



COACHES CORNER

Sharron Helmke

TO COACH FOR EQUITY, START BY LOOKING WITHIN

As coaches, we spend our days actively supporting the professional growth of others, but we're also tasked with modeling lifelong learning through our own continued inquiry and reflection. Nowhere is this more important than when it comes to antiracism. But knowing where or how to start can feel overwhelming.

In my own journey as a white educator and coach, I learned the only place I could start this work with integrity was with myself. By engaging in deep — and sometimes painful — self-inquiry and reflection, I've undertaken an ongoing journey of personal change. So when I contemplated what I could offer on the topic of antiracism, I realized I needed to forgo writing about how we coach others and instead focus on how I might encourage and support you to engage in your own personal learning journey in pursuit of antiracism and racial equity. To paraphrase Gandhi, we can't lead the change we want to see without being the change we want to see.

Making changes within ourselves requires acknowledging our starting places — and the often uncomfortable reality that we're not where we want to be. Like many of you, I spent years in public education with the intention of extending the benefits of education to every child, but gradually I realized that even as I aimed to be part of the solution, I was still part of the problem.

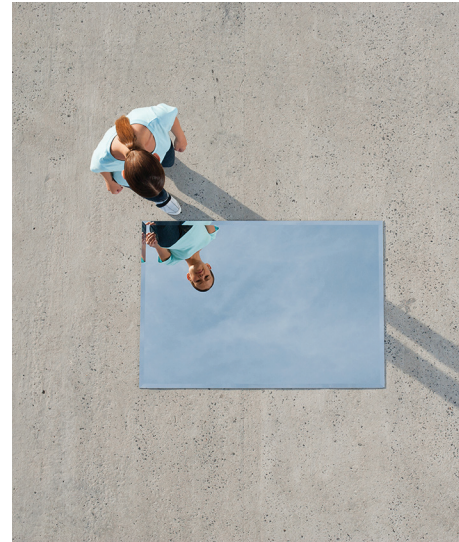
For me, the turning point came the day I sat in a deserted hallway on lunch duty and saw a group of Black girls walking toward me, their loud laughter echoing down the hallway. I rose to confront them, already preparing to have a disciplinary conversation. Luckily, I stopped myself when I realized they weren't disturbing anyone and there was no cause to intervene. But no longer could I tell myself that Black students' disproportionate discipline rates and alienation from the educational system was the fault of others.

Realizing this left me feeling vulnerable. I wasn't where I wanted to be, and I wasn't living up to my own expectations. It was an uncomfortable place to be, both then and now. Yet I share this story because vulnerability is a key part of recognizing how we need to broaden our perspectives, challenge our beliefs, and ultimately change our actions. As coaches, we ask teachers to do this work every time they engage in a coaching conversation with us. To ask this of others, we must be prepared to demand it of ourselves.

In the years since that lunch duty, the blinders of my role in educational inequity have been slipping, and, as they do, I'm forced to acknowledge my own role in perpetuating this inequity. I've come to recognize the many books I've read, data I've studied, and strategies I've implemented weren't enough because they were the wrong starting place. I had to start with me.

After that episode at lunch duty, the lessons toward increased awareness came quickly — and they haven't stopped. There was the day I cleared a book room of high-interest, low-readability books and realized these were the only books with covers showing young adults of color. There

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I implore you: Do not open schools to focus on compliance. Do open schools with an eye toward transformation with smiles on your faces, good mornings and hellos, opportunities for dialogue to build meaning with adults and peers, discipline as a teachable moment centered on co-creating trusting relationships and understanding rather than as a means of punishment. Students deserve to build relationships with adults who prioritize community building and coaching, adults who have their best interests at heart.

This disruption and commitment to creating liberating spaces necessitates a selfless and critically self-reflective approach to working in service of the students in our care. I encourage you to consider the the following part of my

definition of antiracism in education:

Antiracist educators are conscious and aware of their personal bias, their worldview, and how they are privileged or marginalized racially. An educator is antiracist when they actively disrupt systemic racism and inequities from their own sphere of influence and partner with other antiracist educators to enact collective disruption of institutional racism and systemic inequities (Ward, 2020).

It also necessitates a commitment to ongoing learning, to seeing school reopening as an adaptive challenge worthy of a plan-do-study-act approach, in which we continually analyze and reflect on our work and adjust to make improvements. Without this commitment, we risk getting stuck in the hindrances of red tape, powerless task forces, and high-level teams that

meet for months and take no action. This commitment taps the will of educators committed to co-creating liberating schools and workplaces.

Which route will you choose to reopen schools? The predictable zero tolerance, compliance route that leads to status quo and more stress or the transformative route that welcomes students and co-creates supportive, nurturing classroom and school environments? As a mother of black boys, I need you to consider what's at stake — for my children and yours.

REFERENCE

Ward, A.M. (2020, July 11). *Why #AntiRacistEd shouldn't be gentrified: Reason 7: Because whiteness is real.* preview.mailerlite.com/d9g4w6 ■

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was the moment I was confronted by two students who had given essentially the same answer on a test, but the Latino student had received partial credit and the white student full credit. These are just a few of the moments that serve to remind me that I still have work to do within myself.

It's incredibly painful to see myself in the profiles of white privilege and bias in education I read about, but the alternative is to continue perpetuating the kind of damage I firmly believe no child should ever have to suffer — and an alternative none of us should accept. Refusing to look at our own actions and examine our own bias is more than just tacit acceptance. It's active participation.

The good news is this work is fully within our own locus of control. Many of us who want to improve equity for students of color often feel stymied by lack of clarity from leaders and concerned about difficult conversations that potentially could damage relationships. Nevertheless, we can find respite in knowing that personal change

is perhaps the only kind of change we can meaningfully undertake.

As coaches, we can't start by telling others what they're doing wrong or how to "do" equity better. Nor can we support others in understanding their blind spots until we learn to recognize and address our own. Here are some of the ways I continually attempt to gain insight into my blind spots:

- When I feel an urge to act, especially if that urge seems to arise almost automatically, I take a deliberate pause and turn my attention inward, searching for my intention. Often, I find I need to look beyond the first answer to find one that feels wholly honest.
- I pay attention to the spaces I enter, and I notice when I find myself in the minority. How do I feel and respond in such situations? Have I assumed a right to belong, to speak, to know?
- Understanding that how I show up with others directly affects how they respond to me, I ask

myself: In what ways do I show up differently when interacting with people of other races? What feelings accompany those differences in behavior?

- I notice how I approach students of color and respond to their questions and mistakes. Are my expectations for students of color as high as the expectations I hold for other students, and most importantly, do I communicate those expectations through my time, attention, and support to the same extent I do with white students? If not, what excuses do I use to justify the differences, and how do I feel when I'm honest with myself about that?

As you ask yourself these questions, curiosity and honesty will allow you to identify patterns. Only when you're aware of your blind spots and prejudices can you work to change the outcomes that follow from them. ■