



HOW WE CAN BRIDGE THE CULTURE GAP

By Gregory Peters

American public education has a long-documented pattern of serving, and failing, certain student communities more than others with a predictability based on cultural demographics — especially race and its intersection with gender, class, and language (Center for Public Education, 2012; Hilliard, 1995).

If we accept that the U.S. public school system is a manifestation of a history rooted in white supremacy and colonialism, then we can better make meaning of our failure to educate all youth equitably regardless of social predictors and our persistence to strengthen the school system as a

hegemonic social structure.

As the cultural and experience gap between an increasingly diverse student population and predominantly white, female educators widens, schools continue to rely heavily on the pedagogies, curricula, assessments, and interventions that more effectively served a homogeneous group of educators than they do a heterogeneous student population.

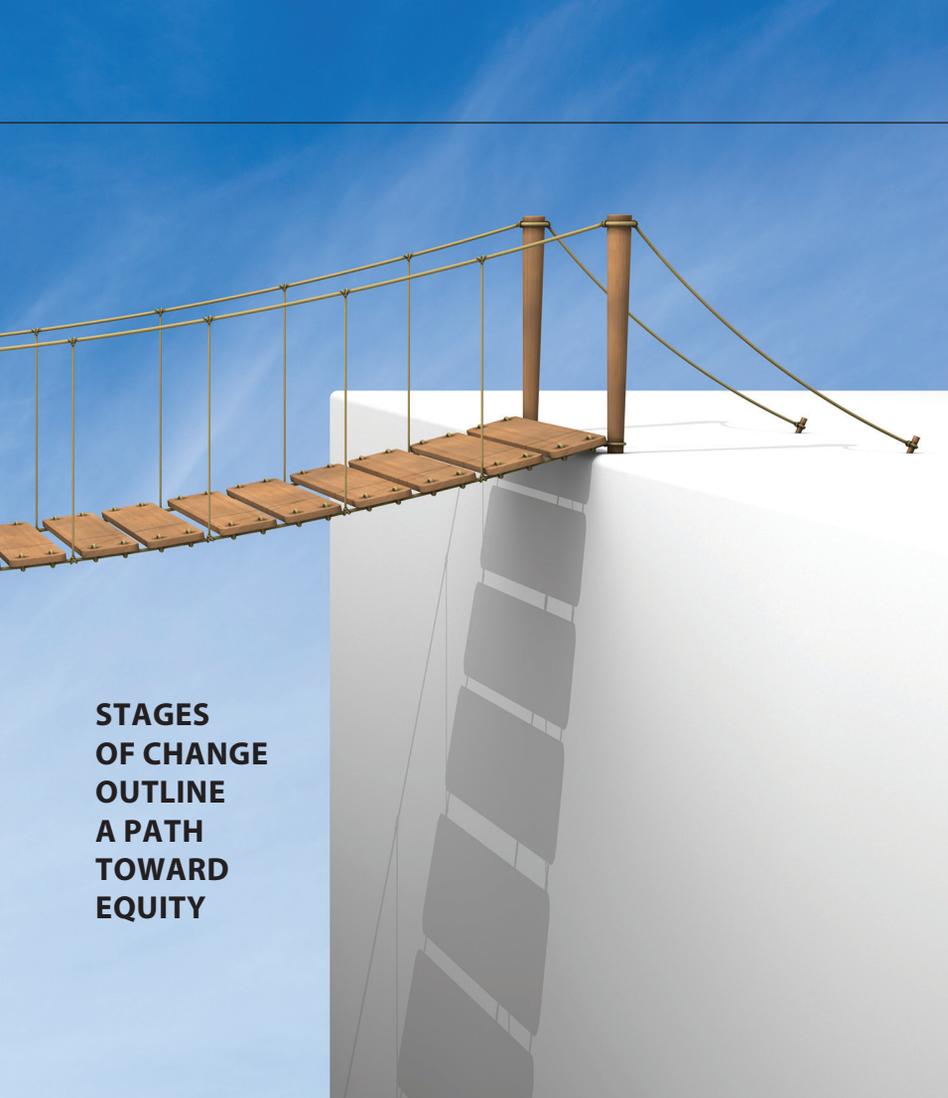
In 2011, I worked with teachers who were considered to have transcended this prescriptive path within education. These teachers met three criteria: principal recommendations, student recommendations, and student achievement data as evidence that they were progressing students who were on the cusp of success or failure. Referred to as transforming teachers, they were described as existing successfully within the educa-

tional system and also transcending the predictive role given to them to reinforce the same system (Peters, 2012).

Students discussed how these teachers were transferring the skills of working in and against an unfair system to the students themselves. Seeking to learn from them, I conducted a facilitated, participatory, interpretive study that included an extensive literature review as well as interviews, focus groups, and a writing retreat with teachers, students, and administrators.

The result — a Conceptual Framework for Teacher Transformation — outlines stages of work necessary for educators and schools to shift beliefs and practices and maintain a commitment to interrupting and transforming inequities within individual and collective practices.

In the years since, my colleagues



STAGES OF CHANGE OUTLINE A PATH TOWARD EQUITY

at the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools and I have worked with hundreds of educators, schools, and districts guided by this framework. An assumption of the framework (and of transformation) is that the work is constant and continuous. No individual and no community are ever done.

In this article, I focus on one area of this work: developing equity-centered professional learning communities. Professional learning communities (PLCs) go by many names, including intentional learning communities and transformational learning communities. We call ours equity-based iGroups (which stands for individual inquiry groups) because our groups are designed specifically to facilitate individuals to cycle continuously through these stages.

THE FRAMEWORK

The Conceptual Framework for

Teacher Transformation highlights stages of development common to transforming teachers. While the work within each stage was unique to the person, patterns emerged based on teacher identities — especially racial identity.

In general, those who identified as teachers of color were able to locate work they had done consciously throughout their lives and within their communities to cycle through these stages, while teachers who identified as white referenced powerful experiences occurring later in life (usually as part of their teacher identity) pushing them into these stages of transformation.

In the years since the study, much work has been done to further define the stages as well as examples of content, curriculum, strategies, structures, and supports needed to cycle through the stages. The focus of this work has been to support schools not only to develop the

Taking time to understand my own history — even before understanding the structure of school — was eye-opening! As a Latino male, I was hurt by education. In my family, my parents had jobs of servitude, and that translated to me as a student catering to my teachers — even when they were treating me unjustly because I was Mexican. Even though I wanted to be a teacher to do differently than what I experienced, I realized I was replicating how I was taught — and I was replicating that same harm for students like me.

“It really hit me how this is a systemic issue. With my awareness came anger that I needed to process through. ... This work is really painful, but it needs to be done. Nobody else can do it for you. And you cannot just read a book or take a workshop. Like anything, you have to put in the work. To transform, you really have to work hard.”

— *Gil Guzman*,
4th/5th-grade teacher,
Garfield Community School,
Menlo Park, California

“I always have cared about and had glimpses of the work needed to serve all students. But when I started to do the work of looking at who I am as a white woman and how, in this system, I work with others, my consciousness raised to a new level.

“It is exhausting. It needs to be. Every interaction I have with students and other adults is changed. Now when faced with someone who needs support, I no longer go to autopilot for what worked for me. I now think about what I am doing and why.

“I now know I have to remain open to other perspectives, especially those across difference, in every situation. This is not limited to my students — my co-leader is a woman of color, and our relationship, how we communicate and collaborate, has changed dramatically. We now know that we always have to consider dynamics related to race, power, and lived experiences in our leadership.”

— **Michelle Griffith**,
principal,
Garfield Community School,
Menlo Park, California

conditions needed for educators to engage in transformational cycles, but also to transform their organizational culture to one rooted in the discourse, decisions, and design committed to interrupting and transforming inequities impacting the least-reached students.

FIRST STAGE

Stance and schema awareness

What is my (our) history? What does it tell about why I act and react in the way I do? What is my (our) current reality and results? Why do I need to interrupt and transform them?

It is important to know from what or where we are transforming to better differentiate between being caught in the continuous work of minor tweaks to a self-repairing system versus engaging in a cycle of transformation toward a radically different reality.

To develop awareness of our own stance and schema, we engage in work to identify and understand who we are and how we came to be. We must explore our own identities and histories as it relates to our beliefs and values and how we make meaning of the world. Our stances define the automatic responses we bring to interactions and conflict. By engaging in the reflective practice of making our schema and stance visible — first to our-

selves — we can critically examine our intentions and actions.

This work needs to be done at the individual and collective levels. If the work of making our identity and history more transparent and connecting it to our day-to-day actions is essential for teacher transformation, then it is a natural extension to recognize the importance of examining our organizational and social history and identity as it relates to our collective decisions and actions that show up in our day-to-day design.

The work schools can do toward this effort includes any number of curricula in which we explore, make meaning of, and share stories about our histories and identities. This exploratory work is necessary for individuals and community alike to develop awareness and make transparent our identities and schemas we use to make meaning of day-to-day occurrences.

Here are examples of work a school may do to raise identity awareness and develop shared knowledge of our collective history:

- Foster regular guided reflections (i.e. Socratic seminars, text-based discussions) — individually and collectively — to explore and make transparent the role of identity in our lives and work.

WHAT IS AN EQUITY WALK?

An equity walk is a collaborative process in which school teams gather observational data to take a pulse of the school within a brief snapshot of time. The data serve as one narrative used to explore an agreed-upon focus, such as a critical incident or a larger problem of practice, that contributes to an identified, student-related inequity within the school. While this is a facilitated process, there are general guidelines:

- The team visits every classroom together.
- Each visit lasts at least three minutes. The team spends a few minutes after leaving each classroom to share and calibrate examples of evidence.
- Visits are not classroom observations of any specific teacher, but rather an observation of a school or program as a whole.
In one equity walk, a team chose to focus on patterns of student participation by race and gender for a grade level where an experience gap

- Engage research, texts, and other media from experts to deepen the understanding of identity and history as it relates to schooling.
- Create opportunities for individuals to share and hear each other's stories related to our identities and histories.
- Work to calibrate shared meanings for essential language (i.e. equity, excellence) and concepts (i.e. purpose of school versus the purpose of education).
- Interrogate the espoused versus actual impact of the school, district, or system mission and history by examining key artifacts and data.
- Conduct regular equity walks (see below) and focus groups to reveal the school's (and students') current narrative in real time.

SECOND STAGE

Interruptive and catalytic experience

How should we best conduct ourselves and engage others in order to interrupt the inequities our least-reached students experience in our care?

In the second stage of work, schools must work to develop conditions that allow for interruptions to inequities when they occur. While the term “interruption” may conjure a variety of meanings and emotional reactions, in this context,

the term refers to developing the tools, practices, and agreements or permissions to interrupt inequities in design and practices.

Given that the objective is a disturbance to a current mental model, interruption also requires and assumes that with the interruption is an agreement to remain engaged and collaborate on the work needed toward transformation.

Some of the most powerful ways to create and sustain these conditions include developing and adhering to discourse and collaboration norms (or agreements) that encourage dissonance — rather than comfort — in our working relationships. For example, we don't consider “be on time” to be a norm as much as a work requirement, while norms such as “trust best intentions” frequently serve as permission to avoid questioning root beliefs and values behind our discourse or actions. Rather, norms such as “speak your truth” and “pay attention to patterns of participation” foster ongoing inquiry and invite multiple perspectives in our work.

Additionally, creating conditions for interrupting inequities requires communities to practice using tools and skills to foster such engagement. As scaffolds, these tools can be removed while the deeper collaboration continues. When

and achievement gap persisted for its male students of color.

Before conducting the equity walk, the team calibrated examples of authentic, observational data and discussed hopes, fears, and biases that may surface during the observations. They prioritized looking at seating and grouping arrangements as well as coding student-to-student and student-to-teacher discourse.

After an equity walk is complete, the team compiles, shares, and discusses individual observations to identify

patterns and outliers and reflect on the findings and related implications for the school and its leadership. During this time, the team also determines next steps to share the equity walk synthesis and analysis with the larger school community.

One school's strategy that proved particularly effective was to share its equity walk data with a series of probing questions at staff meetings following the walk so that teachers could reflect on the data in relation to their individual practices.

“E ven as a leader, I have felt isolated as a person of color. It makes me wonder how other people of color without the same authority in my school feel. When we came together in affinity, at first it was healing and cathartic. We had felt less valued and had limited power and voice in conversations and decisions that directly impacted our students and us.

“Wanting our voices to be unapologetically powerful and to be heard, we supported each other to engage authentically and patiently as our school makes meaning of the inequities. We supported each other to come together in solidarity — and with love and compassion.”

— *Harini Aravamudhan,*
assistant principal,
Everett Middle School,
San Francisco, California

the work reaches new levels of difficulty, the scaffolds can be reintroduced until a community's habits and skills improve as well.

In the first stage, we are getting to know ourselves individually and as a larger community. In this stage, we need to learn more about how to engage with each other and develop the trust to do so. There are many ways to establish strong, ethical working conditions as a base for the discourse needed to invite interruptions and interrogate inequities. Examples include:

- Develop and adhere to working and discourse norms.
- Learn and practice using protocols as scaffolds.
- Foster opportunities to make one's work public — moving from sharing celebrations to exploring equity dilemmas.
- Practice using different forms of feedback.
- Practice shared facilitation and leadership.
- Develop and practice engagement strategies to ensure equitable participation.
- Refer to the school's mission, vision, or other focusing agreement to prioritize work.

THIRD STAGE

Making new meaning

What can I learn — from myself, from those with whom I share affinity, and from allies across difference — to change how I understand and react to inequities in my practice, especially for my least-reached students?

Interruption alone is not enough. If we knew how to be more effective, we would be doing what we needed to do, and interruption would not be necessary. Thus, even when we have created the conditions and culture where we can interrupt inequities as they present themselves, we may not always know what to do next.

Without the opportunity to reflect and collaborate for new meaning making, we potentially see our dilemmas through the same eyes and run the risk of repeating our original actions based on the same beliefs. Schools that invest in developing the will and skill to interrupt inequities need to commit time for staff to engage in discursive reflection and discourse to consider new ways of looking at old dilemmas. This work is quite specific and occurs in three different spaces: alone, in affinity, and with allies across difference.

- **Alone:** The work of transformation cannot happen without collaboration, but it also cannot happen without doing work by ourselves. Each of us has a unique story. Schools cannot be expected to provide every level of support for every individual, nor can any professional educator expect to progress as a social justice leader only doing work while on the clock. Schools can support individual work by making transparent this expectation and providing resources to which individuals can connect.
- **In affinity:** There is an experience gap between the cultures and demographics of educators and students. The gap wid-

ens when we look specifically at our least-reached students. Given this reality, we need places to go and work with others who share similar identities. These affinity groupings may be based on race, gender, class, or other significant identity. They should be safe spaces formed around the work necessary to interrupt inequities faced by students within these groupings. A specific benefit is that affinity groups support individuals to find and offer mentorship and to engage in discourse that is feared or not yet appropriate for mixed groups but is still necessary to address.

- **With allies across difference:** Ultimately, we do work alone and with those in affinity so that we may better be prepared to engage as allies across difference. We make this part of our professional expectations in order to expand our own frames of reference for defining our work, dilemmas, and solutions. As a result, we need spaces to come together across difference in ways that allow us to hear and seriously consider new ways of thinking and making sense of our world.

FOURTH STAGE

Changed or new action

How should I (we) radically change what I (we) do to transform the inequities the least-reached students experience in our care? What conditions are necessary for me (us) to be courageous to take such risks?

The long-term goal of engaging in this cycle is a sustained shift in practice, but the path to success is not seamless. Changing the way we do school can lead to additional inequities in need of interruption or may surface the need for additional meaning making.

This notion of radically different action in the context of education brings a new set of hurdles, some of which are less in a school's control than creating the conditions for the first three stages. The trust that was built to engage in interruptive and meaning making discourse is different than the trust needed to risk failing publicly.

In a climate of blaming schools for societal problems, schools and educators have developed a counterproductive defensiveness for innovation and risk taking. The status quo, even with its predictable failure for specific communities, remains a more comfortable choice.

Leaders from schools, districts, and communities must engage in their own cycles of transformation to support similar work in schools. Meanwhile, schools can respond to this reality by increasing efforts to deepen trust and develop systems that reward informed risk taking. Examples include:

- Support teachers to engage in regular, formal, data-based inquiry so data support and justify radical actions.
- Regularly recognize and honor informed risk taking. Normalize healthy failure from informed risks, using these opportunities to reinforce the urgency of success.

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and reflecting at least three times. This reinforces the process of using practices that are relevant to students' lives and demonstrates to the teachers that doing so is a relatively simple way to engage students in learning activities that lead to positive learning outcomes.

The premise behind getting teachers to try to use what they have learned about their students is an important step in getting them to really "see" the significance of making the curriculum relevant to children's lives. In addition, the practice of making the curriculum relevant supports greater equity because it helps to reframe classroom practices in a way that more effectively meets the learning needs of racially and economically diverse children.

RESPONSIBILITY:

An imperative to enact socially just practices

Responsibility means developing a sense of obligation to using practices that foster an equitable classroom culture. To accomplish this, I ask teachers to reflect on their experiences with developing relationships and using relevant curriculum and make three commitments to how they will continue these efforts in their daily practices.

The intention is that the commitments serve as a reminder of the responsibility educators have to be persistent in their efforts to support the success of all students. Typically, the commitments teachers make connect to the concepts of relationships and relevance.

For example, one teacher wrote, "A commitment I am making is to modify curricular materials to reflect the cultural and familial lives of my students. This means creating big books, math problems, science experiments, and other instructional materials that are meaningful to their lives. A commonality that

I discovered among my target students was the fact that their cultural and personal assets are rarely reflected in the curriculum. I believe relevant lessons will help them to make connections beyond simple understanding."

This reflection demonstrates how one teacher has reframed her thinking as it relates to her day-to-day practices and how they need to shift to connect more successfully with her students. In my own work leading professional learning, my next steps are to find a way that I can reconnect with teachers to discuss how their efforts to enact their commitments have progressed. This will allow me to take the next step in fulfilling my own responsibilities to foster the reframing of teaching practices that promote greater equity.

Teachers, administrators, and teacher educators must work consistently to find ways to meet the needs of all students in a manner that will help them to be academically and socially successful. Following an axiom of relationship, relevance, and responsibility will focus educators' efforts to create more equitable schooling environments that support success for all students.

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How we can bridge the culture gap

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- Engage the wider community — including students — to determine urgent priorities, risks, and actions to consider.
- Include policymakers in the school's transformation work; make the process and practices public and shared.
- Reconceptualize support and evaluation systems so progress and change are valued variables.

CONTINUOUS AND CONSTANT WORK

This article is an introduction to a framework that is much more complex and responsive than a simple program or set of activities. The work of transformation — and in particular, transformation for social justice — must remain continuous and constant. As such, for as long as inequities remain and interruption is needed, we must create and sustain conditions in schools where this cycle of awareness, interruption, meaning

making, and radical action for improvement can occur.

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