



BY SONIA CAUS GLEASON

Learning how leaders advance equity and justice can inspire, give us mental models, and help us create our own road maps.

Eight years ago, Nancy Gerzon and I researched professional learning in high-poverty schools that were narrowing the achievement gap for every demographic, which resulted in the book *Growing Into Equity* (Corwin, 2013). One of the few U.S. high schools that fit our criteria was Social Justice Humanitas Academy in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

José Luis Navarro was the school's leader and a former California Teacher of the Year. He went on to serve as a local district support coordinator and has returned to school leadership at Birmingham Community Charter High

School, where he is lead administrative director.

I recently spoke with Navarro about his journey as an equity leader and how he brings the perspectives of teacher, school leader, and central office leader to bear on his work. Highlights of our conversation have been edited for length.



Navarro

What's different about how you're pursuing equity now than when we met eight years ago?

Navarro: As a leader, I've always been a data guy focused on student achievement. But now the data I gather includes more about students

and teachers as humans. I've always valued social and emotional learning and incorporated teaching about social justice. In recent years, I've come to care even more about kindness and curiosity, and about mental health.

At this point, PTSD should not stand for post-traumatic stress disorder. It should be persistent traumatic stress disorder. Our kids and communities *are still* being traumatized by COVID-19, and many were in a state of trauma before it started. We need to learn to recognize and deal with this in schools. Providing support is a matter of equity.

People across social classes, races, and ethnicities can dismiss social-emotional issues as health or educational issues. You're supposed to just "tough it out." How do you handle that?

Navarro: Most people — immigrant, Black, white, people with less education — often don't believe mental health is a thing. So it can be hard even to get a baseline of how students are doing so that we can target support.

I do a mental health survey at school that asks kids about various things, including trauma, which is what's most interesting to me. It allows my school's psychiatric social workers to be proactive about helping students instead of waiting for a crisis. But there are challenges.

If I offer a social worker's support to a more affluent family, they see it as a support. If I offer that support to a more marginalized family, social workers often are associated with foster care, with children being taken from homes. Some parents won't let their kids take the survey because they are scared the government will take their kids away from them.

Institutional racism has led some in the Black community to distrust us as educators. The same can be true for immigrant families.

There can be a tug of war between people who believe in focusing on mental health and others who put that to the side to focus on accelerating academics to make up for learning loss. How do you think about it?

Navarro: You have to do both. These days, I'm emphasizing Maslow's hierarchy of needs. (See p. 49.) While many affluent students have struggles, they are not usually at the lowest tiers of Maslow, so they already have a head start.

That means schools in low-

income areas, which can often have higher numbers of kids of color, are disproportionately burdened. But in any school, we need to help the students move up the levels of Maslow's pyramid so they are able to work their way up Bloom's taxonomy of learning.

The academic piece still matters. During quarantine, we were not virtually learning. We were crisis learning. That is different. Teachers did what they could. But now we need to be more intentional about meeting students' individual academic needs.

For example, having a 12th grader who is reading at a 3rd-grade level read *The Grapes of Wrath* is not offering them rigor. That's just too hard. But having a 12th grader who's reading at a 4th-grade level read *Lord of the Flies*, which is typically a 6th-grade book, that can be rigorous. They can do it if they have a lot of guidance, a lot of love, and a lot of support. But they have got to believe that they matter, you see them, and they are worthy.

In between working at two innovative, urban high schools, you had a stint in Los Angeles Unified School District's central office. What surprised you about that experience?

Navarro: There are some thoughtful, very intelligent problem-solvers in central office who did not necessarily know how to help school-level leaders, but wanted to. I noticed there were many allies-in-waiting.

So, I would just say, "Here's something I've tried, and here's the data to back it up." And I'd connect school leaders who were using great practices with other school leaders and with

central office staff. This made it possible to get a lot done.

Central office had a lot of data. I could advise on identifying the most important information educators in schools need and how to organize it. For example, the district was working on developing usable, digital student data profiles. Using my principal's perspective, I was able to influence the IT engineers to make the platform something school leaders would use easily.

The challenge, to be very *Hamilton*-like, is getting "in the room where it happens." I had to earn that spot. The position was customized for me, as an administrator assigned to supporting the lowest-performing schools.

I was able to be nimble going back and forth to schools and central office, pointing out things people were doing right, and then sharing those practices among schools. It was so successful after one year that they asked me to share effective secondary school practices with 14 elementary schools.

Since the videotaping of George Floyd's murder, and the racial equity protests and organizing that followed, there's been a new impetus to talk more directly about race in many schools. What's your experience?

Navarro: Los Angeles Unified School District is really shifting to looking at things through a racial lens, even if some persons are holdouts. At Birmingham Charter, we brought in consultants to guide the 35 people on the instructional leadership team in a book club conversation on *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo.

When we were planning the session, I thought I was walking on eggshells. Some white colleagues were really upset. They asked, “Why talk about race? It’s not about race. I never think about my race.” Some Black people, who never spoke up at meetings before, said things like, “That’s the privilege talking. You never have to think about the color of your skin. I always have to.” People were really uncomfortable talking about privilege at first. But I think we’re coming around to it.

I think district leaders need to continue to force the conversation around privilege. Acknowledge it. Don’t hide from it.

In a systems-change frame, you can attend to racial equity by working on systems, practices, and beliefs. How do you go about it?

Navarro: As an administrator, I work on actions first. You won’t necessarily be able to change colleagues’ feelings, but you can affect how they act toward students. If a teacher speaks sharply with some kids, you can help the teacher change his or her tone, even if you can’t immediately make the teacher respect the kids.

At our school, we help teachers and students take positive actions together. For example, if a student is struggling in one area, we bring together all their teachers and hold a meeting with them and the student to provide support. They are called very important person (VIP) or student support and progress team sessions.

We ask each person, including the student, to respond to these questions: What is one positive attribute you see in the VIP? What is one positive change you want to see — not in the student, but in *their actions*? Everyone leaves really excited and hopeful.

As part of schoolwide change, we also use data. We want to know what students and staff are thinking. So, when someone charges into the office upset about something, saying that “everyone is upset,” we can say, “Well, we surveyed the staff, and 84% are OK with this.”

Then we can start to build critical mass around some issues. Or, we find out from the data that we as leaders are totally wrong. We have to listen and admit that we are wrong. That’s taking action, too.

What about beliefs? Changing them is core to systems change in the long run.

Navarro: This is slow and difficult, especially changing racist beliefs. There are very few times when you’ll hear a white person directly say: “You Black people are lazy.” It’s much more nefarious and subtle.

At the same time, when you know someone personally, when teachers and students are more human to one another, we can break down racist attitudes and build empathy. One way is we’re trying to develop *interest convergence*. I want the adults to see where their interests converge with student interests, where mainstream society’s interests and the interests of the those on the margins converge.

Right now, many see the two groups as parallel, with teachers thinking of their jobs as imposing power upon the students. I think there can be a lot of *power with* students. If we work *with* the students, rather than *over* the students, we can get a lot more done.

And while we tell people they should have empathy, we often don’t help people build it. Convening circles is one way we’re trying: You sit in a circle of staff and students together. You pass around a talking piece. And with some ground rules and a commitment to building trust in place, you take up a topic where everyone has something to say.

The students see that the adults are human. The adults see that the students have the same needs that they do. And it brings you back to what psychologist Dr. Shefali Tsabary says, that kids only want to know three things: “Do you see me? Do I matter? Am I worthy?”

How else do you try to build community across racial and other differences?

Navarro: We’re working on creating safe spaces where people can ask dumb questions and be safe. The topics we take on can be about race, or picking a new school leader, or vaccines, or something else. But they have to be issues that address differing values, and the questions have to be very clear. I think of them as laboratories of democracy.

These conversations encourage people to be brave and vulnerable. For example, one veteran teacher kept referring to African Americans as “Negros” during his class. A student approached the teacher saying, “That really offends me when you say that. Why are you using that?” The teacher tried to explain and then got defensive, but later leaned into the question. I’m really proud of him.

He reached out to an African American teacher and said, “I use this word but thought it was OK. Martin Luther King used it.” The colleague responded: “If a person of color is offended, then it is offensive.”

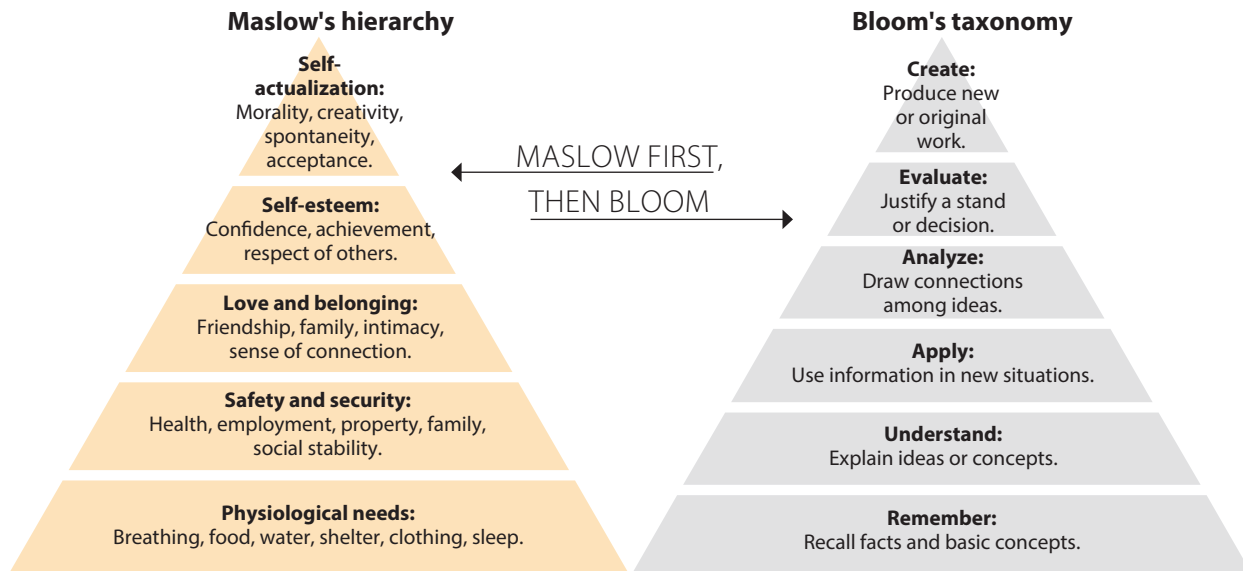
The colleague continued by explaining that it is OK if you’re reading it in a document because there is historical context. But in the class where the teacher was showing a clip from the movie *Amistad* [about the slave trade from Africa to North America], using the term “Negros” was not appropriate. The people on those ships were Africans. He should have used that word.

It became an interesting conversation because there was this learning. That happened because the teacher was willing to ask the “dumb” question. But we often don’t ask. Our school is doing a good job of creating spaces where people can ask questions.

What advice do you have for white educators about supporting their colleagues of color?

Navarro: First, just acknowledge that being white comes with privilege. Then use your privilege to support colleagues and students.

Bring kindness and curiosity. You don’t know what your Latino colleagues are going through, or Black, or Filipino,



Adapted from Maslow, 1943, & Armstrong, 2010.

or Armenian. So be curious. Ask. Be a learner. You can ask people of color, “What do you need from us?” Don’t tell them what you think they need.

On the other side, we POC need to give our colleagues in the majority some grace. It is hard to ask someone on the margins to give people in the majority anything. But it is not about those in the majority, it is about our own worth. I do what I do not for them, but so that I am the man I want to be. I should respond with grace so that I’m the man worthy of my wife’s love.

That said, I draw the line with people who say, “Racism is not real. Sexism is not real.” It’s real. Can we move on to trying to solve it now?

If we don’t get to the truths of an issue, it’s impossible to fully heal and move on. Are there truths that you think are still undiscussable?

Navarro: They all have to be fair game. We need to talk about it. We need to own it. As Brené Brown says, we have to be willing to be vulnerable in our conversations, even though thinking about vulnerability really freaks people out. We have to learn to talk about all of it in professional development.

For example, we have to be able to ask white teachers, “Why is it that if you see an African American kid, you become apprehensive?” We have to

question it when some educators say, “I’m not going to tell that Black boy to take off his hat because he’ll come after me.” He probably won’t go after you any more than a white kid would. But fear of BIPOC students is definitely there, and we need to address it.

We have to challenge all teachers when they say they care for their students and they are anti-racist. What does care look like? How does anti-racism get enacted? Let’s get concrete.

What’s your advice on finding the right professional learning?

Navarro: If you have a problem that is a technical problem, a problem whose solution is known, get an expert to tell you what to do and how. But if you need to solve a problem that has many moving parts and many ways to approach it — one that is complex and complicated — find someone who will help you be a learner and who will help bring together the different people who can work on the problem.

And if we’re the ones who can offer the answers, we can look to do it with a lot of grace. It’s our job as leaders to listen to the people around us and make sure everyone’s views are heard. As leaders, we’re servants. We serve these students and help teachers serve our students.

Many educators are willing and

awesome, but some may be misguided on certain issues, and they just need information and support. We leaders need to bring out the best in our staff. And we need to help our teachers tend to Maslow’s pyramid before we get to Bloom’s *for their own growth*, not just their students. Before we talk about teachers teaching the Common Core, we need to ask them “Do you believe *you* matter?”

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