that support "other people's children."



Dr. Irvine's analysis, which has given me much to chew on in my doctoral studies, has also moved my thinking about my work in the here-and-now with CFGs and their coaches. As a result, I have been re-thinking what I want to do in meetings with new CFG coaches, and my reappraisal 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?

(Internal memo, NSRF-New York, 2002)

I 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 those questions are the legendary "silver bullet," but I do think that regular reflection and debriefing, considering the questions as possible prompts for every activity, will help me move beyond sporadically focusing on equity as a mere add-on.

Recently I facilitated a series of what we call "lunchtime learning sessions" about content literacy at a Philadelphia high school. As I thought about the reflection questions, looking for the ways in which the sessions related to equity, I realized that I needed to go beyond generically using metacognitive strategies of reading instruction to situate the role of literacy in the struggle for equity. To that end, I added the introduction of Linda Christensen's *Reading, Writing and Rising Up* (Rethinking Schools, 2000) to the resources for my CFGs and their coaches. Christensen's introduction quotes Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin, Paulo Friere, 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 purposefully employing reading and writing skills to challenge the inequities our students face daily in our schools and our society.

Christensen's perspective helped me translate Dr. Irvine's analysis and Nancy Mohr's questions into practice that can help kids. I hope that by contextualizing the analysis of how and why their literacy strategies are keys to student success, I can add the missing dimension of explicit student empowerment to my conversations and work with teachers. I believe that the added dimension, which links literacy with the power dynamics in our society, is the key to student engagement and success.

I will continue reading the contributions of Dr. Irvine and other educator-researchers of color as I work to develop the lens of my "third eye," for the clarity of what the third eye sees depends on regular collaboration, reflection, and change in my practice.

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Education as the Practice of Freedom

by Camilla Greene

The academy is not a paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The Classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

—bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

Many educators are committed to serving urban youth—the students ignored by the current public system—but how many educators believe in teaching their students to view education as, to use bell hook's phrase, the "practice of freedom"? Evidently they do not, and I fear the consequences.

As an external coach in schools and school districts, I have been engaged the past few years in a variety of transformational initiatives, mostly in urban areas and mostly in high schools. The Gates High School