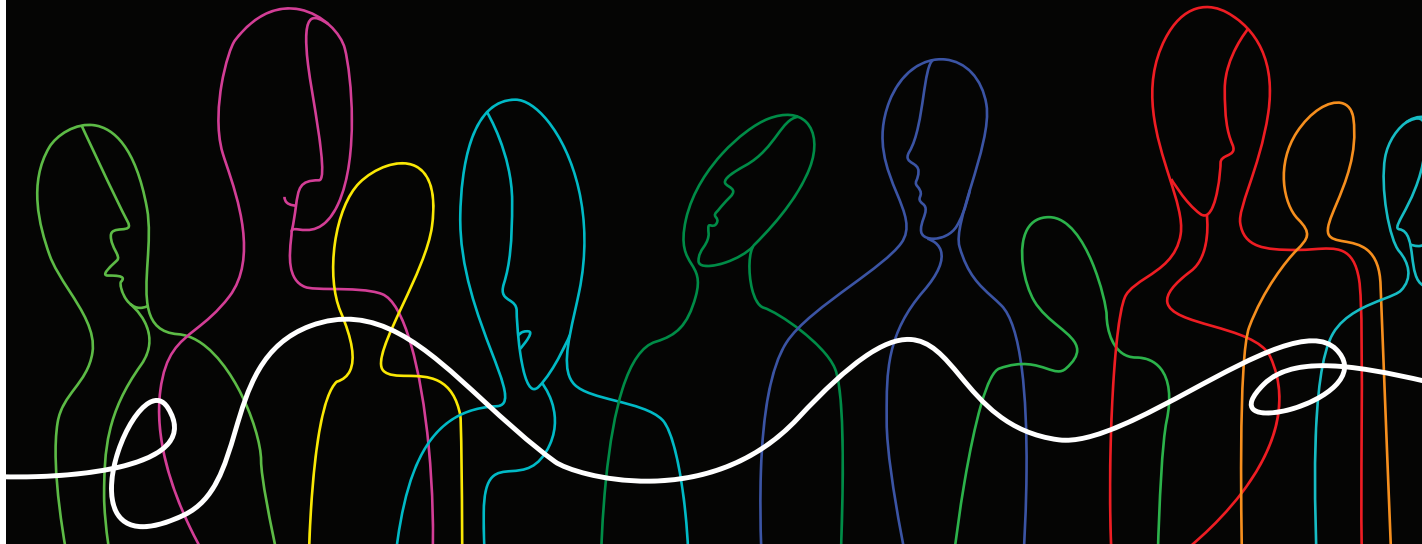


# CONNECTIONS BRING US CLOSER TO EQUITY AND JUSTICE

PROGRAMS BUILD KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS  
TEACHERS NEED TO BE INFLUENTIAL  
BEYOND THEIR CLASSROOMS



BY ELLIE DRAGO-SEVERSON, JESSICA BLUM-DESTEFANO, AND DEBORAH BROOKS-LAWRENCE

*“With so much unrest and uncertainty in our nation, in this city, and in our district, teams continue to be the glue that holds my school together. I make sure to ask teachers, ‘How are you feeling?’ They all need a place to emote, to learn, to plan, and to connect. Teams are making a difference.”*

— Urban veteran principal

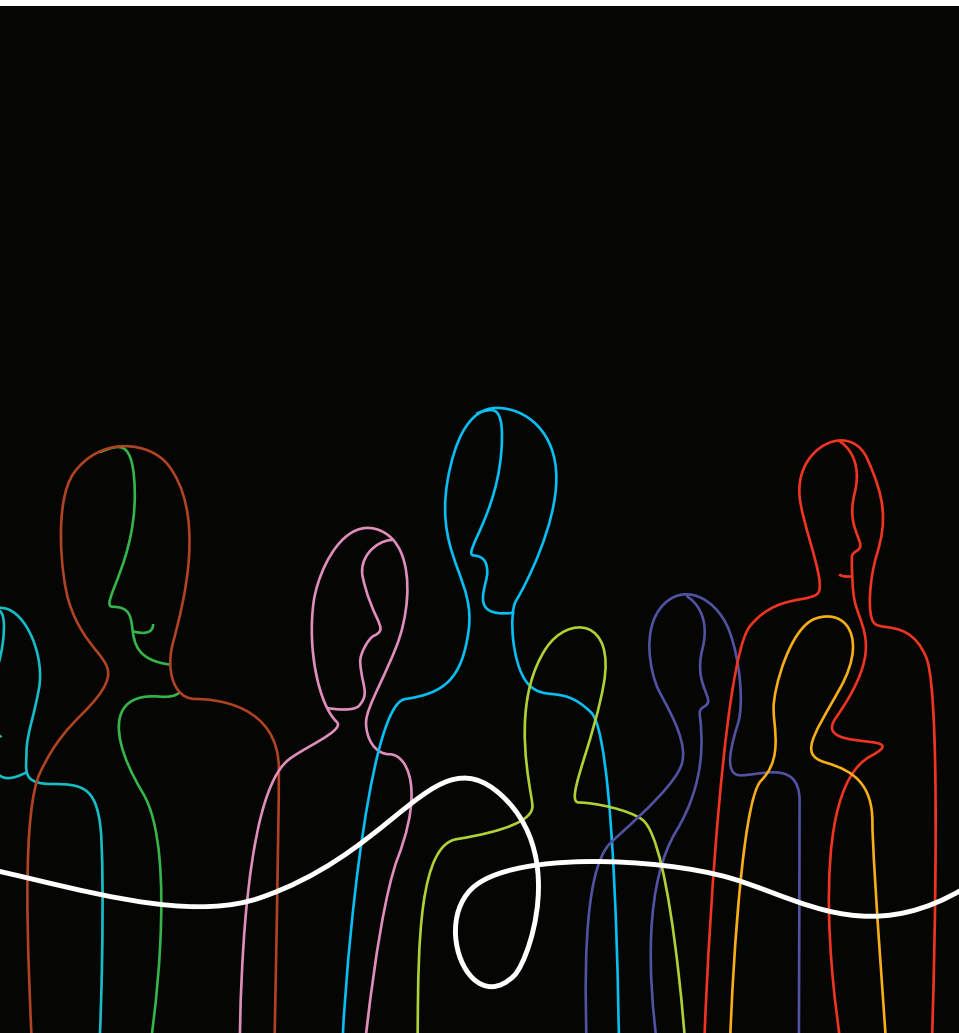
**A**t their best, teams can bring people and talents together and serve as holding environments — spaces that offer both developmental supports and challenges — for individual, group, and organizational growth and transformation.

While teaming has steadily emerged as a lever for educational change in recent years, educators are now being called on to team in new and deeper ways as they navigate unprecedented uncertainty amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, strive to meet the urgencies

of the Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice, and work to dismantle oppressive systems of all kinds in schools and out.

As suggested by the high school principal quoted at left, teams are critical now and can serve as integral spaces of planning, connection, and advocacy for social justice, broadly defined. Yet educators enter into pressing conversations about equity, race, identity, culture, and the health and well-being of the community from a wide range of starting places.

The fact that many of these conversations have moved online



has added new layers of complexity. For example, some educators have welcomed the heightened intimacy of glimpsed homes, pets, families, and living spaces during virtual meetings, while others find the eroding boundary between home and work and the expanding hours of the workday challenging (in addition to technological and child care concerns).

For many, online teaming can involve all of these feelings and more at once, depending on the team, the time, and the purpose of the meeting. All of this sits atop the already expansive spectrum of understandings and commitments individuals bring to diversity, equity, teaming, and inclusion work.

What does all of this mean for educators seeking to leverage teaming as a pathway for more inclusive, dignity-affirming, justice-oriented schools? How can teams — and the people who compose them — grow together and forward toward more equitable action and understanding?

As an intercultural team that teaches and researches about the connection between adult development and educational leadership, we recognize that every adult brings unique constructions and meaning making to teams, which reflect the cumulative experiences, stories, hopes, cultures, and expectations embedded in their positionalities.

We have also found that by

making these diverse constructions and orientations more transparent — by acknowledging differences and commonalities both visible and invisible, and by deepening connections and understandings over time — team members can better meet one another where they are as they come together as individuals in service to common goals.

Toward this end, foundational lessons from research on racial identity development, the Courageous Conversation framework (Singleton, 2014), and constructive-developmental theory illustrate how adults bring different cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities to teaming. Combined with practical strategies for building

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

To begin putting the strategies for developmental teaming into practice, consider the following questions, either individually or with colleagues:

- What is one thing you value about your team?
- What is one thing you'd like your team to get better at?
- How has the shift to virtual team meetings been going for you?
- What is one insight or takeaway from the ideas and strategies presented here?
- What's your next step?

teams as fertile contexts for authentic communication, collaboration, and action, we can all make more progress toward greater equity and social justice.

### TEAMING THROUGH DIFFERENT LENSES

Individuals bring all of themselves holistically into teams, including intersectional dimensions of identity such as race, gender, culture, language, sexual orientation, professional role, and personality. Yet research suggests that people do not always — nor equally — feel comfortable sharing from this rich fullness, depending on the composition and climate of a team, especially intercultural ones. Sometimes, the risk of offering one’s most genuine thinking can feel too great. Other times, the silence can be too much to bear.

Seminal research about racial identity development (e.g. Cross, 1995; Helms, 1994, 2020; Tatum, 2017) has helped articulate the diverse and evolving understandings of both self and other that people can bring to teams.

For example, many models of racial identity development describe processes of disentangling oneself from externally imposed, hegemonic narratives about one’s racial group and moving toward increasingly positive and interconnected self-understandings over time. These journeys look different for people of color and white people because we live in contexts shaped by systemic racism (Singh, 2019).

Moreover, pioneering work around Courageous Conversation (Singleton, 2014) has made mainstream the idea that, for many reasons, people enter into sensitive and personal conversations about race, identity, and inequity from different compass points (e.g. from emotional, intellectual, moral, or action-oriented orientations).

While bridging different understandings can be difficult in general, engaging in conversations about race and equity from foundationally different compass

points can be particularly painful when these points of entry are invisible or unacknowledged.

Linking models of racial identity development and the Courageous Conversation compass, then, is the unifying idea that bringing under-the-surface orientations into more conscious awareness can lead to growth and change for individuals and groups, and ultimately to more purposeful action and collaboration.

### A CONSTRUCTIVE-DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUUM

Another lens that we have found particularly helpful is constructive-developmental theory (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2017, 2018). Like theories of racial identity development, constructive-development theory maps adults’ internal progression toward greater self-understanding and helps put into words some of the meaning making people bring with them into team dialogues.

Constructive-developmental theory highlights adulthood as a potentially rich time of growth and change, during which individuals’ perspectives grow more complex over time, rather than a static period where development is “done” (Kegan, 1982, 1994). While constructive-developmental theory is organized into cumulative stages, which we call ways of knowing, these stages are not fixed categories or labels, but rather pause points along an expanding continuum of meaning-making.

What are the different ways of knowing, and why do they matter when teaming for equity in today’s complex world?

**Instrumental** knowers often excel at concrete and logistical initiatives and can bring deep expertise, commitment, and content knowledge to the table during equity teaming. What is harder for instrumental knowers is looking beyond what they see as the “right” way to do things, as they tend to universalize their understandings of how the world works and have not yet developed the

capacity to more fully take others’ perspectives.

Adults with a **socializing** way of knowing have developed this capacity, and accordingly orient strongly to valued others’ — and society’s — opinions and assessments of them. In schools and on teams, adults with this way of knowing often attune well to relational and interpersonal dimensions of collaboration, though they may struggle to engage in conflict or difficult conversations.

Growing into a **self-authoring** way of knowing involves taking a more reflective perspective on the expectations of others and building capacity to author one’s own values, standards, and beliefs, such as a deep commitment to equity. Teaming, teaching, and leading with these values is important to self-authoring knowers, although they may struggle to invite others into their value systems and visions.

**Self-transforming** knowers have developed personal values and philosophies, but are no longer run by them. They seek to continue to further evolve and reflect through interconnection and mutuality. When engaged in equity collaborations, they can simultaneously embrace their expertise and commit to learning more.

This continuum (see the table on p. 35) helps illustrate one additional layer of why adults may orient to teaming differently, including when working toward social justice. This can open a path for more understanding and connection, which is necessary for progress toward equity within teams and beyond.

### STRATEGIES FOR INTERCONNECTION

Layered with insights from other theories and lenses, such as models of racial identity development, constructive-developmental theory can help teams establish the foundation of all change work: relationships.

Educators across levels have continually voiced that building teams

WAYS OF KNOWING AND TEAMING FOR CHANGE		
Way of knowing	Dominant orientation to teaming	Growing edges when teaming for change and social justice
<b>INSTRUMENTAL</b> Rule-oriented self: How can I get the things I want and need?	If everyone would just do and learn what they're supposed to, the school would make progress and get things right.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing beyond one's own experiences and worldviews.</li> <li>• More fully taking teammates' perspectives.</li> <li>• Recognizing there is not just one "right" way to address equity issues.</li> </ul>
<b>SOCIALIZING</b> Other-focused self: What you think of me, I think of me.	How can I say something that won't offend or disappoint my colleagues, especially when we're talking about sensitive subjects?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging in conflict and difficult conversations.</li> <li>• Taking a strong stand for an idea when others may disagree.</li> </ul>
<b>SELF-AUTHORING</b> Reflective self: Am I staying true to my own values and competencies?	It's important to me that I get a chance to share my perspective and offer critique. I'm open to your ideas, but I can decide for myself what's the best next step.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with teammates with very different views and ideas.</li> <li>• Inviting others into one's thinking and vision.</li> <li>• Critiquing one's own vision.</li> </ul>
<b>SELF-TRANSFORMING</b> Interconnecting self: How can we learn from each other and grow together?	My colleagues help me see into myself and our work in new ways. Transformation isn't possible without leaning into the contradictions and paradoxes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving toward concrete action amidst many options.</li> <li>• Navigating hierarchical structures.</li> <li>• Continuing to grapple with the complexities of learning and unlearning about identity and equity.</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018.

with developmental intentionality has helped them to have critical and difficult conversations, especially conversations about race, privilege, and identity that they previously avoided.

Here are four strategies from our research and work with educators that can build and deepen essential team interconnection and collaboration for greater equity and justice (Drago-Severson, 2004, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018; Drago-Severson, Joswick-O'Connor, & Blum-DeStefano, 2018).

**Check in about expectations.** Affording each team member the opportunity to check in at the start of a new or rebooted collaboration can allow individuals to share their hopes, goals, passions, and strengths as well as the kinds of things they would like support with.

**Share communication preferences.** Openly sharing one's communication and feedback preferences allows each member to better meet others where they are and can be a powerful way to

avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

**Generate plans, norms, and agreements.** Setting a clear plan for team time and work can optimize conditions for growth and connection. This can be done through protocols, and by developing shared norms, goals, and values that evolve over time.

**Deepen connections.** Undergirding all of these strategies is the imperative of continually deepening mutual understandings and connections. Deep listening and genuine investment in one another involve setting aside purposeful time to learn about the stories, expertise, and experiences team members bring into any space.

### LOOKING AHEAD

Teams are essential today because we cannot effect urgently needed changes alone. Building an educational system that honors, supports, and includes all students and families takes everyone.

This means educators will likely engage in more teams than ever before

— not just data teams and curriculum and leadership teams, but equity teams, affinity groups, blended and online learning teams, and many more.

We see the teaming lenses and strategies in this article as the bedrock of transformation, not as bonus features or side projects. When we can infuse even the smallest interactions with intentionality and authentic care and respect, it makes bigger change possible.

As the world continues to seek and embody the "beloved community" championed by Rep. John Lewis, developmental teaming can be one promising path forward.

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**Sharron Helmke (sharronhelmke@gmail.com) is a Gestalt awareness coach and a senior consultant for Learning Forward. ■**

Connections bring us closer to equity and justice

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**Ellie Drago-Severson (drago-severson@tc.edu) is professor of education leadership and adult learning and leadership, Teachers College, Columbia University. Jessica Blum-DeStefano (jblumdestefano@bankstreet.edu) is course instructor & advisor, Bank Street Graduate School of Education. Deborah Brooks-Lawrence (deborah.brooks@acs.nyc.gov) is child welfare specialist and contract manager, NYC Administration for Children's Services in New York City. ■**