



Don't ignore emotions in equity work — embrace them

BY JACOBÈ BELL

Imagine you're an instructional coach reviewing student perspective data with teachers. As part of a schoolwide survey, students have answered questions about their experiences with their teachers, such as: How respectful is your teacher toward you? How much do you matter to others in this class? How often does this teacher take time to make sure you understand the material?

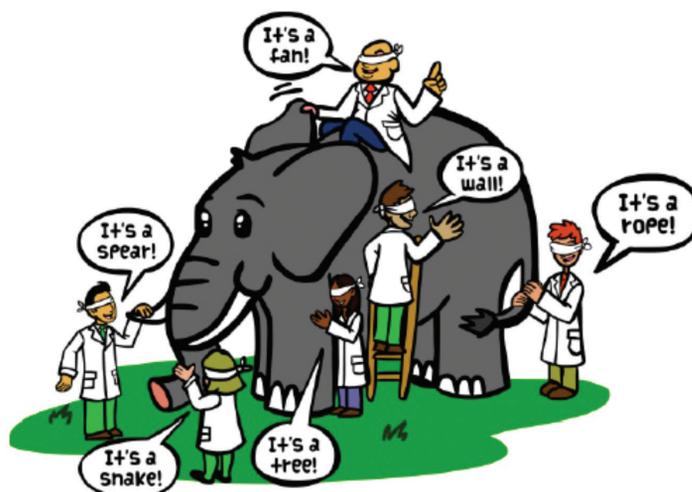
This data affects students and teachers on a personal level — and the results for many of the teachers are upsetting. One teacher is in tears because, despite her hard work, only 38% of her students responded favorably to this question: Overall, how interested are you in this class?

Seeing the teacher's distress — and feeling some of his own — a school administrator soothes the teacher and her colleagues by saying, "We have a

good school. We're doing right by the kids." As teachers begin to nod, he goes on: "This data isn't accurate. It doesn't reflect what students really think."

As the facilitator of the meeting, you're troubled by his comments and concerned that they undermine the goals of the discussion. What do you do?

As a coach, I've been in this situation multiple times, and it's never easy to navigate. Sometimes my inner



voice tells me to be quiet to keep the peace and not alienate the staff. Other times I feel like screaming. Of course, neither of those options is constructive.

Instead, I take inspiration from the late Congressman John Lewis, who said, “Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.” Challenging the administrator’s denial and helping the teacher face her distress constitute necessary trouble. Our students are worth that trouble.

Cultivating inclusive classrooms, where all students are heard, affirmed, and validated, is an equity issue. As an instructional coach and a supervisor of coaches, I have a moral obligation to work against the system that was designed to and continues to oppress some students and benefit others.

This work often brings up difficult emotions, for me and for the educators I work with. Those emotions are an important part of the work, so I have found and developed strategies to help teacher teams and my team of coaches metabolize, or work in and through, the emotions, rather than ignoring them. I find them useful in conversations like the one described above and in many other situations.

ACKNOWLEDGE DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS

First, I acknowledge that we are all in different stages of our equity journey

and different emotional places, and that’s OK. To reinforce the point that we all have different perceptions, I like to use the analogy of approaching an elephant while blindfolded and trying to determine what it is by feeling only one part of the animal. (For more information on this strategy, see www.theblindelephant.com.)

Using the image above, I explain that each person has access to information based on their lived experiences and, as a result, their perception of the situation is different. Based on where they’re standing, one person assumes the thing in front of him is a wall, while others think it is a spear or a rope.

When we walk into new situations in the real world, we enter them from a specific angle and based on our lived experiences. Our past experiences and beliefs shape our perceptions of what we’re seeing and hearing. Like the blindfolds in the elephant story, they can keep us from seeing and understanding the whole picture.

I find that this analogy helps educators feel more comfortable with the fact that they all come to the conversation from different places. This creates a foundation of psychological safety and helps educators take risks a little more easily.

PRACTICE OOPS AND OUCH

To cultivate psychological safety,

I find that clear norms or protocols help participants productively engage in difficult conversations. I learned the Oops and Ouch protocol (James Madison University Tutor Resources, n.d.) from one of the schools I previously supported. This protocol helps participants address and acknowledge offenses that occur. It also asks people to apologize for the impact of their words, whether or not the harm was intentional. The beauty of this technique is that it provides a tool to acknowledge, reflect, and shift.

For example, when someone says, “I don’t believe this student perception data is accurate. The students were just trying to make us look bad,” I can use the protocol and say, “Ouch, can you expand on that some? It seems like you might be saying student opinions aren’t valuable or that students are lying about how they feel.”

They then have the opportunity to clarify and say, “Oops. What I meant to say was ...” or to reflect and say, “Oops. Maybe I should rethink that assumption.” The protocol provides language to help people acknowledge their missteps and try a different approach. When this becomes a norm, it becomes easier for people to engage in difficult conversations.

DEMONSTRATE EMPATHY

Demonstrating empathy is an important part of coaching.

STUDENT FEEDBACK TOOL

<p>What are your students telling you?</p> <p>Answer in student's voice.</p>	<p>What does that mean they are asking you to do?</p> <p>Answer in student's voice.</p>	<p>How might you address their ask?</p>

Demonstrating empathy builds trust and helps people feel safe or vulnerable enough to push beyond their emotions and dig into the work of creating more inclusive classrooms.

The place I generally start to demonstrate empathy is to share a story of challenge and growth from my own career. For example, when looking at the student perspective data, I might tell the story from my time as a teacher when my students told me I treated the boys in the class differently than the girls. I felt annoyed and insulted and was in denial. But I chose to listen with my heart rather than leaning into my desire to dismiss my students' thoughts. I had a conversation with my students to learn more and tried to be open to their feedback. I heard that the boys believed I was giving the girls more chances for self-correction. I apologized and actively worked to change my ways. Working through this with them was difficult, but it made me a much better teacher.

A second way I demonstrate empathy is by making space for everyone to share their emotions. Sometimes, I find myself wanting to shut down conversations about emotions to keep the discussion

moving and drive toward action, but I've found it leads to more productive outcomes when I stop and make time to facilitate an open conversation about what people are feeling. I might ask, "Let's do a whip around to share what's bubbling up for you right now. In one sentence, what is top of mind for you?" By having open conversations about emotions, I give people the chance to feel heard and to hear each other.

HUMANIZE THE DATA

After I establish the foundations and norms, I focus on humanizing the work we are doing together — that is, helping everyone remember the people behind the data and the discussions. In the example of the student perception data, I like to engage teacher teams in examining the data through the lens of students. Our partner, Panorama Education, which developed the student feedback surveys we use, suggested that we have teachers summarize the data findings in the voices of their students. I use the tool above to help with the exercise.

In the first two columns, the teacher writes out what the students are trying to tell her with their feedback and what they are asking her to do as a result.

They write these summaries using the words and sentiments that students might use. In the third column, they reflect and write (in their own voice) ways they might address the students' feedback. After teachers fill out the chart, I ask them to share, with a partner or the whole group, the story of their classroom as seen through the eyes of their students.

I've found that this strategy can work wonders. It puts teachers in students' shoes, so to speak, and gets them out of their own perspectives. It also provides a much-needed opportunity for some lightheartedness. For example, when a teacher sums up her student feedback with a sentence like, "Hey, miss, you boring!" it makes teachers chuckle and helps them work through the difficult knowledge that kids find their class uninteresting.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFLECTION

Critical reflection increases critical consciousness and provides a pathway to personal and professional growth and, ultimately, more culturally responsive practices. Bravely focusing on the system and our own contributions to inequity helps us

REFLECTION

Based on what we've learned from our students, how has it changed how you think about benchmark or state test data results? Teaching? Students?

Name	I used to think ...	Now I think ...
DK	Students who did not work/slept in class had no motivations.	Students feel motivated by the teachers in the room even if they are not being interactive. Motivations are not clear but should be used to help improve.
RW	Reading longer text would create stamina and the students would be more ready for future text.	Now I realize smaller text and cultural connection is just as important for students to relate to and respond to.
HN	I used to think more so the "what" of teaching.	Now I am more alert to the "how" — mindful of the marriage between what and how — how do I make learning accessible while fulfilling the standards.
WJ	I used to think that students would enjoy reading the material presented.	Now I am more aware that the content needs to be more geared toward them and their interests.

identify what is in our locus of control and how we can target improvement efforts to make a difference for students.

Equity pauses are a great way to encourage educators to stop and reflect. In an equity pause, a facilitator asks the group to stop and take a moment to consider these questions:

- How might we be contributing to the problem?
- Where are we making assumptions, engaging in deficit thinking, or blaming others rather than taking a critical eye to our system and our own practices?
- What forces in our system may be contributing to the inequities we see?
- How might our current

processes, practices, or beliefs be contributing to inequity?

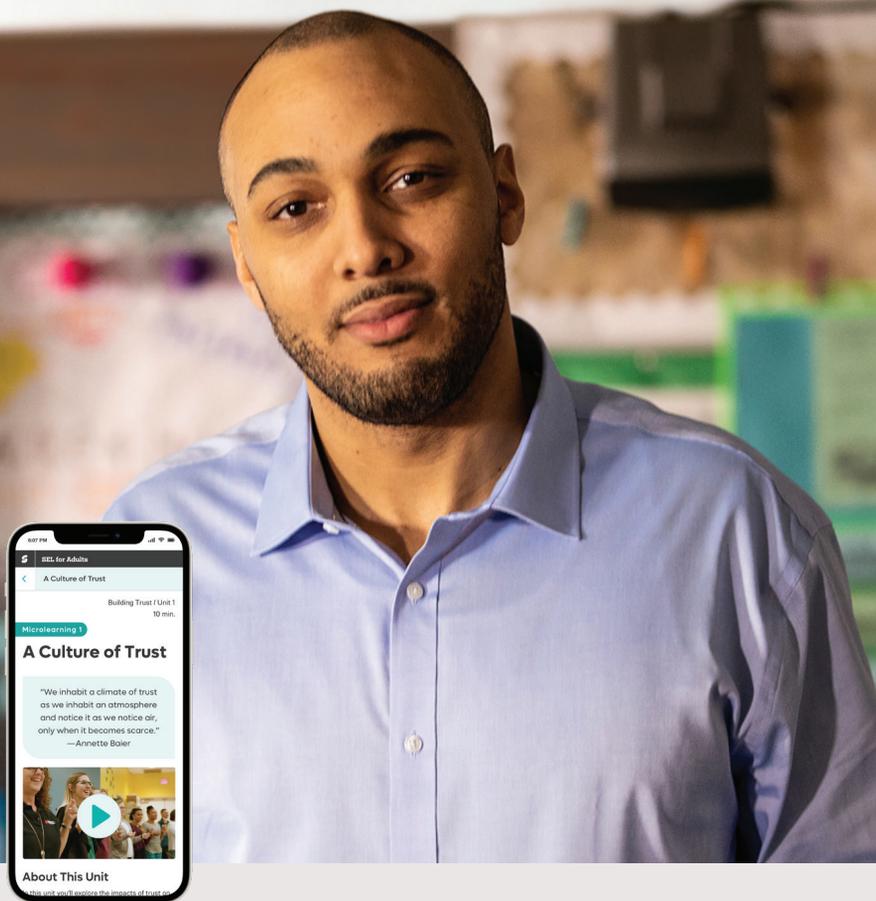
I use the equity pause designed by High Tech High to ask people to stop and consider how they or the system may be contributing to the results (High Tech High Graduate School of Education, n.d.). In the example of the student perception data discussion, I use the equity pause when teams are about 50% through their data analysis. I choose this moment for people to reflect on their analysis so far and set the purpose for the remaining analysis. I find it is a great way to reflect on self and begin to peel back the layers of how the system or institution can contribute to inequity.

Another helpful tool for critical reflection is the "I used to think ...

Now I think ..." protocol. This simple exercise, which asks people to reflect on how their thinking has changed, can be a powerful way for educators reflecting on data to revisit fixed or deficit-focused mindsets about students. You can see an artifact of this protocol from one of my previous school teams above.

EMBRACE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

If we are going to be in service to all our students, we need to release inaction and bravely embrace facilitating difficult, unpopular conversations. As a coach, I find it is important to explain the need for difficult conversations when navigating emotionality. So often, we avoid conflict, which is understandable but



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can lead to inaction. It is important to feel the emotions and metabolize them, so I invite people to sit in the uncomfortableness of difficult conversations.

In his 2017 book, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathways to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, Resmaa Menakem refers to clean and dirty pain. Dirty pain is suppressing or going around something. It hinders healing and progress. Clean pain is acknowledging and working through difficulty. It helps us take action and make positive change. I think of difficult conversations in schools as clean pain. Coaches and other facilitators have an important role to play in helping educators work through it.

The tools I have described here can help us do that. In the schools where I have used them, I've seen progress over time. Schools have become more able to listen to their data and act on it because they acknowledge and work through their emotions rather than getting stuck in them.

We must all acknowledge that there is an emotional labor to doing this work. We must be willing to work through it and help others do the same. We can't be the equity leaders we want to be if we don't engage in these emotional processes. To be rebel leaders, we must be open and vulnerable to grow.

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