# The Power of Voice:
# Equity and School Practice

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**Abstract**

As stewards of democracy, educators—p-12 and university partners—must attend to each student as a learner and as a person; this is a complex charge. Current focus on academic performance in isolation may divert us from our fundamental responsibilities to know our students, to learn from them as well as teach them. This article, derived from work at an NNER-Hawaii setting think tank that addressed issues related to inequities in schools and places that prepare educators, describes a model for engaging with students in authentic conversation as one way to address a fundamental condition for learning: human conversation.

**The Power of Voice: Equity and School Practice**

> *I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate, or public meetings. Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well. What would it feel like to be listening to each other again about what disturbs and troubles us? About what gives us energy and hope? About our yearnings, our fears, our prayers, our children? (Wheatley, 2002, p. 3)*

The National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) shares Wheatley's conviction that thoughtful conversation is a catalyst for powerful personal, institutional, and community change. We also hold this commitment, that schools have the responsibility for change that advances the public good. As proffered by Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad (2004), "It is not possible to create a wise and thoughtful public if, as educators, we fail to grapple with the complicated, difficult, and messy issues that human beings have confronted since the dawn of civilization" (p. 92). They go on to note that "the human conversation must be a guiding force in our daily lives" (p. 154).

In November 2006, a group of international educators gathered in Oahu, Hawaii, for three days of intense work, bringing with them background knowledge, experiences, and commitment to improve equity—one voice at a time—in our schools and universities. Beginning with the principle that we must first learn about ourselves to learn from and about others, the group began an ambitious journey to develop materials to put this principle into action. A vision for improved equity in schools and universities—both public institutions responsible for advancing the public good—guided the conversations, information and material sharing, and task completion.

The gathering, ***"I"deas in Paradise: Issues, Implications, Impact, & Implementation***, was envisioned long before the actual gathering. The University of Hawaii at Manoa and partner schools, members of the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER), received the 2005 Michelli Award for Advancing Social Justice. The Michelli Award, given to promote the importance of social justice in the NNER work and presented to an exemplary school/university partnership, celebrates commitment to and progress toward providing equitable access to high quality and relevant learning in a nurturing and inclusive environment for all learners. Following the award, conversations between the NNER executive director and the dean of the college of education began the journey toward this session where the Hawaii setting would co-host with the NNER a meeting that focused only on the advancement of this principle.

John Goodlad uses the metaphor of the human conversation to remind the Network members that while wide-ranging differences in circumstance and opportunity exist for groups and individuals, all humans have dreams and aspirations for themselves and their families—dreams and aspirations that include full access to participate in a safe, nurturing educational environment.

While "human conversation" may be a simple concept, it is not an easy undertaking. Barriers both physical and tacit, the range of experiences, and different realities faced by individuals and groups make simple conversation across these differences difficult, and sometimes possible. We tend to live in and navigate the familiar waters of our own social, political, religious, and economic communities engaging only superficially with individuals and groups that differ from our own. Schools, on the other hand, have daily opportunities to bring widely ranging perspectives together, promote collaboration, share learning, and appreciate the variety of skills and strengths that come together under one roof. In short, schools have the context and responsibility to bring about a more just society by promoting equity for all learners and by advancing social democracy in school practices. And universities that prepare the teachers for our schools share in this responsibility.

**Narrative Method of Inquiry for Self and Others: Stories as Learning Tools**

'Storytelling' and 'narrative' are terms commonly used interchangeably.  In its broadest definition the term 'narrative' may refer to any form of written or oral expression that forms a set of ideas into a coherent whole.  Well-known literary theorist Roland Barth's comments on the range of forms in which narrative may be expressed in his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative," where he notes that the stories of the world are without number, are present in all times, all cultures, and all societies. And while the narratives provide general knowledge of group experiences, they encompass the personal experiences and feelings of those who tell the stories (Sontag, 1983).

In March 2005, John Goodlad was unable to present as a Distinguished Lecturer at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Conference in Alexandria, Georgia, due to a treatment he was undergoing for an ongoing illness.  He wrote a brief letter for the conference attendees entitled, *Illness as a learning experience*. We include it as an example of storytelling and what we can gather from it in narrative analysis.  Goodlad tells a brief story reminiscent of the time spent with his son Stephen during this period of absence and how this personal experience furthered his understanding about issues of equity, justice, and diversity in education.  He wrote:

> For the past five months, regaining my health has dominated my daily life. The accompanying hours of contemplation have had a profound impact on my thinking. This has not changed my ecology of belief, but it has made elements of it much clearer: We will not have the nation of our rhetorical expectations— the American Dream—until equity and justice for all are at the heart of school mission, public policy, and our daily behavior. This is the argument of the book written with colleague Corinne Mantle-Bromley and son Stephen John Goodlad, published last year, *Edu-*

*cation for Everyone: Agenda for Education in De-mocracy*. My ill health seems to mirror that of the nation.

On our way to the clinic one day, I railed to Stephen about the dehumanization accompanying serious illness. He took exception, claiming quite the reverse—that I am going through a very humanizing journey of actually experiencing the downside of being human. I was sharply reminded of my own teaching: reading, thinking, and talking about the shortcomings of my social and political democracy fall far short of addressing them.

Reflecting on Stephen's remark brought me into the parallel between the inequities and injustices in our care of the disabled and the education of the young. Because of the education I was fortunate to get from my little-schooled parents and from our schools, I am now getting the best of health care (See my *Romances with Schools: A Life of Education*, published in 2004). But millions of children are deprived of the education that provides a pathway into the resources they need to live productive, satisfying lives and to ensure such for their children.

Day after day during these five months, I have listened to the conversations of people young and old who not only suffer life-threatening illnesses but also contemplate years of accompanying indebtedness that will deprive them of what the more fortunate take for granted, I among them.

As we go about our work each day, how often do we ever think about the relationship between the education we seek to provide and the well-being of both our democracy and the diverse array of human beings in its care? Are those we elect to care for this democracy aware that those test scores they

seek to raise correlate not at all with the dispositions of honesty, integrity, good judgment, dependability, compassion, good workmanship, and the like that we expect of our citizens and that we expect our schools to develop in the young?

We do not need more education summits and commissioned reports to tell us what is wrong and what to do. But we do need lay leaders who sit in the equivalent of those clinic waiting rooms, participating with the advantaged and disadvantaged in conversations of our cultural infrastructure. And we do need educators—positional leaders or not—who hurry home from conferences such as this to work with their colleagues, students, and parents in taking inventory of the inequities and injustices embedded in their schools and pursuing an agenda of renewal. Even with our disabilities, we are fortunate to be doing the work we do with the personal abilities our circumstances have enabled us to develop.

While we can identify several critical narratives in Goodlad's story, we hear his overarching call for a new kind of educator — a lay leader — one who is adept at conversing *and* listening to the stories of the full spectrum of persons encountered in daily living and who has the ability to transfer and share these insights. This is the first step to eliminating the inequities and injustices embedded in culturally transmitted practices of schooling. Goodlad's observation in the context of *I'deas in Paradise* led the authors to seek an example—a model developed to heighten our listening to and learning from and about our students. Most important, we emphasize that this process starts with self. Contributing to a more just context for students begins with self-reflection; openness to understanding ourselves precedes openness to others. Our own experiences form and re-form who we are and confronting our own fears and biases begins with understanding that we have them. The interplay between

authentic self-reflection and authentic listening is clear; once we tell our own stories and learn from them, we can listen to our students' stories and learn from them as well. From both come change and connections. Social distance is decreased by telling our stories.

Public education is about achieving human dignity for all through intentional action.  We learn through our conversations with young and old alike and realize that personally devastating experiences may appear short-term or as isolated incidences; but the repercussions of these experiences are usually  long-term.  And at the same time, positive enriching experiences also have long-term impact. And as stewards of our students and schools, we educators have the responsibility to have long-lasting and positive impact on others. And this begins with knowing who our students are as integrated beings whose experiences in and out of school are relevant to their learning.

## Equity, Equality, Diversity—Learning From and With One Another

As noted above, schools are the vortex for conversation and action related to advancing equity.  We propose that authentic conversation is a prerequisite to the advancement of equity for all students. There are longstanding practices in many schools and universities that promote rather than decrease social distance between teachers and learners. These include large class sizes—at the post secondary level as an example, lecture halls with hundreds of students—short periods for passing between classes that don't allow for post or pre class conversations, and mandated time allotments for specific content instruction that minimizes opportunities for unstructured interaction between students and teachers.

Equity implies that students are known and understood by all the school or university personnel with whom they interact, and does not result from *equal* access to educational opportunity that institutions provide for students, but rather it requires targeted, individualized, and supported access for each student. However, to do this, educators must *know* what support is needed and how to pro-

vide that support. One useful way to think about education's role in advancing equity for all students is to understand that it is a process of ongoing inquiry and action; and this implies that each educator mindfully attends to students' integrated wholeness and melds that knowledge into practice.

Moving the concept of conversation from the individual level to a metaphor of our profession, collective attention to individual and group needs and strengths advances our goal to provide high quality education for all.  Educators understand that as one issue is understood and confronted—for individuals and groups— it gives rise to yet other striking inequities:  issues once confronted also demand attention and action. Therefore, as educators, we each individually and all collectively are in an ongoing cycle of inquiry into and advancement of our own practice and that of the profession.

Au, Bigelow and Karp (2007) recommend several guidelines that can help P-12 and university colleagues  to move beyond rhetoric to active engagement with students. They highlight the following:

1.  Instruction and curriculum should be grounded in the lives of students; should be academically rigorous preparing students for the world in which they live, and include dispositions that address multiple perspectives;
2.  Students should be taught skills they need to be critical thinkers; should be engaged in participatory and experiential activities to learn how to make real decisions and collectively problem-solve;
3.  Classrooms should be designed in ways that teach students to trust, be hopeful, kind and visionary; and
4.  Educators must be culturally sensitive and admit that they don't know everything.

And as Margaret Wheatley noted, these lofty concepts begin with simple, honest conversation.

Diversity, ubiquitous as a concept in our work, must be under-stood and translated in personal ways and experiences as it is inex-tricably bound with the concept of equity and therefore to actions taken to advance equity. Student diversity informs and challenges our understanding of individual needs in the classroom and in edu-cation systems. Equitable and excellent schooling, based on aware-ness of and respect for student diversity, is the vision of the NNER. We strive for this vision in all systems and levels—to see it in our attitudes, instructional practices, curriculum, and school and univer-sity policies.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), 43% of the students in U.S. schools are from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse groups. Our nation's changing demographics coupled with global migration and diversification provide the impetus for increased attention to formal education's role in advancing our sense of publicness—of acknowledging our role in preparing all students for full and productive participation in this democracy. While this attention has led to an increased under-standing of some of the unique psychological strengths and needs of persons in culturally diverse groups, an abundance of empirical research suggests ongoing disparities in the quality, equity, and ef-ficacy of treatment among individuals from these groups in educa-tional settings, including people of color, poor persons, individuals with disabilities, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals—in summary the dis-parity becomes conspicuously apparent in the differences between an educator's worldview and that of the students served. Sue (1992) provides a specific example:

> *Several years ago, I heard an interesting tale from a Nigerian counselor who was attending one of my multicultural counseling workshops. The tale, often told to Nigerian children, goes something like this: A white female elementary school teacher in the Unit-ed States posed a math problem to her class one day, "Suppose there are four blackbirds sitting in a tree.*

*You take a slingshot and shoot one of them. How
many are left?" A white student answered quickly,
"That's easy. One subtracted from four is three." An
African immigrant youth then answered with equal
confidence, "Zero." The teacher chuckled at the lat-
ter response and stated that the first student was right
and that, perhaps, the second student should study
more math. From that day forth, the African student
seemed to withdraw from class activities and seldom
spoke to other students or the teacher.* (p.6)

This example illustrates the dilemma facing teachers today. If
the teacher had understood the African student's reasons for arriving
at the answer zero, she might have heard, "If you shoot one bird, the
others will fly away." For Nigerians, as in many cultures, the group
is more important than the individual; survival of all depends on
interrelationships among the parts.

## The R.E.S.P.E.C.T.F.U.L. Model

Teachers face continual challenges balancing their academic
mission with the prerequisite condition for learning—connecting
with students as individuals with multifaceted lives, experiences,
interests, and perspectives—and therefore to engage in meaning-
ful conversations with students. And, teacher educators struggle
to find useful tools to assist teacher candidates in developing the
knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to authentically en-
gage with their future students. To support the collective work of
those who prepare teachers and those engaged in P-12 education,
the R.E.S.P.E.C.T.F.U.L. model is proffered for conversation and
reflection. It provides only one example to aid in understanding the
many facets of diversity and the complexity, often not apparent in
the school context that shapes students' lives. With the demands on
time and pressure for group assessment performance, schools as a
culture often focus only on the segments of students' lives that di-
rectly intersect with course or classroom performance.

The R.E.S.P.E.C.T.F.U.L. model was originally conceptualized to address diversity issues in counseling (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1997). As we strive to work more effectively, ethically, and respectfully with students from diverse populations, readers are challenged to consider the utility of this model as a comprehensive and holistic approach to understand how students' and our own multidimensionality affect the process and outcomes of learning and to examine its usefulness in working with current P-12 students and in teacher preparation programs.

The R.E.S.P.E.C.T.F.U.L. model addresses the multidimensional nature of human development by directing attention to 10 factors that significantly impact students' and teachers' psychological development. Please note that teacher is not meant to be defined narrowly; rather, the term includes all those in the education profession who interact with students—P-12 and higher education faculty, administrators, and others who have a responsibility to advance students' learning and well-being. This framework is useful in helping to [a] assess our own development; [b] recognize our cultural-contextual bias; [c] assess factors that impact students' development; and [d] understand how to effectively and ethically address the interface of multiple cultural-contextual factors in education. The ten factors that comprise the model include: **R**eligious/spiritual identity; **E**conomic class standing; **S**exual identity; **P**sychological maturity; **E**thnic/racial identity; **C**hronological/developmental challenges; **T**rauma and other threats to one's well-being; **F**amily history and influence; **U**nique physical characteristics, and **L**ocation of residence and language differences. For a detailed a description of each of these factors, readers are encouraged to view the authors' original manuscript at: www.geocities.com/nimc_newsletter/RESPECTFUL_Counseling.pdf

### *The RESPECTFUL Model as a Tool for Conversation*

Following are three scenarios, shared here as examples of countless possibilities of the interplay among the factors for any one of our students. Used as a tool or an example, they are intended for conversation to raise awareness and conscientiously assess the ways

in which the interaction of multiple factors may impact any student's overall well-being in our schools.   However, we stress that it is important and fundamentally critical to our role as educators to use these scenarios to examine how *our own* beliefs and attitudes affect the content and process of teaching and our interactions with our students. Understanding and confronting our own cultural experiences, biases, or preferences renews us and our work and reminds us that ongoing inquiry required for improving conditions for equity in our schools begins with self. The scenarios provide only a glimpse of each student; far too often with busy schedules and multiple competing goals this level of information is all that educators have from which to draw conclusions, make judgments, and support their students.

**Case Scenario #1:**
David is an 18-year old gay male.  For the past two years, he has been involved in a monogamous and satisfying relationship with Abe.  David was raised in San Francisco by both parents who been married for nearly 30 years.  His father is a minister and has wanted David to be a minister since he was very young. This semester, David has been failing most of his classes in his major—theology—but continues to do well in math, and is in jeopardy of being dismissed from the university in which he enrolled at the request of his father because of its theology program.  David voluntarily seeks help from you as one of his teachers based in large part by the insistence of his partner who thinks it would be useful for David to talk to a professional about his feelings which David described as a mix of depression, guilt, anger, and sadness.  It has become clear that David does not want to be a minister but would prefer to change his major to accounting.  David also shares that he has not disclosed his sexual preference with his parents.  Although he wants to talk with his parents about this aspect of his life, he is afraid of their reaction.

Educators may consider how the interplay of at least three factors (religious/spiritual identity, economic class background, and sexual identity) in the RESPECTFUL model may impact on David's development and current daily functioning. A few questions that educators may wish to explore with David include:

- How have David's religious upbringing, spiritual beliefs, and values influenced his life?
- How does the socioeconomic class in which David was raised influence his current way of thinking? What are his aspirations for a career?
- What are the conflicts between David's sexual identity and his family's religious beliefs?

In examining how personal beliefs, experiences, and attitudes affect interaction with David, educators may consider these questions:

- How do your own religious/spiritual beliefs and values influence conversations with David?
- What biases do you bring from your own background?
- What information do you need to more fully understand David's situation?
- Where can you go to get background information that you feel you need?

**Case Scenario #2:**
Mona is an extremely thin 12- year old, African American middle school girl. She was adopted when she was an infant by John and Mandy, both White, ages 44 and 47, respectively. They are an upper middle-class family living in a predominately White neighborhood. Mona's parents admit that they spoil her, catering to her every whim. Although Mona has a history of struggling in school with her reading, lately her grades have dropped considerably; she iso-

lates herself both at home and school, seems depressed all the time, hardly eats.

The second case scenario is presented to highlight the importance of taking into consideration the interplay of multiple contexts of diversity (i.e., psychological maturity, racial/ethnic identity, and chronological challenges) that may impact teaching Mona. A few questions that educators may wish to explore include:

- How should you enter into conversations with Mona to gain her confidence, build rapport, and understand her as an individual?
- What can you learn about Mona's relationship with and feelings about her peers?
- What are some of the challenges that Mona is encountering from a chronological perspective?
- How comfortable are you with working with Mona?
- How might your own cultural biases/preferences influence your work with Mona?

In the last case scenario, educators are encouraged to consider the ways in which the interaction of Manuel's daily stresses, family history, unique physical characteristics, and ecological barriers impact his psychological well-being.

**Case Scenario #3:**
Manuel is a 14 year-old Latino-American male in the ninth grade. Recently his parents divorced after 20 years of marriage. His mother was granted full custody of both him and his younger sister. Since the divorce, the family moved to a smaller, low-income apartment and his mother has taken on a weekend job to supplement the income. Although Manuel has a history of doing well in school, lately his grades have dropped from an A to a C average. His engagement in school has changed including decreased attendance and dropping from the football team. He has changed peer groups, spend-

ing his time with individuals who appear to be associat-
ed with local gang activity, and he has made statements in
school that he has experimented with alcohol. Calls to his
mother have not been returned.

A few questions that educators may wish to explore include:

- How can you get to know Manuel as an individual
  and understand his situation from many perspec-
  tives?
- What can you learn about how Manuel's family dy-
  namics affected his life?
- What different sources of support should be consid-
  ered for Manuel?

As is the case with the other factors of the R.E.S.P.E.C.T.F.U.L.
model, self-reflection is the first step in authentic interaction with
students because possible stereotypes and biases that educators may
have developed about their students might lead to inaccurate as-
sumptions and interpretations within educational settings. Educa-
tors may consider these questions:

- How do the daily stresses you experience impact
  your work with Manuel?
- How have your family experiences influenced your
  comfort level in working with Manuel?
- What are your biases regarding Manuel's stressors
  and how do these biases impact your work with
  him?

## Agenda for Education in a Democracy in Practice and Conver-sation

John Goodlad (2004), noted for his significant research related
to the public purpose of schools, developed what he calls the "Agen-
da for Education in a Democracy" (AED). His agenda challenges
educators to provide all students with access to the highest quality of

knowledge and skills delivered in learning environments character-
ized by nurturing pedagogy where well-prepared and dedicated edu-
cators see themselves as stewards of schools and of students' future
opportunities. The AED is based on the assumption that the strength
and continual renewal of our social and political democracy is de-
pendent on quality public education. Conversation and storytelling
which we have access to daily provides a method of inquiry  about
self and others to actualize this ambitious agenda.  And while the ar-
ticle focused primarily on schools and P-12 students, the NNER rec-
ognizes that schools are inextricably interwoven with universities.
One fundamental, undergirding strategy of the Agenda for Education
in a Democracy is the notion of simultaneous renewal.  That is, the
renewal of both schools and university teacher education programs
must occur interactively.  Said another way: you cannot have good
schools without  well-prepared teachers and you cannot have well-
prepared  teachers without good schools.  Students' experiences in
schools are in large part related to the quality of education prepara-
tion programs. Are future teachers taught to understand and consider
the total narrative of each student?  Is self-reflection and subsequent
action modeled and taught as future teachers are enculturated into
the profession?  Do current and future teachers have sufficient op-
portunities to learn and practice meaningful conversation with their
students?  What roles do democracy and social justice play in the
programs that develop future educational leaders?

## Conclusion: Beginning the Conversation

Benjamin Barber (1997) in *The Public Purpose of Education
and Schooling*, edited by Goodlad, illustrates the critical and bed-
rock importance of equity in our public education institutions.

> Public schools are not merely schools for the public,
> but schools of publicness: institutions where we learn
> what it means to be a public…The "Titanic" mental-
> ity that drives us to compartmentalize our society
> cannot succeed. We stay afloat only if we recognize
> that we are all aboard a single ship.  (p. 22)

Advancing equity in our public education institutions is vital to  improving the health of our democracy.  All students must be able to access the knowledge necessary to be able to live satisfying and productive lives in a  democracy—able to make a good living and to live well advancing one's self and  one's community.  For this to become a reality for our students, human conversation between and among teachers and students is critical.  The R.E.S.P.E.C.T.F.U.L. model illustrates one way to accomplish this.  However  it is developed in our education programs—pre and in-service― meaningful conversation is a cornerstone to helping our students actualize their dreams and contribute to the collective dreams of a democracy nurtured by an engaged and connected public.

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