

African-American boys are sent to the principal's office more often than any other group and disproportionately to their numbers in a school, according to Victor Cary, partner at the National Equity Project in Oakland, Calif. That is just one example of how the issues of society at large — racism, classism, sexism, language, and other biases — play out in the classroom, he said.

By Valerie von Frank

If you were an African-American student at Acorn Woodland Elementary School in Oakland, Calif., a few years ago, chances are good you found yourself in trouble in the principal's office. Then-principal Kimi Kean said 80% of students suspended at the school were African-American — but African-Americans made up just 40% of the student population.

From California to Maine, according to Victor Cary, partner at the National Equity Project in Oakland, the pattern is the same. African-American boys, in particular, are sent to the principal's office more often than any other group and disproportionately to their numbers in a school. That is just one example of how the issues of society at large — racism, classism, sexism, language, and other biases — play out in the classroom, according to Cary.

“There's something institutional at play,” Cary said. “Our job is to help schools understand why that is so and

what they might do about it.”

Cary said change might begin by simply rephrasing one’s language. Rather than talking about the dropout rate for African-American boys, for example, he said his group invites a discussion of why and how schools are pushing out African-American males. A shift in language can help shift thinking.

Coaches with the National Equity Project, formerly the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, lead participants through the emotional minefield of deep-rooted, sometimes unconscious biases. One aspect of the National Equity Project’s work is to help move educators past barriers that keep students from achieving by bringing forward issues of oppression and addressing them specifically, but in

helping educators target student groups such as English language learners or African-Americans for solutions and become aware of these students’ specific needs as opposed to instituting general solutions to problems such as low reading scores.

Depending on the data and mutually agreed-upon goals, the work might begin by allowing educators opportunities to “speak their truths.” “The coach’s job,” Cary said, “is to create a space for an honest, authentic conversation.”

Tom Malarkey, a coach with the National Equity Project, gave an example of a school in which he worked where the students and all noncertified staff members were people of color and most of the teachers were white. Bringing all staff members together, he led a process in which they

COACHES ROOT OUT DEEP BIAS

a nonjudgmental way, Cary said.

“It’s not about blame and shame,” Cary said. “It’s bringing to consciousness what in the institution is precipitating this. It’s being cognizant of how the institution is operating and who is benefiting.

“We help surface issues in a way that can serve kids. We don’t say anyone is doing something wrong.”

COACHING FOR EQUITY

The National Equity Project has a cadre of coaches who work with schools and districts to improve student achievement, with a particular focus in urban areas with large numbers of traditionally underperforming students.

Coaching is a way to significantly change the culture, context, and competency of schools, Cary said. According to the organization’s definition, coaching for equity is “the practice of guiding, instructing, provoking, and supporting people to achieve a mutually agreed-upon objective that interrupts historical patterns of inequity.”

Coaches work with leaders, leadership teams in schools or districts, and whole faculties. Cary said the work requires

shared their perspectives. The certified staff learned a lot from support staff members’ views on how the school operations were perceived by people of color, Malarkey said.

“People are affected by oppression,” Cary said. “We have to understand and deal with the effect it has. It matters who you are in relation to the children you’re teaching. Many teachers come from a different cultural background, different language experience than their students. It’s just different ways of being.”

He said one exercise the organization’s coaches often used involves constructivist listening, in which educators are paired and spend time listening to the other person’s perspective purely for the speaker’s benefit, not to share knowledge. Each has an opportunity to talk, but without response from the partner.

“We ask, ‘When was the last time you were listened to fully at work?’” Cary said, “then, ‘What was your experience as a learner yourself, and how might your identity have



Victor Cary

impacted your experience?’ People begin to think about things they haven’t thought about for years. It’s a way to break out of unconscious routines.”

Malarkey, who coached at Acorn Woodland, said coaching for equity must be undertaken carefully.

“It’s one thing to be an advocate focusing on the needs of underserved students,” he said. “It’s another thing to build people’s will to address those issues. A lot of work (for participants) is inside-out, who I am and how I am, my journey, for me to be effective and develop why it is important for me to address issues of race, class, and culture in school.”

Both Malarkey and Cary noted that there is no single answer to solving equity issues in schools, but building leadership capacity is essential. Coaches help build staff members’ capacity and support them in finding solutions that transform how teachers support and nurture each student

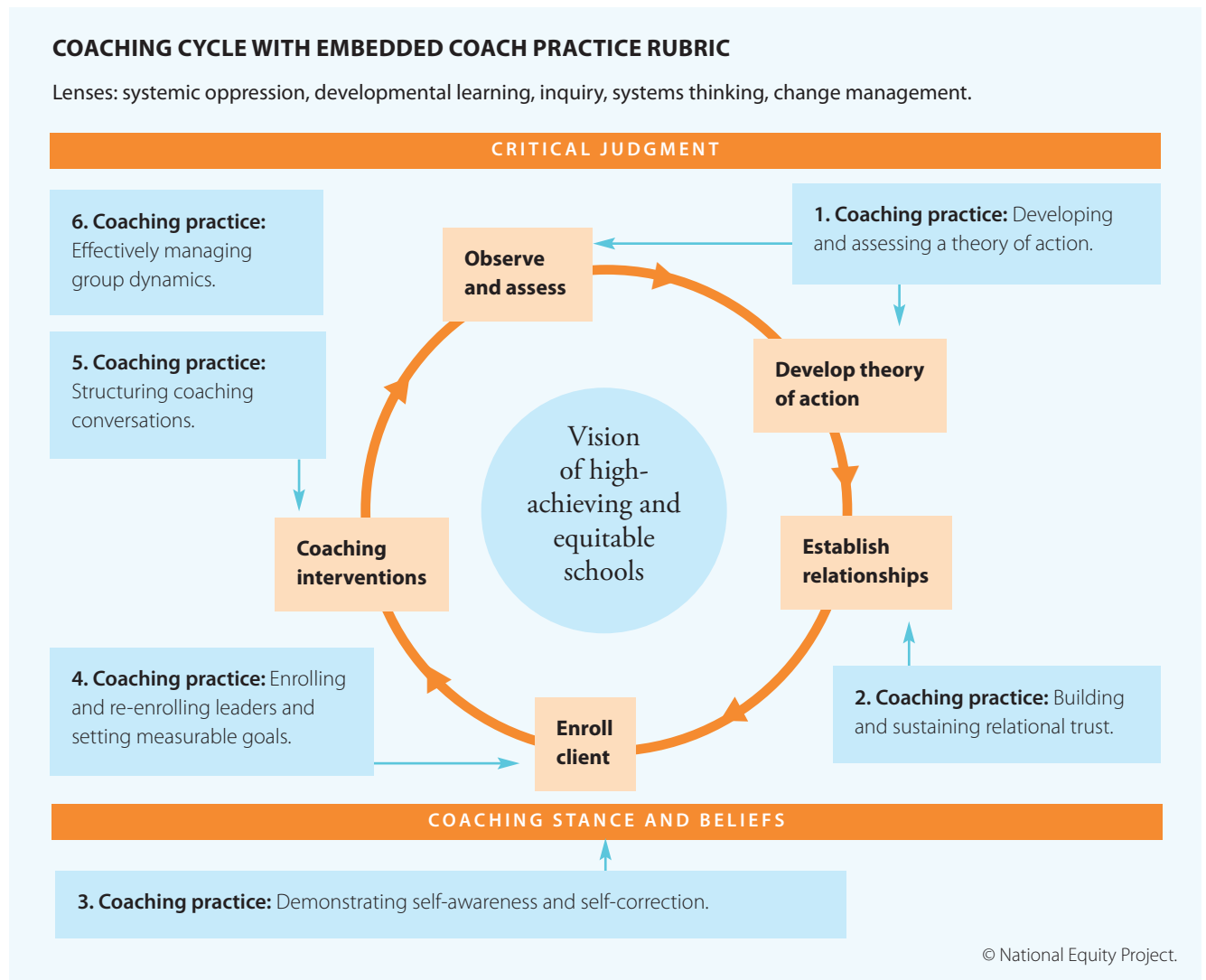
“People tend to want a silver bullet,” Malarkey said. “They

say, ‘You guys are the equity people. Tell us what to do.’ We have to shift the paradigm to what’s going to be most effective for their situation, help them develop a theory of action for themselves. It’s changing hearts and minds. It’s stepping back and asking the deeper questions so when they’re planning, they do it with a greater consciousness.”

THE COACHING MODEL

The National Equity Project works in the areas of conditions or context, culture, and competency using a highly specific model for all its coaching efforts. The coaching cycle, which is nonlinear, involves these phases:

Observe and assess. The coach watches teachers’ instructional practices, observes leaders, talks one-to-one with staff, and asks about priorities, past experiences, goals, perceived obstacles, and related matters. Malarkey said, “The lens with us all the time is, What is the person’s or the collective awareness about equity



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ASSESSING A COACH'S STAGE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Formative	Emergent	Developing	Integrating	Innovating
Demonstrates understanding of skills and of need for skills in all practice areas; has demonstrated competence in one or more content areas.	Shows proficiency in some practices and content areas.	Demonstrates proficiency in all content areas and engages most coaching practices skillfully to achieve goals.	Equips education leaders with practices and content competencies to effectively lead without coach assistance (fully builds leader capacity).	Shares and creates new knowledge and practices to improve performance in schools and in the coaching organization.
School development capacity		Leadership development capacity		

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challenges? How do they talk about low-achieving students? Are they explicit about race, class, culture, and language?” Malarkey said some staff will talk about “those students,” while more aware teachers may know that, for example, 30% of Latino students are underperforming compared with 5% of white students.

Malarkey said the coach seeks information about patterns in the school or district data, available resources, teachers’ content background, the school’s collaborative learning structures, and whether and how teachers work together.

Develop a theory of action. Using the information the coach has gathered, the next step is to develop a theory of action, plan interventions, and identify the intended outcomes of those actions for creating a high-achieving, equitable school. Part of this step is working with school staff to develop mutually agreed-upon, measurable goals. The collaboration increases the school’s commitment and accountability.

Establish relationships. Leaders within the school community will take responsibility for creating conditions that maximize adult and student learning, the National Equity Project believes. Coaches identify and build rapport with formal and informal leaders and work with them on relational competence and emotional intelligence, helping them look critically at themselves.

Enroll the client. When key staff are engaged and committed to clear outcomes, the coach and leaders can work together to develop a written work plan articulating coaching goals, including equity and achievement goals, coaching strategies, and the school’s commitments needed to achieve the goal. The plan also identifies what data will be collected to monitor progress.

Coaching interventions. Interventions depend on school

needs, but the National Equity Project supports work in general areas: Build instructional leaders’ capacity to support teacher development and improved pedagogy; establish and facilitate equity-centered professional learning communities; help schools and districts build strong family and community partnerships to support and motivate students; focus on school redesign so that resources and structures support teaching and learning, including teacher collaboration, expectations, and shared responsibility; and build leader and teacher cultural competence.

LEARNING FOR COACHES

All this work is facilitated by skilled coaches, carefully prepared through their own ongoing professional learning. National Equity Project coaches engage in monthly, day-long meetings to share experiences and have deep conversations that enhance their ability to sharpen the common lens they bring to their work in schools and districts. They develop shared language to describe their work.

Coaches spend this day reflecting on their own theories and attitudes, according to an organization document, “to uncover blind spots, reveal hidden assumptions, and take more considered actions.” Cary said professional learning for coaches focuses on developing emotional intelligence, practicing facilitating productive conversations, and developing “distress-free authority,” the ability of the coach to be comfortable in leading the process without feeling the need to have all the answers, among other pieces.

The coaches may focus on one aspect or course of study for up to a year, learning the core competencies of coaching. For example, Cary said coaches’ learning in the past has specifically addressed how to develop a theory of action, how to build relational trust, setting goals with the educators the coach is working with, managing group dynamics and difficult conversations, the meaning of cultural proficiency, and how to create structured conversations for one-to-one dialogue. They may study the research on a topic, then bring information to the group for

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discussion and reflection. See the table on p. 24 on the stages of coach development.

Coaches also work together in project teams that focus on their clients, sharing their progress toward goals and their challenges. They use protocols to structure conversations and help one another strategize.

“We take a rigorous, intentional approach to coaching with a methodology and a theory of action so we can impact children’s learning,” Cary said. “We want to make good on the promise of a quality education for every child. ‘People can solve their own problems if they have the will, skill, knowledge, and emotional capacity. This is not about fixing anybody. It’s about creating a partnership with adults and supporting them in growing their own practices. The evidence of success is they see a difference in performance of children.’”

CORE COMPETENCIES

Each National Equity Project coach takes part in ongoing professional learning around core competencies that are part of the coach’s evaluation:

1. **Data-based inquiry:** The coach leads development of a rigorous school practice of using data effectively to inform teaching and administration.
2. **Facilitative leadership:** The coach fosters the school leader’s skills for productive dialogue, collaboration, and goal setting through effective school meetings.
3. **Instructional leadership:** The coach provides expert advice to school leaders to develop and implement policies and procedures regarding school, vision, culture, management, instruction, and community relations.
4. **Equity-centered professional learning communities:** The coach leads school teams of educators to establish a process of continuous learning toward equitable achievement goals.
5. **School design:** The coach is able to manage large-scale projects of school creation and conversion.
6. **Cultural competence:** The coach enables educators to interact effectively in diverse cultural environments.
7. **Instructional coaching:** The coach builds teacher capacity to use accelerated learning strategies to do standards-based instruction and to evaluate student needs and progress.

SUCCESS

Kean, Acorn Woodland’s principal through 2009-10, frequently uses the word transformation when she talks about the school. She has reason. In 2002-03, the year after staff examined data on student suspensions, suspensions were reduced by 75%, she said, and the racial disparity was closing. Five years ago, 13% of students were performing at grade level; the school’s latest results in 2009-10 showed 49% of students at grade level in language arts and 65% in math on the state standardized test, making Acorn the most improved school in the school district out of 66 elementaries.

Coaches from the National Equity Project worked with the school’s staff from 2000 to 2009, with a one-year hiatus. From that coaching effort, Kean said, the school found a way to create a more positive, higher-achieving environment for all kids.

The coach worked with the school leadership team to set goals, focus on data, and work with staff on collaborative planning. Both staff and students developed clear, measurable achievement targets. Teachers learned strategies such as reciprocal teaching and using graphic organizers. They taught the same skills at the same time and assessed student progress in the same way. They targeted instruction with small reading groups.

“There’s constantly so much pressure from all sides,” Kean said. “Coaching helped us focus on what’s important, see how what we were doing was reinforcing inequity versus transforming, and helped us clarify where we want to go.”

“Coaching is about developing your inner capacity. It’s about inquiry. What’s your current reality, what data tells you that, what goal do you have, what’s getting in the way, what do you want to try to make that different? Then, once you try, reflecting on it. What did you produce now? Are you closer to your goal? What’s the next strategy you’ll use? It’s about teaching people how to think and problem solve rather than giving people a prescription.

“Without coaching, we would have had no way out of the rut that we were in,” Kean said. “Coaching helped us look at patterns in data and how we were creating inequities. We’d been so in it that we hadn’t been able to see it clearly. Working with the coach, we had to ask, ‘Why do we think that’s happening? What do we think we can do about it? What’s our role as educators?’”

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