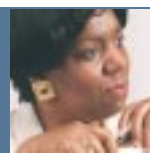


Between You and Me:

Facilitating Cross-Race Dialogue About the Achievement Gap in Schools Between African American and European American Students

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Purpose

This paper describes a dialogue process that took place in Charleston, West Virginia, between and among district and school-level administrators, who are predominantly European American and African American community leaders. AEL, a federally funded regional educational laboratory, and the Kanawha County School District (where Charleston is located) partnered to initiate the process, which played out in monthly sessions over a 16-month period beginning in May 2001. Although the number of participants expanded and contracted from time to time, the original group included 10 district administrators, 12 principals, and 14 community members. In addition to the regular participants, some school board members and state legislators also participated from time to time. The group named itself the MAACK (Maximizing the Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha). The sessions were intended to generate conditions that would make it possible “to improve educational opportunities for African American children”(Kusimo, 2001).

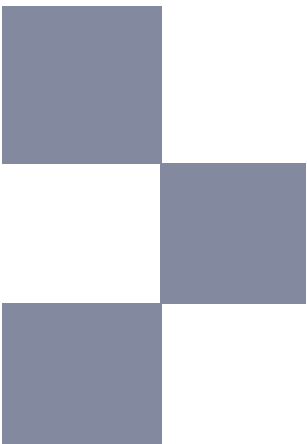
The dialogue sessions were to help each cohort achieve a better understanding of the other’s experience and perspective so that together they could plan collaborative actions. The purpose of this account is to offer a process by which similar dialogues might be initiated in other school districts and communities.

Difficulty and Urgency of Cross-Race Conversations

No claim is made to achieving a consensus about the factors affecting the academic progress of African American students. The dialogue facilitators did not expect that people whose experiences and cultures were very different would necessarily come to see things the same way. Rather, they aspired to achieve a climate in which people could hear one another and acknowledge the validity of one another’s points of view. In particular, they hoped that district and school administrators, who mostly shared membership in the dominant culture, would be able to hear and understand the viewpoints of African Americans.

Since the legislation known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) took effect in January 2002, the topic of school achievement gaps between middle class (primarily European American students) and students of different ethnicities (primarily Latino and African American) has been widely addressed in education literature. Schools and school districts are now charged with assuring that all students make satisfactory academic progress as measured by standardized state tests, with both extra help and penalties for schools whose minority students fail to meet adequate yearly progress. Yet, while the achievement gap is easily documented in state test scores, graduation rates, and percentages of minority students present in special education classes and absent from gifted and talented classes, consideration of remedies can be seriously handicapped when predominantly European American educators talk among themselves. It’s not unlike people talking about the best use of space in a room while overlooking the elephant in its center. For, typically, the subject of race as it influences what happens in schools is not openly discussed, nor is the possibility that there may be multiple perspectives about its effect.

Mica Pollock (2001), on conducting an ethnographic study of diversity in a district in California, writes that “the question Americans ask most about race in education—*how and why do different “race groups” achieve differently?*—is the very question we (educators) most suppress” (p. 2). Educators in the California district could discuss the subject in a general way, but it was never raised when the topic at hand was how to improve education in *this* district or *this* school.



Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) observes that many White teachers, both preservice and veteran, are reluctant to acknowledge student differences, particularly racial differences. They explain this claim to color blindness as treating all children equally. Ladson-Billings points out that not to acknowledge differences is to act as if all children are, in fact, the same; this inevitably produces inequitable treatment. To expose the fallacy of this stance, she uses the example of a teacher who would insist that a wheelchair-bound child complete the same number of sit-ups as other students in the name of equal treatment. Geneva Gay (2000) notes that most teachers “expect all students to behave according to the school’s cultural standards of normality,” which, she says, are commonly Eurocentric and middle class. She asserts that rather than recognize and “build on what the students have in order to make their learning easier and better, the teachers want to correct and compensate for their ‘cultural deprivation’” (p. 46).

This discomfort with the topic of racial and cultural differences is not limited to educators. In the fall of 2000, the Public Education Network (PEN) and Public Agenda published a report of a series of community conversations about education and race held in eight cities and states across the nation. Discussion organizers in a majority of the sites reported that discussants found it difficult to talk openly about race, preferring code words like “inner city” or “disadvantaged.” Clearly, discomfort with the topic in schools mirrors societal discomfort.

Frequently, when educators discuss poor academic performance among minority students, they focus on remedies such as remediation, extended time for learning, new programs, and practice with test questions, without spending time first considering the causes. When causes are discussed, it has been common to hear educators express concern about societal and familial problems that reduce students’ readiness to learn, but less common to hear them question the impact of school practices. The dialogue sessions made it possible to openly discuss the causes of the achievement gap from a variety of perspectives before considering remedies.

Background and Context

The seeds for the effort to explore how schools could better serve African American children were sown when district officials asked an AEL staff member with many connections in the local African American community for help. The need to identify ways to improve learning for African American children was evidenced by negative media reports about African American students being socially promoted from middle to high school, the poor performance on state assessments in schools with high percentages of African American students, and an Office of Civil Rights citation for disproportional numbers of African American students in certain special education categories.

When planning that would result in the dialogue sessions began, the NCLB legislation was still in Congress. Data that showed a significant achievement gap between African American and European American students in Kanawha County were similar to that in many districts across the nation, and there was not yet a federal mandate to share such data with the public. In Kanawha, as in the California district studied by Mica Pollock, disaggregated data on student performance, while shared annually in principals’ meetings, had not been made public; nor had it been shared with teachers as part of an effort to address disparities. Given the difficulty that many people have in talking about race, generally, and race as it affects student achievement specifically, the superintendent was courageous in agreeing to share data with the African American community.

Standardized test data for the 2000-2001 school year would be available in the fall. However, AEL and the Kanawha County Schools superintendent felt, given the sensitivity of the subject, that it would be helpful to come together in the spring to establish working relationships among district and community participants before considering the data.

Recruiting Participants

The superintendent chose district participants. They were key central office administrators, such as the assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction and for counseling and testing; the personnel director; and directors of elementary, middle, and high school programs. He also invited principals from schools that had significant populations of African American students. District participation remained high throughout the dialogues, evidencing the district's commitment to the process. The community group was composed of people with influence in the African American community who were concerned about education, such as pastors, youth program leaders, retired teachers, university professors, and business leaders.

Two AEL staff members led the sessions, one of whom was an African American woman with many contacts in the community. It was invaluable, if not critical to the success of the dialogue process, to have someone from the African American community who could recruit community participants as well as collaborate in planning and leading the meetings. Often, people from the dominant culture have limited contacts in the African American community. They are unlikely to be able to recruit from a wide range of community leaders. They are also likely to have difficulty planning meeting processes that respond to the needs of people with viewpoints and styles different from their own. Joint leadership of the meetings also communicates that both ethnic groups are on equal footing.

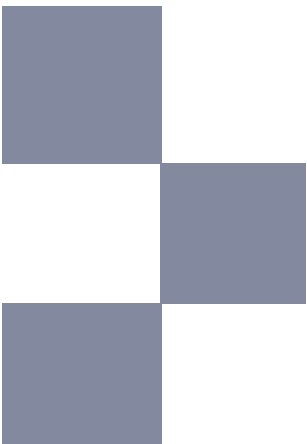
Meeting Design and Processes

During the first half of the year, the group met either at a nearby historically Black university or in Black churches. During the second half, they also met occasionally in schools. When the meeting site was a school, time was allotted for school leaders to showcase programs and actions they considered to be responsive to the needs of African American students.

In addition to convenience for participants, meeting sites were selected to expose district participants to places of significance in the African American community. The group met for the first several sessions at the college, relatively familiar ground to both district and community participants. They then moved to churches, which were less familiar to district and more familiar to community participants. Meeting on the home ground of community members also shifted the balance of power, which automatically tended to be weighted toward district participants by virtue of their authority over schools, and resulted in a more equitable distribution. In churches, community members had authority.

Meetings began at 8 a.m. with breakfast and, after the inaugural meeting, generally lasted until 11:30 a.m. Beginning each meeting with breakfast, which, when the group met in churches, was often a down-home meal, proved to be more than a convenience. Breaking bread together allowed time for people to become better acquainted with one another. Over time, people who had met and interacted in previous sessions chatted over eggs and biscuits. The half hour provided for breakfast also allowed most stragglers to arrive in time for the meeting. However, since group members—both community and district—occasionally had to fit meetings around other commitments or emergencies, meeting planners/facilitators had to be prepared to adjust if someone came late, left early, or was absent for a time during the meeting.

Meeting notices were sent to arrive a week before the meeting date and included a brief agenda. A somewhat more detailed agenda was provided on the meeting day. Name tags were available at every meeting. After the initial meeting, permanent name tags were prepared, with additional blank tags provided for surprise visitors. Permanent



tags were made for all who attended a session so that when they returned, the tags gave evidence that they were viewed as group members. Most meetings included opportunities for small-group discussion on topics introduced to the full group. Facilitators took care to assure that the groups included a balanced mix of community and district members. Initially, each group included a facilitator from AEL, but as people grew comfortable with one another over time, group members facilitated discussions, with AEL staff participating. Discussion questions were designed to invite conversation without encouraging confrontation. Each meeting's activities were framed at the beginning by a brief summary of previous work and at the end by announcements of educational events of interest in the district.

Creating Dialogue

The first two meetings were concerned with creating a level of comfort among people who joined the group warily. Few community members were well acquainted with the administrators and vice versa. The initial order of business was to confirm for the community members that their views would be heard and considered by the educators. It was equally important to demonstrate for the educators that this would be a different experience from their accustomed interchanges with the public, during which community members asked questions that they answered. It was also necessary to establish that while dialogue would be an important part of the meetings, the ultimate purpose was to take action to improve educational opportunities and achievement for African American students. Neither district nor community members attended the sessions expecting that the main goal was simply to better understand one another.

Inaugural Meeting

The first meeting began at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 3:00 p.m. Planners catered lunch so that people were together for the full time. This was the only full-day meeting. Since it was to set the tone for remaining sessions, it was longer in order to assure time for everyone to feel heard and affirmed, as well as for people to become acquainted with one another.

The superintendent opened the meeting by acknowledging that the data about the achievement gap, which people would see in the fall, would be disturbing and hurtful, and he committed the district to addressing it. Then a warm-up activity required people to approach one another with questions about personal interests. The first activity was to read and discuss an article by Kati Haycock (2001), director of The Education Trust, entitled "Closing the Achievement Gap."

While anyone wishing to conduct a similar dialogue may prefer to choose a more recent article, it is important to begin with factual information that gives everyone a common fund of knowledge from which to speak, thus equalizing the dialogue. It also reduces the likelihood of conflict that can arise when people express opinions unfounded in fact.

Participants were assigned to groups and each group was given a short section of the article to read and discuss. They then moved to different groups made up of people who had read different portions of the article. In this arrangement each person became an expert on a particular section charged with informing the others of its content, so that together the group gained an understanding of the full article. This process is known as a "jigsaw." (See Appendix A for directions for all group processes described in this account.)

Following the jigsaw, community members were invited to talk about what could be done to better meet the needs of African American students while administrators listened. Community members formed a circle so that they spoke to one another, with

administrators forming an outside circle. The administrators' task was to listen to the discussion without comment. Afterwards, they were to repeat what they had heard, **not** to respond to it. Facilitators took notes during the inside circle discussion, which they used to form questions for the next session's activities.

Facilitators chose this process, known as "the fishbowl," to make clear from the beginning that community views were to be given equal weight in the sessions. Also, because community members were talking among themselves rather than to district administrators, there was less likelihood that when concerns were expressed, listeners would feel accused and respond defensively. Those who wish to use this process should be prepared for the likelihood that administrators charged with listening and repeating what they heard will find it an unfamiliar and difficult task. Those who responded invariably elaborated. While none challenged what was said, most talked about ways schools or the school system was already doing what the discussants wished to see done. Facilitators did not interrupt when this happened, feeling that limiting responders to repeating what they had heard, while affirming to the speakers, could make responders feel chastised when they were already feeling uncomfortable about what they were hearing. Had any responders challenged the truth of what they had heard, the facilitators would have intervened.

Second Session

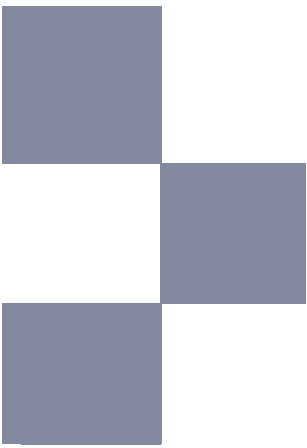
In order to build on the themes that emerged during the fishbowl discussion and to continue building equitable relationships among participants, AEL staff used a process called *interview design*. In this process, participants sit facing one another in rows, each with a question with which to query the person seated opposite. Planners provide the questions and organize the rows so that there is one question per seat. After a couple of minutes, people on one side of the row shift seats until everyone has responded to all of the questions. The questions, which explored themes that emerged from the fishbowl discussion, follow:

1. What suggestions would you give for changing curriculum to include African American experience (culture, history, and literature)?
2. If African American students were truly supported and encouraged to achieve, what would that look like?
3. What do teachers need to understand about African American students in order to be able to guide them in a nurturing manner?
4. What connections would you like to see among community members and school system employees?
5. In the last meeting, someone commented that many African Americans "know they are not wanted" and give up in school. What needs to happen to make these children feel that they are wanted?

At the end of the interviews, those with the same question gathered to compile their responses so that all ideas were captured. Facilitators gave each group strips of paper to record the actions recommended in response to their interview question. The full group then organized the information using a process called "shapes and symbols." They named the resulting categories, which would become the objectives for the MAACK as it moved from dialogue to action. Although meetings continued to include time to read and discuss articles about the instructional needs of African American students, both administrators and community members expected that from this point on, time would be allocated for action planning.

Third Session

Using the information gathered and categorized in the previous meeting, the group formed five task committees, with the following objectives:

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1. Develop a dialogue between school personnel and the broader community about racial issues.
 2. Increase school personnel's understanding of what the experience of schooling is like for African American students and their families.
 3. Help close the academic achievement gap between African American and non-African American children.
 4. Improve collaboration between special educators and African American families, and help decrease the number of African American children classified as behavior disordered, emotionally disturbed, or mentally impaired.
 5. Mobilize the broader African American community around issues of education.

While the objectives were broader than optimal, they were the categories of action developed by the group in the previous meeting and were left for committee members to modify as they chose. The objectives included action items grouped under them as they had been sorted in the previous meeting. Sign-up lists were posted around the room. People circulated and chose which of the five objectives most interested them. Each task committee included a balance of district and community people. Had that not been the case, facilitators were prepared to persuade some to shift membership to achieve a balance. The rest of the meeting consisted of organizing the task committees.

Most of the committees began planning actions that would carry out the intent of the objectives. Task committee 2 decided, in addition, to develop a student survey in order not only to inform administrators about student views but to learn whether the views expressed by community members were echoed by students themselves. Survey questions were designed by AEL staff, in collaboration with school personnel and community members, to cover the topics on which community members had expressed opinions. The school district administered the survey in four schools that served significant numbers of African American students. The results, disaggregated by race and gender, were shared with the group at its last meeting. (See Appendix B for a copy of the survey.)

Fourth Session

In this meeting, participants reviewed data on the achievement gap provided by the school system and planned a process by which the group would release data to the public. Given that the PEN account of community dialogues reported that planners frequently had great difficulty obtaining sufficient data in a useful form, the superintendent and the assistant superintendent for counseling and testing were extraordinarily forthcoming, not only in their willingness to provide data but in developing analyses not normally done, in order to reveal how African American students were fairing in the district.

The assistant superintendent presented the data, disaggregated by ethnicity and gender, to the full group. It included

- average ACT scores
- average number of discipline referrals
- percentage of students, by grade, scoring above the 50th percentile in mathematics and reading on the state assessment
- percentage of students taking honors and advanced placement classes
- percentage of students in core (college track) classes
- percentage of students graduating
- average rate of retention
- percentage of students leaving school before graduation

It was important that the district was proactive in presenting the full picture of student performance. However, most people are unaccustomed to analyzing data. It is difficult to digest a great deal of statistical information in a short amount of time. While all meeting participants received copies of all information provided, discussion centered on test score data. Although, in this case, the data provided were for one year, ideally data over a period of three or more years should be included so that trends are revealed.

Working in small groups, participants discussed the data. Facilitators used test scores for all grades to produce graphs, which helped people to grasp differences quickly. They also developed questions such as the following to guide discussions: Looking across grades, what patterns do you see in the changes in test scores from grade to grade? What do you notice about gender differences within and across ethnic groups?

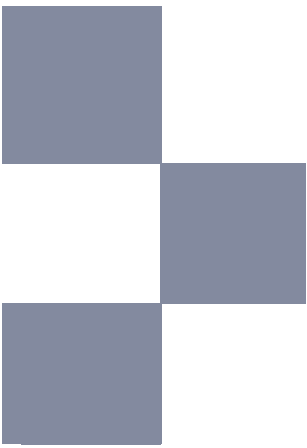
After the small group discussions, the full group made plans to release data to the public. They decided on a press conference that would be led by the superintendent and a community representative. Other group members were encouraged to attend. Following the press conference, the superintendent and community member were interviewed on a radio talk show and local television program. The superintendent also committed to presenting the data during one of the monthly countywide principals' meetings and to making the achievement gap a topic at every principals' meeting.

Remaining Sessions

The MAACK school-community group continued to meet through the 2001-2002 school year. At first, task committees met separately and reported progress during regular meetings. However, scheduling additional meeting times proved too difficult, so a portion of most remaining meetings was given to task committee meetings. The group also continued to engage in dialogue around issues affecting African American students.

One discussion developed from reading chapter 3 of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) *The Dreamkeepers*, "Seeing Color, Seeing Culture." This chapter raises the question of whether those who say they don't notice their students' color are more or less able to teach them effectively. The facilitators had heard many teachers assert with pride that they did not notice whether a student was Black or White, believing that such "color blindness" was evidence of their lack of prejudice. In this case, rather than use the jigsaw process, facilitators excerpted key ideas from the chapter so that everyone read the same selections. Participants also received copies of the full article for later perusal. The reading led to a discussion of race, culture, and identity whereby people began to understand that not to see color reduces the ability to recognize and build on the strengths that ethnicity and culture offer.

Further discussion of the issues ensured when participants read a chapter by noted education researcher and theorist Lisa Delpit (1998) entitled "What Should Teachers Do? Ebonics and Culturally Responsive Instruction." This marked a turning point in the dialogues. While people had grown comfortable with one another and spoke freely, previous dialogues had generally been driven by community members speaking as African Americans seeking to have their viewpoints understood by mostly European American administrators. This discussion gave evidence that views were not uniform within groups and produced cross-race alliances among people with similar views. Because of the complexity of the topic and the intensity of the discussion, it was continued in the next meeting with an article by Barbara Miner (1998) entitled "Embracing Ebonics and Teaching Standard English: An Interview with Carrie Secret." The teacher in this article not only addresses ways to recognize the richness of Ebonics in the classroom without diminishing the importance of mastering standard English but also describes ways she incorporated culture into her instruction. During this meeting, a Charleston native and well-known singer performed, demonstrating and talking about



the power of Ebonics in gospel music. Facilitators also distributed copies of two poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar: “The Seedling” is written in standard English; “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” is written in Ebonics. This was the last session to include dialogue centered around readings.

Two other strategies engaged the group in dialogue. After the group had been meeting for nearly a year, facilitators moved from activities that would deepen understanding of the education needs of African American students to activities to build connections and collaboration between schools and the broader community. For one activity, facilitators organized community members and administrators separately into small groups. Facilitators asked each cohort to discuss and record on chart paper their responses to two questions.

Both the group of administrators and the group of community members responded to the questions, If community support for schools was all that I would like it to be, what would it look like? What would be different for students? For teachers? What would community members be doing? Community members responded to the question, What needs to change in the community for the type of support described to be possible? Administrators responded to the question, What needs to change in the school for the type of support described to be possible? Each cohort then reported its responses to the other.

After compiling the results, at the next meeting, facilitators formed mixed small groups to recommend actions around three areas both groups had identified as most important: (1) improved attitudes, (2) greater community presence in the schools, and (3) more effective communication. In developing each recommendation, they were asked to consider the resources needed, possible obstacles, and the difference it would make for students.

Next, facilitators invited everyone involved with an education-related organization to record on chart paper one thing the organization needed that others in the group might be able to provide. The chart papers were then taped on the walls and everyone was asked to circulate, read the needs, and write their names and contact information under at least one need with which they could help. Both district and community participants posted papers. Every paper had at least one name under it and most had more than one.

One paper requested that district administrators meet with parents associated with a church in a low-income neighborhood. That meeting took place in the church meeting hall. Thirty-seven parents brought problems and concerns to the meeting. Afterwards administrators who attended spoke positively of the experience and the value of going to parents instead of parents always coming to them.

Outcomes of the Dialogue Sessions

At the end of a year of dialogue sessions, AEL evaluators conducted interviews with a sample of participants. District participants spoke of the dialogues as learning experiences that brought them into contact with people they had not known were there. A district administrator said that he was “far more sensitive to information (about teaching African American students) that comes across my desk.” He added that “many of us became more comfortable dealing with racial issues . . . we are in a better position to address them.” A principal commented that before the sessions, “it was felt that there was a disregard, a disinterest, a downright negligence” in the community. He felt that the open dialogue that continues and the commitment of the superintendent to working toward eliminating the achievement gap were primary benefits. Both the district and community people interviewed spoke of valuing the dialogues as new experiences. A community member observed that “we have begun a very critical dialogue between the community and schools. I feel more comfortable approaching (the superintendent) and his key staff about issues that are affecting our community.”

Some of the actions that occurred as a direct result of the MAACK sessions include the following:

- The superintendent regularly addressed equity issues in monthly meetings with principals.
- The district became proactive in identifying African American students who might qualify for gifted and talented classes, rather than waiting for teacher referrals for testing.
- The community organized a well-attended meet-the-candidates night during a school board election.
- The task committee concerned with special education developed a grant proposal to train African Americans to become paraprofessionals in special education classes. While this grant was turned down initially, it was revised and resubmitted to the U.S. Department of Education, which funded it in 2004. The program will begin at West Virginia State University in the fall 2004 semester.
- The district collaborated with AEL in a three-year professional development process to increase participating teachers' ability to deliver culturally responsive instruction. The process took place in two elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. These schools lie in one feeder pattern that draws from African American neighborhoods.

As the dialogue sessions between district administrators and community leaders drew to a close, the community leaders decided to continue to meet, changing meeting times to evening to draw in a broader range of participants. After three years, that group is still active. Its participants have recruited parents to attend school open houses and parent-teacher conferences. Representatives regularly attend school board meetings and some local school improvement councils. They successfully lobbied state legislators for the passage of West Virginia H. B. 4669, a bill to establish professional development schools where teachers will learn strategies that are affective in meeting the needs of African American students. Participants of the community initiative are also tutoring students in math and science. Their most recent effort is to recruit people from churches and after-school programs to be trained as community academic advisors so that they will be prepared to help parents and students select courses and otherwise take the steps necessary to prepare for and apply to college. The group's steering committee also continues to meet monthly with the superintendent to assure that district action continues toward improving the achievement of African American students.

Considerations When Planning Dialogue Sessions

Process Length

One or two sessions are not enough to establish the level of comfort among participants necessary for genuine dialogue. The sessions described here extended over 16 months, with a few months skipped to accommodate holidays and summer vacation. Attendance was not steady for all participants, but a core group was faithful. Once a comfort level was achieved, around the fourth or fifth session, newcomers and occasional participants did not need special attention from the facilitators. They adjusted to the climate of ease that had been established.



Meeting Length and Scheduled Time

The meetings required participants to commit a significant amount of time. The first meeting was seven hours and included lunch. Subsequently, meetings began at 8:00 on a weekday morning with breakfast and continued until 11:00, or even 11:30 when discussions warranted. Postmeeting conversations sometimes extended an additional 30 minutes. Most people are accustomed to meetings lasting no longer than 90 minutes. However, if people are to get beyond surface politeness to establish relationships that allow them to wrestle together with complex issues, they need more time than conventional meeting lengths allow. After the first several meetings, once relationships have formed and the group has successfully dealt with difficult topics, meetings can be shortened.

Morning meetings limited community participation either to people who were not working or who had job flexibility. While evening or Saturday meetings might have been a better choice for community, they would have limited district participation. The superintendent was able either to require or strongly encourage his employees to participate in meetings held during the work day. But he would have found it difficult to insist on their participation, had the meetings been scheduled after official work hours, since the job responsibilities of most administrators already include many evening and weekend obligations.

Recruiting Participants

In this case, one of the AEL planners was an African American community member who was able to recruit participants from among her acquaintances. If planners do not themselves have such contacts, it is essential to work with someone who does. Recruiting is not a matter of simply developing a list of participants and mailing invitations. It requires personal contact by someone known to the invitees who understands and can communicate the purpose of the sessions and the importance of participating. Such a person can extend the invitation so that it includes both a request for commitment to the process, and to the person extending the invitation.

Careful attention should also be given to including *all* central office staff members who work with schools. In the process described here, although district participation was substantial, in the central office, it did not extend beyond top-level administrators. In subsequent work with the district around the issue of the achievement gap, AEL staff found that those who had not participated in the dialogue sessions were less proactive in addressing race-based issues than those who had participated.

Meeting Locations

Sites for meetings should be carefully chosen, taking turf issues into consideration. District personnel are accustomed to meetings held in education settings such as schools, colleges, or administrative offices. While most community members have certainly attended meetings at these locations, they are home ground for educators, not for community members. The first several meetings were held at a historically Black university. As an educational setting, it was familiar to district participants. As a local African American cultural center, it was familiar to community participants. Once cross-race relationships had developed among participants, meetings moved to African American churches. When meetings were held in churches, their pastors welcomed participants and opened the meetings. Finally, schools were added as occasional meeting sites.

When the choice is between home ground for community members and home ground for district staff, it is preferable to choose community home ground. Not only does it allow educators to become familiar with community sites with which they may have previously been unfamiliar, it puts community members in the role of hosts, and educators in the role of guests.

Dialogue planning

The process began as a collaboration between the school district and AEL, with the expectation that staff from the district and AEL would plan meetings jointly. However, the district quickly moved into a position of support, with AEL staff taking the lead in planning. It proved to be an advantage that planners were part of an organization recognized as neutral. AEL took no official position on the issues discussed. It was also recognized as an organization that had expertise in working with educators and facilitating meetings. Districts wishing to open a dialogue with minority community leaders should work with a similar organization or individuals, known to be both neutral and skilled, who can take the lead in planning.

Dialogue facilitation

Two AEL staff people, one African American and the other European American, facilitated meetings. Joint facilitation of such dialogues communicates that both groups are heard and that views will be given equal weight. It also models an open interracial working relationship. In fact, it would be unwise to undertake such dialogues without including facilitators from the ethnic groups represented among participants.

In their preparations, facilitators need to take into consideration differing communication styles and levels of intensity. District participants are typically dispassionate. Their participation is, in most cases, a professional obligation. When they speak, they are likely to use the educational jargon that is so much a part of their profession. Community participants attend voluntarily because of their concern about factors they believe are limiting their children's achievement. They are likely to be more passionate and direct. At first, some European American district participants seemed to misinterpret passion as hostility. But continued dialogue gave them the opportunity to distinguish between passion and confrontation.

When participants begin exchanging stories of their own school experience, facilitators will know that they have moved beyond the surface in communicating. Instead of limiting themselves to discussing issues affecting people generally, they will have developed enough trust in one another's goodwill to speak of personal experiences, some of which are painful. In the dialogues described here, participants discovered that incidents in their pasts where their academic potential was discounted were not limited to one race or one group. At the same time, educators discovered that community members had stories to tell of overt prejudice in schools—something educators assumed had been eliminated long ago.

Discussion Method

At the beginning of the dialogue process, planners need to establish discussion norms that protect all participants. Also, discussion processes must be carefully chosen to discourage accusation-and-defense exchanges. Finally, facilitators must be able, when necessary, to redirect such exchanges if they do arise. The dialogue goal is to build working relationships that allow collaborative action to address the achievement gap. If participants feel attacked, they will either retaliate or shut down, ending any possibility for collaboration. Over time, as participants develop cordial relationships, they will assist in defusing any anger that might be expressed by newcomers to the process. Planners should not, however, assume that careful planning and skilled facilitation will produce easy conversation from the beginning. Initially, most people, particularly those from the dominant culture, will be uncomfortable talking about race issues, no matter what discussion process facilitators choose to employ.



Leadership and Ownership in Outcomes

In retrospect, this paper's authors realized that, over time, as they planned and facilitated the dialogue process, AEL staff, rather than district leaders, came to be viewed as its initiator. Questions about the process were directed to AEL staff. Outside of meetings, AEL staff became the conduit to community members. District staff sent meeting notices to district participants and AEL sent notices to community members. District staff responded to AEL staff requests for materials and paid for refreshments, when necessary. Otherwise, they attended and participated on the same basis as community members. This shift was unfortunate in that it diluted the impact of district administrators' choosing to reach out to the African American community to open a dialogue. While the authors do not regret taking the lead in meeting planning and facilitation, if they were to repeat the process, they would consider ways to keep attention on the district as the initiator. These might include having all notices sent from the district and designing meetings to include, throughout the process, opportunities for district staff to lead activities that seek information and advice from community members.

What Dialogue Sessions Can and Cannot Achieve

Cross-race dialogue sessions, if they are successful in building relationships and understanding, are a beginning. They can alter attitudes and deepen the knowledge of those involved, so that they become more aware of what needs to happen in schools and in the community to improve achievement for African American students, and more able to act together to make changes. However, it takes time to bring about the changes. The understanding that makes change possible is unlikely to extend beyond the participants to the larger district or community population without continued work in both groups.

Achieving changes in attitudes and understanding in districts is particularly challenging, since in most districts a large majority of educators are European American. The dialogue sessions were designed to assure a racial balance in participants. That balance, and dialogue processes that assured equal exchanges of views, created conditions that fostered increased understanding. In most schools and districts, those African American educators whose views diverge from their colleagues can find it difficult to be heard, or may be reluctant to voice opinions that differ from the majority.

Lisa Delpit (1988) calls this lack of differing views the "silenced dialogue." Writing about the difficulty Black educators face in having their viewpoints heard by their White colleagues, she quotes a Black woman principal and doctoral student who describes an experience Delpit says is common among minority educators who attempt to be heard.

If you try to suggest that that's not quite the way it is, they (White educators) get defensive, then you get defensive, then they'll start reciting research. I try to give them my experiences, to explain. They just look and nod. The more I try to explain they just look and nod, just keep looking and nodding. They don't really hear me (p. 281).

Without deliberate actions to invite and validate minority views, such dialogues among educators are likely to remain silenced.

Equally, community members who form relationships that allow them greater influence in the district, and who gain a greater understanding of changes that need to happen in the community, will be in a better position to act to improve student achievement. But without a deliberate and concerted effort, increased access and influence will remain limited to the dialogue participants. Community members who participated in the dialogues described in this paper have continued to work in the community to inform and mobilize others.

The Kanawha County dialogue process contributed to a better understanding among people both in the school district and in the community about what it takes to promote improved academic achievement for African American students. It also created a commitment among participants to act. It did not, nor did facilitators expect that it would, create consensus, either within or across groups. Cross-race dialogues are like a courtship. They establish enough common ground to make possible the ensuing marriage of joint action. But what follows, like marriage, takes work. There will be times when partners work easily together and times when they disagree. Long-term success will depend on both groups' remaining willing to communicate with and listen to one another through both the easy and the hard times.

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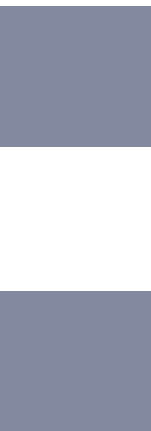
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Appendix A
Dialogue Process Tools



Jigsaw Process for Reading Selections

Jigsaw directions

1. Divide people into 5- or 6-person jigsaw groups. The groups should be diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, and role group.
2. Appoint one person from each group as the leader.
3. Divide the reading into 5-6 segments.
4. Assign each person to read one segment.
5. Give people time to read over their segment at least twice and become familiar with it.
6. Form temporary "expert groups" by having one person from each jigsaw group to join others assigned to the same segment. Give expert groups time to discuss the main points of their segment.
7. Ask people to return to their groups.
8. Ask each person to present her or his segment to the group. Others in the group should ask questions for clarification.
9. After small group discussions, ask questions (prepared in advance) of the whole group in order to explore differing perspectives (e.g. What did your group discuss to be the most important information or the most surprising? or What questions does this reading raise for you?).



Inside-Outside Fishbowl

The fishbowl is an adaptation of the focus group—so called because, as this group talks, its participants are observed or by a larger group. Fishbowl can be useful strategy when a group is too large to have a discussion in which everyone can participate meaningfully. By selecting a subgroup to do the talking, the entire group stays engaged—either as discussants or observers.

The fishbowl offers a powerful way to hear from subgroups about what is important to them. Basically, as eight to fifteen people sit in a circle, a number of listeners surrounding them. At the end of thirty minutes or so of discussion speakers and listeners can change places. Listeners restate what they heard. Some procedural tips follow:

1. Establish norms for the group, e.g., keep things confidential, listen with respect, contribute when you are moved to speak, and don't use names of teachers or students.
2. Clarify the role of the outside circle. They are to listen carefully throughout the discussion, not talking or interjecting until it is their turn.
3. When individuals in the outside circle speak, they say only what they have heard. They do not attempt to defend their position or react to comments.

Adapted from Walsh, J. & Sattes, B. (2000). *Inside School Improvement: Creating High-Performing Learning Communities*. Charleston, WV: AEL, Inc.

Interview Design Process

Interview Design is a method of data analysis in which all participants provide, gather, and analyze information. It has been used effectively in groups ranging from 10 to 500 people.

General description. Participants gather information by interviewing one another in a round-robin process, using a pre-determined set of questions. They then work in groups to analyze and report findings.

Rationale. The interview design process is

Active: No one can simply sit back and listen.

Equitable: All answers are recorded anonymously so each person's opinions are given equal consideration, regardless of his or her title or position.

Informal: The process helps people get to know one another around a substantive issue.

Objective: Interviewers do not argue or give their own opinions; they ask questions only for clarification.

Efficient: The knowledge and views of all participants on key questions are captured, so that people can see both the similarities and differences represented in the group.

Engaging: Participants work together to summarize and analyze views expressed in the interviews.

Detailed description of the process

Participants are seated in rows facing one another. Each person is assigned a question that he or she will ask of every person in the facing row. If there are five questions, there are two rows of 5 chairs facing each other. If there are 30 participants, the room will contain three sets of chairs. For example,

1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5	5	5

After people have asked their question of the person facing them and recorded the response, people in one of the two rows rise and move to the next seat. The interview process is then repeated. People continue to move after each interview until they have regained their original seat.

When the interview process is complete, all those with the same question gather to summarize and analyze interview responses.

Advance preparation

- 1. Develop the questions.** The quality of the result will depend on the quality of the questions. Avoid questions that can be answered with a yes or no. Also avoid questions that invite a particular response. For example, Problematic:
Question: Do you like _____? (Answer: Yes. End of interview)

Question: What are your concerns about _____? (Invites a negative response. This question is okay, if there is a balancing question that asks for positive reactions.)

Effective:

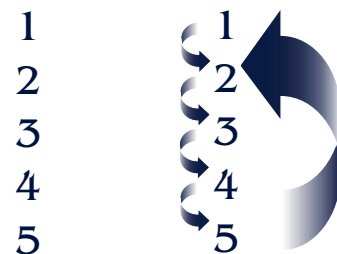
Question: Tell me about your experience with _____.

- 2. Develop a handout that lists all questions with space for participants to jot notes.** In order to improve the quality of responses, you can distribute this handout and allow participants a few minutes for reflection before they move to the chairs to begin the interview process.
- 3. Print each question on a separate sheet of paper.** Make as many copies of each question sheet as there are people who will ask that question. In the example provided (5 questions, 3 sets of chairs) six people will ask question 1, so six copies will be needed. (It is helpful to print each question on a different color paper. When you place the questions on the chairs, you will be able to see at a glance that they are in the correct order.)

Conducting the activity

If possible, don't schedule this as the first or last activity of the day, unless you can be sure people will arrive on time or will not leave early.

- 1. Arrange the chairs.** If you must use the same space and chairs that you have used for other activities, schedule this activity after a break so that you have time to set up the interview rows. If you have an odd number of participants, add a chair to the beginning or end of the **non-moving** side of a set. The extra person will work with the person having the first or last question. One might take notes while the other asks the question. Also, latecomers can be added in this way.
- 2. Place the interview questions on the chair seats.** The people who sit in the first seat in each row will be responsible for asking question #1, people sitting in the second seat will ask question #2, etc.
- 3. Distribute the handout with all questions and ask people to think about them.** Explain that they will be interviewed concerning their views. Allow no more than 5 minutes for reflection.
- 4. Give instructions before asking people to moving to the chair sets.** Announce which side of the sets will move in which direction. (For example, people sitting in the rows facing the windows will move when time is called. People with question one will move down one seat. People with the last question will move to the first seat in the row.) *Those who move will take their questions with them. They will not leave them on the seat.* Ask participants to take a pen and paper to their seats. Also suggest that they take something with a firm surface to use as a writing surface, unless the chairs include writing surfaces.
- 5. Announce the amount of time people will have to respond to each question.** Generally, 2 or 3 minutes is sufficient. Remind interviewers that they are to ask questions only to clarify their understanding of a response, and are not to express their own opinions as interviewers. Announce the start. Call time at the end of the first interview. At that point, the pair reverses roles and the interviewer is interviewed. At the end of the second time period people in the designated rows move down a seat and the process repeats.



- 6. Circulate at the end of the first interview to catch any confusion about who moves in what direction.** You may need to remind people to take their questions with them when they move to the next seat.
- 7. Time the interviews.** Generally, 2 or 3 minutes is sufficient for each interview (so that people change seats after 4 to 6 minutes) . You may wish to shorten or lengthen the time as you observe the process.
- 8. At the end of the interview process ask all people with the same interview question to gather at a designated spot to analyze the responses.** Depending on your instructions, this activity will require from 10 to 20 minutes. You may ask them to identify major themes or to capture and summarize all responses, whichever is appropriate for your purposes. Results can be reported orally, written to be turned in for a summary report, or displayed on chart paper.

Participants may need another short break at the conclusion of Interview Design.



Shapes and Symbols: A Process for Group Consensus

This process helps a large group organize information through a highly structured process. Everyone participates equally and owns the product. Ideas quickly become anonymous—not attached to a particular “donor”—and the entire group participates throughout the process. At no time does the facilitator take responsibility for making decisions about categories for ideas.

The process consist of the following three steps:

- 1. brainstorming**
- 2. ordering** the brainstormed data into categories
- 3. naming** the categories formed through ordering

Start by dividing participants into small groups of five to eight members each.

Step 1. Brainstorming

The purpose of brainstorming is to elicit as much data as possible. In brainstorming, all ideas are accepted as valid; no criticism or evaluative comments are made about individual ideas. However, since the information gathered for this process came from the interview design, this step was unnecessary,. Small groups transferred the information they had gathered in the interview design to 5_x 7_ cards.

The shapes and symbols process requires at least 20 cards, so if you have a small number of groups you may want to designate a minimum number that each group must contribute.

Step 2. Ordering

The purpose of this step is to bring order to the information gathered by identifying similarities among the various items and organizing them by their common traits.

- Post a set of 5_x 7_ cards across a wall as column headers. On each card, draw an arbitrary symbol (such as a circle, triangle, X, star, square, etc.).
- Ask each group to identify the two cards from their group of cards that they feel are most important. This step gives the group a way to quickly arrive at some “shared understanding” because people have had to look through their cards and think about each one in comparison to the others. Most likely, they will also have lively discussions about their relative importance. Collect these cards. Then ask for a card that includes an idea that was the most often mentioned in response to their interview question. Collect this card from each group.
- Once you have collected two or three cards from each group, the process of posting them begins. Read a card aloud to the group and tape it under the first symbol. Read the next card and tape it under the next symbol. In turn, read the remaining cards and tape them under the symbols. As you post the cards, ask participants to identify any common traits or relationships among the cards that might serve to help organize them. If you read a card that seems very much like a previous card, for example, you may ask the group if it should be posted in its “own category” or under the category of a previously posted card. When you have completed posting the cards you have collected, you may, for example, have at least one card posted under four or five symbols, with more than one card under one or two of the symbols. The group will have determined that cards grouped together under a symbol have features in common that are sufficiently unlike those under the other symbols to form a category.

- d. Once categories have begun to emerge, ask each group to read through its remaining cards, decide into which category each belongs, and draw the symbol of the corresponding “header” card onto the idea card. If they cannot find an appropriate already-existing category, they should draw a question mark on the card.
- e. Once the cards are turned in, the facilitator continues to read each one aloud and post (with approval of the entire group) where indicated. When all cards are posted, ask all participants to deal with any cards not yet organized into a group. Move and combine cards in an attempt to eliminate any that are alone in a group of one. Do not force cards to fit into existing categories; if they do not fit, leave them as a new group rather than adding them to an existing group.

Step 3. Naming

In this step all participants arrive at consensus regarding the meaning of items that were grouped together.

- a. Assign one (or more) categories to each small group. Group members’ job is to review the set of cards in order to come up with a suitable name for the category. As they work, suggest that they ask the following questions:

What are all of these items about?

What do they all have in common?

- b. As a group suggests a name, check it out with the entire group. Ask them to reflect by asking these questions:



Is this name inclusive?

Does the name describe all of the items in the category?

Appendix B
Student Survey

MAACK Student Survey

Read each statement below and circle the number that best describes your answer.
 1 = *not at all* or *no*. 5 = *a lot* or *yes*. If you don't know or have no opinion, circle "D" for *don't know*.

Yes: (- -) No: (- -)
 

	Not At All			A Lot		Don't Know
1. I feel welcome and at home in this school.	1	2	3	4	5	D
2. I feel like I can be myself in class.	1	2	3	4	5	D
3. My teachers do a good job.	1	2	3	4	5	D
4. I am called on in class as much as anyone else.	1	2	3	4	5	D
5. If I don't understand something, I feel comfortable asking for help.	1	2	3	4	5	D
6. My teachers try to help when I ask.	1	2	3	4	5	D
7. I feel like my teachers know me well.	1	2	3	4	5	D
8. I feel my teachers care about me.	1	2	3	4	5	D
9. My teachers encourage me to do good work.	1	2	3	4	5	D
10. I get good grades.	1	2	3	4	5	D
11. I think class work is interesting.	1	2	3	4	5	D
12. I think class work is too easy.	1	2	3	4	5	D
13. If I wanted to, I could get A's most or all of the time.	1	2	3	4	5	D
14. I never get in trouble in school.	1	2	3	4	5	D
15. Students in this school treat one another well.	1	2	3	4	5	D
16. I feel safe in this school.	1	2	3	4	5	D
17. I am in school clubs and activities.	1	2	3	4	5	D
18. People in my family know how I am doing in school.	1	2	3	4	5	D
19. Someone in my family has been to my school this year.	1	2	3	4	5	D
20. My family knows the teachers in this school.	1	2	3	4	5	D
21. I can get help with homework from someone in my family.	1	2	3	4	5	D
22. Whether I am a good student matters in my family.	1	2	3	4	5	D
23. I can get help from the school counselor if I am having a problem.	1	2	3	4	5	D

	Not At All			A Lot		Don't Know
24. The teachers in this school are fair.	1	2	3	4	5	D
25. This school's principal is fair.	1	2	3	4	5	D
26. I have some ideas about what I want to do to earn a living when I leave school.	1	2	3	4	5	D
27. I expect that when I finish high school I will go to college or get more training.	1	2	3	4	5	D

Please fill in appropriate bubble:

M Male

F Female

Please circle the word that best describes how you identify yourself:

A African American

W White

M Mixed

O Other

Please circle the number that matches your current Grade Level:

Three 3

Eight 8

Four 4

Nine 9

Five 5

Ten 10

Six 6

Eleven 11

Seven 7

Twelve 12

I have been in this school:

0 less than six months

1 six months

2 six months to one school year

3 more than one school year