A STORY OF TRANSFORMATION

THE WASHINGTON EARLY LEARNING COMMITTEE &

THE NATIONAL EQUITY PROJECT

Presented to:

National Equity Project

Presented by:

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately every five years the State Department of Early Learning of Washington (DEL) publishes guidelines that outline "what children know and are able to do at different stages of their development." These early learning benchmarks are designed to support parents as their child's first and most important teachers, as well as childcare providers who may also spend up to eight hours of day with young children during the week. In 2010, the DEL, in partnership with Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and Thrive by Five Washington, set out to update the benchmarks for early learning and development previously published in 2005, with an easier to read format that was more culturally representative and accessible to the diverse populations living in the state.

In order to accomplish this task, the DEL Director, the Director of the Thrive by Five Washington, and the OSPI formed a committee of early learning specialists. Members of the Guidelines committee included childcare providers, parents, and non-profit organizations that either worked directly with young children and their families or advocated on their behalf. Members also represented many of the racial and ethnic minority populations living in the state. Committee leaders also undertook a broad public outreach effort, receiving comments from more than 400 individuals and organizations. Approximately fifty people participated on the committee initially, though over time a smaller core group of about thirty individuals undertook most of the work. The committee members included a combination of individuals who had worked to develop the 2005 benchmarks as well as individuals for whom this was their first time updating early learning benchmarks. The process of updating the early learning benchmarks, making them easier to read and more culturally competent, is at face value a fairly standard process that many public agencies and non-profit organizations undertake regularly. That the process happened, and that it appeared "successful," is not news worthy.

The urgency

We know that early experiences matter, yet not every child gets a great start in life.

1. Less than 4 percent of public investment in education and child development occurs during the first three years — the time when children's brains grow the fastest and the most.

2. As early as 9 months old, children in poverty begin to show signs of slipping behind in their development.

3. Exposure to toxic stress in the first few years of a child's life can lead to permanent changes in learning (linguistic, cognitive, and social-emotional skills), behavior, and long term physical health.

4. Many children from vulnerable families have no access to high-quality pre-kindergarten, home visiting, high-quality child care, or other programs that have been shown to close the opportunity gap for minority and poor children.

- Thrive by Five, Washington

So why tell this story? First, behind the early learning guidelines document, peoples' lives are at stake. As you can see in the above sidebar, racial disparities in early learning support

are a critical area of the "opportunity gap" that results in very different life outcomes for different racial groups. More culturally competent guidelines can foster more effective support, and thus improved outcomes.

Second, while many organizations tout culturally competent documents - checklists that most leaders today are familiar with that allow for a document to be deemed "culturally competent" —in this case the *process* of revising the document enabled the participants to engage in a different kind of conversation about race than they had ever had before. The conversation allowed the participants to rise above the false dichotomies so prevalent in the media discourse around race, such as: right/wrong, victim/perpetrator, or enlightened/ignorant divisions of people. This story won't tell you about how all the people of color were victims and how the white people overcame their racism. It *will* tell you a less common story about how a group of people learned to really listen to one another's individual experiences, to value each other more authentically as human beings, and for the first time to take collective ownership of the true purpose of the task at hand: improving outcomes for all children and families in Washington.

There were many factors that were unusual about the 2012 process in Washington that contributed to this group's transformation and ultimate success. The first was that several people representing different ethnic groups on the early learning committee refused to be silent and took the risk of speaking out again, even after they had felt dismissed, even gravely threatened by "cultural genocide" in the previous version. The second was that the particular leaders in positions of authority in this case had a genuine interest in listening and enough humility to request for help from expert facilitators. The third was that the National Equity Project provided an unusual and particularly effective kind of facilitation for communicating issues of race. One important aspect of NEP's approach is that they identify "racialized outcomes" as occurring as a result of complex social systems, not simply as a result of discriminatory intent. NEP has been strongly influenced by john powell's work around race and systems thinking.[1] Some of powell's definitions proved to be extremely helpful as a starting point for this group's transformation. Powell's analysis of structural racism was key to inviting participants into a conversation:

> *"The Structural Racialization analysis enables us to demonstrate the impact of institutional arrangements and policies on group outcomes: discrete parts of systems interact to yield cumulative effects.* ***Racialized outcomes do not require racist actors****,*

[1] Professor powell does not capitalize his name.

but rather are inherent to the existing system" (powell, Cagampagn Heller, Bundallit, June 2011 – emphasis added).

This analysis allows people to acknowledge that most individuals today do not actively seek to discriminate against others based on race, but rather inherited institutional arrangements as well as unconscious (and sometimes conscious) biases have affected the policies, procedures and behaviors in our systems that lead to unequal outcomes.

While there were other factors that were important as well, which will be described in this report, the combination of these three key ingredients allowed for a remarkable group transformation to occur, in which individual members interacted with one another on very difficult issues with uncommon honesty, patience, and courage. This "relational" transformation resulted in an early learning document embraced wholeheartedly by both executives and grassroots community groups that has the potential to transform the practices of early learning professionals across an entire state.

What follows below is a narrative of what happened during the revision process. We will attempt to answer these questions; What was the challenge at hand? What was the process facilitated by NEP that allowed for transformation to occur? What was the experience of that process from the participants? And what were the important conditions that made this transformation possible? The purpose of documenting this narrative is to share with other practitioners what we believe works when confronting one of the most difficult and urgent challenges of our time: reconnecting people across the historical racial divide that has caused so much harm. Another purpose is to concretize the learning for the participants in the revision process. This document celebrates their hard work, honors it, and makes it part of their shared, evolving history.

PART I. "YOU COULD CUT THE TENSION WITH A KNIFE"

We begin our story with the first meeting in February 2011 of the revision committee. The committee remembers the details of this meeting as if it occurred yesterday. It was the kind of meeting in which the layers of emotion, confusion, and even fear were palpable around the relationships between representatives of different ethnic groups and the fact that people were going to have to talk about race.

"Things got heated in the first half hour of our first meeting and it freaked people out."

The participants at this meeting could be roughly divided into three to four groups according to their vantage points: (1) those who had participated in the 2005 process and felt their feedback was dismissed, (2) those who participated in the 2005 process who were aware of the discontent but either stymied about what to do about it or not grasping the cause or scope of the problem, and (3) new participants who were largely unaware of the dynamics of the previous process. Regardless from which perspective the participants came from, the consensus was that the process was blocked and no one knew how to move forward.

Below are quotes from the participants from the different vantage points sharing how they felt during the first meeting and their perspective on "the problem."

Participants in the 2005 process who felt their feedback was dismissed:

> *"I had been involved with a number of other people at the state level of really trying to work with OSPI in cultural appropriateness, bias and fairness reviews. We had spent hours and hours in meetings and many times I had to fly from Spokane over to Olympia or Seattle. Sometimes I would do it on my own dime. So I had invested a lot of energy and hope for change. All this time we had put-in,* ***only to come to find out at the end that they never integrated anything that we had said."***

> *"The first couple of days were really, I don't know what adjective, really heavy. Some of the tribes stood up and said they thought this was* ***cultural genocide****, these benchmarks. People from the Asian Pacific said they had been a part of it and people had played a trick on them,* ***they didn't trust us."***

Participants in the 2005 process who were aware of the discontent but stymied about what to do about it:

> *"I had been around at the very beginning when things fell apart with the original document. We worked with someone who wrote up some recommendations. We actually even went through a training together on racism and then the committee just stopped meeting and* ***everything just disappeared."***

> *"I could see maybe even for the old group kind of thinking that it would have been challenging to all of a sudden have, 'well what you did in the past wasn't good enough so we're bringing you back and we're bringing new people.' I can just imagine that there were probably a lot more* ***feelings even on their side*** *that would have been hard."*

Participants in the 2005 process who were not aware of the cause or scope of the problem:

> *"**I was unaware** of the fact that many people in different ethnic communities or different cultural communities were unhappy with the original version of the benchmarks."*

New participants who were largely unaware of the dynamics of the previous process:

> *"I thought that we would go through them and make a few corrections, and **everyone would be happy and we would go home."***

The quotes above illustrate the vast differences of experience and perspective, spanning from cultural genocide, to little to no awareness, to an assumption that this work would be easy. Emotions at play included anger, resentment, and confusion. Managing the strong feelings and such a vast diversity of experience and perspective required a special kind of facilitation.

PART II. CREATING A NEW CONTAINER

A. Background on the National Equity Project

The National Equity Project (NEP), formerly the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, is a leadership development and coaching organization whose mission is to help schools and other organizations *"make good on the promise of a quality education for all children."* To ensure that every child gets the full benefit of a quality education, NEP believes new approaches and new kinds of leadership are needed at all levels of public schools and institutions working towards equity for children. At the core of NEP's approach is an awareness and commitment to engage with people in new ways to change outcomes for students. The National Equity Project provides sustained, embedded support to educators and other leaders to make more effective decisions and take more effective action in their day-to-day work of providing a quality education for all children. Some of the services they provide include intensive leadership retreats, one-on-one leadership coaching, group/systems coaching and facilitation, and school design consultation. These services build culture, conditions, and competencies for excellence and equity in districts, schools, classrooms, nonprofit organizations, and communities.

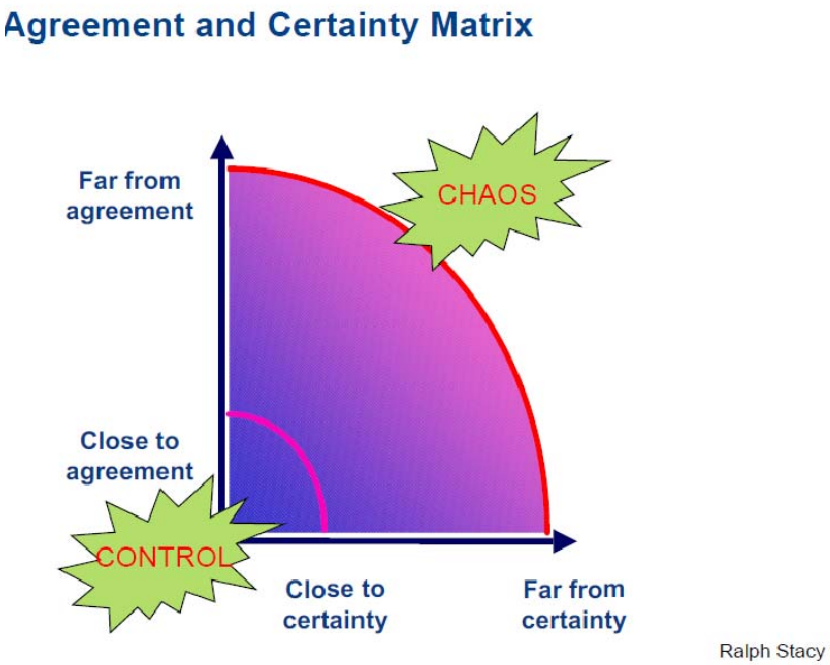
Leaders from the WA Benchmarks committee reached out to NEP and requested support for the Early Learning Committee to create a shared vision and agreements for revising the Early Learning and Development Benchmarks document. The leadership recognized that the group needed to create a new process for interacting before any work on the actual benchmarks could move forward effectively One of the leaders was familiar with NEP's approach from other related work and felt confident they could provide facilitation that would assist the group to break through their impasse. NEP was initially contracted to facilitate two 2-day meetings with follow-up facilitation and coaching for what was to become the Early Learning Benchmarks Committee.

B. The first meeting with NEP

> *"We knew there was a little unhappiness, but the truth is that when we came in the problem was located at the edge of chaos, and what that means is you have to act fast. So as the facilitators of this space we actually had to do a major interruption immediately, meaning literally we made it through the first day until 5:00. But to keep them in the room for the next day, we went to talk with the folks directly [after the meeting]"* (NEP Facilitator).

NEP facilitators realized in their first meeting how deep the hurt and confusion about how to move forward was felt. While they "got through the first day," the real work began after 5:00 pm that same day, when NEP facilitators Victor Cary and Lisa Lasky sat down on a person-to-person basis with the individuals in the room to listen to their concerns "off the record," to allow people to speak candidly without having to maintain professional discretion, and to ask, "what do you need to come back tomorrow?" NEP facilitators communicated how much the group needed everyone's input even if it made people uncomfortable, and reassured the individuals that everyone would have a chance to share their perspective regardless of how long it took, they would be heard. People needed to know that there weren't going to be good guys and bad guys, or made into caricatures, and that they weren't going to be silenced.

A theory and model that informs NEP's work is a complex systems approach to understanding challenges or problems faced by groups, building off john powell's work and others'. Ralph Stacey presents a matrix method to select management actions that fit the complexity of the challenges facing a group.



Certainty is defined by a group's relative ability to predict an outcome or make links to "known" cause and effect relationships. Agreement refers to the degree of consensus among the relevant group about how to move forward.

In the Early Learning Committee, much of the confusion and fear was in response to how complex this problem was, yet it was disguised as something that should have been simple. One person had even said she thought the group could *"make a few corrections, and everyone would be happy."* However, the group was far from agreement about what the revisions to the early learning document should be and far from certainty about what the cause of the tension was. When problems are this complex, approaching the zone of chaos in Stacey's model, standard procedure rarely works, which is why NEP spent so much time early in their work with this group helping them learn how to listen. NEP understood that the problem was at the edge of chaos in the first meeting and thus reacted quickly to ensure people had enough trust and willingness to keep trying and come back the next day. They designed their second day and most of the first phase of their work with this group to address a problem that was highly complex in which the solution was not certain.

C. Building an Intentional Learning Community

One of the foundational elements of NEP's approach is to build an intentional learning community. They typically charter the group around what John Heron (an influence for NEP)

calls, "*commending and seeking assent to a set of values as the basis for our being and learning together"(1996).*

Heron says that new groups often feel very anxious about what is going to happen. Because of this normal nervousness, he advises that rather than have the group start with a blank slate and develop the guiding values themselves, facilitators should present a positive invitation and seek agreement. This way people feel calm, secure, and empowered to step into a productive learning space.

NEP uses a set of values that invite learning that come from the work of Angeles Arrien (2002):.

Community Agreements

1) **Show up (or choose to be present).** This principle guides us to be both firm and yielding, honoring our own individual limits and boundaries as well as the limits and boundaries of others.

2) **Pay attention (to heart and meaning).** This principle guides individuals to observe where in their experience they are half-hearted rather than open-hearted, when they carry a doubting heart rather than a clear heart, and when they are experiencing weak-heartedness rather than strong-heartedness.

3) **Tell the truth (without blame or judgment).** This principle invokes the idea that the visionary is one who brings his or her voice into the world and refuses to edit, rehearse, perform, or hide. The task here is to come forward fully with our gifts, talents, and resources and to powerfully meet the tests and challenges of life.

4) **Be open to outcome (not attached to outcome).** This principle is known as the Way of the Teacher. Traditional societies believe wisdom is flexible and fluid, never positional, that the human resource of wisdom is accessed by learning how to trust and how to be comfortable with states of not knowing.

These values were offered in a spirit of support and invitation to group members to participate in a new way, to bring perhaps more of one's true self into the experience, and to challenge one's self to experiment with a new way of learning and interacting. NEP offered these values not to dictate a "right" way of being with each other, but to attend to the discomfort and anxiety of the group, helping give the group confidence that this process was

going to address their needs. The group also needed to consider a new way of relating to each other if the complex problem was going to be addressed.

The group's ability to attend to each of these principles was key to their success. One of the most challenging and most important principles for this group was "stepping into the unknown/recognizing that knowledge is flexible not positional and being open to outcome".

> *"What we try and do in our work is create safe learning environments for people so that they can experience conflict, discomfort, dissidence because that's where the real learning is, and actually stay in that long enough together to move to the next place. So this group built muscle, literally built muscle together through this experience. People didn't come back to see us (NEP Facilitators) every month. They came back to be with each other through this" (NEP Facilitator).*

Essential to the success of this approach is the intangible tone, mood, and "voice" of the facilitation. The participants noted this intangible component often.

> *"I mean some of it was verbal and I mean some of it was physical you know moving around the room, standing by people who seemed to be having trouble, a touch on the shoulder, eye contact. They seemed to use a lot of different sensory approaches, not just spoken, not just the auditory, the visual and physical and proximity to people."*

> *"I just remember Victor walking around the room and when someone seemed agitated he would be close to them and have a calming effect. And Lisa would encourage you…she had this spontaneity and enthusiasm and encouraged people to participate."*

John Heron calls these kinds of qualities and behaviors "Charismatic Presence." This is a technique that is difficult to measure, but it can be learned and should not be overlooked as important, as seen from positive participant responses to it. The participants were aware of this presence and noticed how much it helped.

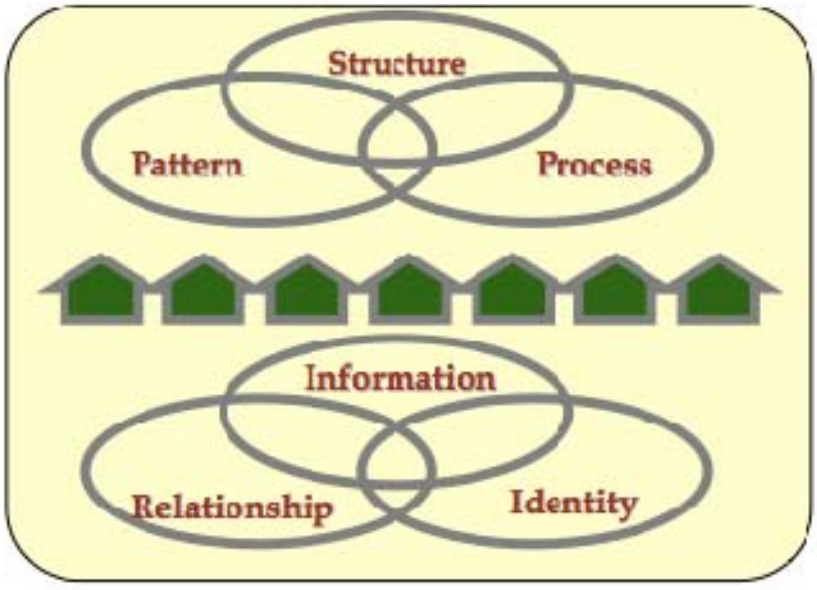
> *"Charismatic presence is about relaxed and aware posture and movement; charismatic voice is to do with tone and timing, especially moving between a more rapid information-giving clock time, and a slower more rhythmic and evocative charismatic time which empowers what is said with human depth and significance" (Heron, 1996).*

The NEP organizational culture has a practice of naming and valuing intangibles. They cultivate the capacity of their facilitators to attend to such things as "timing" and moving in and out of different rhythms of voice and presentation. They encourage fostering a real

human connection with the participants of the processes they facilitate, not just a professional one.

D. Healing Relationships

How do you move away from standard procedure and technical expertise to attend to what is needed in complex situations? NEP's technical expertise comes from years of study and experience in organizations. One of the ways in which NEP helps groups attend to what's needed in complex situations comes from Margaret Wheatley and Tim Dalmau's " Six Circle Model." This model describes organizational change as occurring in six spheres. The first three spheres are technical in nature and consist of pattern, structure and process, encompassing such things as operations and strategies in organizations. The other three spheres are relational in nature and include relationship, information, and identity, making up what we tend to think of as organizational culture.



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All six spheres are equally important to organizational change, but research by Dalmau and Wheatley indicates that traditional change efforts tend to focus on the technical spheres. However, when working with groups who "*seek to understand how bias, conscious and unconscious may be impacting teaching and learning at the individual, institutional and structural levels"* (Leading for Equity curriculum, 2011) attending to the relational spheres is particularly relevant. NEP describes the distinction between the technical and relational sets of spheres as "above the green line" (technical) and "below the green line" (relational), referring to the green line that divides the six-circle model. NEP's working belief is that

“Groups of people who establish a culture that values work “below the green line” can self organize to identify and implement the above the green line strategies and the infrastructure to achieve power and create results.

> *"We didn’t present the six circle model. We operated from that. We’re operating from that as I listen to people and think what’s the work of this group?” (NEP Facilitator).*

The first task at hand, under the green line, was to attend to the relationships. One of the fundamental approaches NEP uses to heal pain and create connection between individuals when it’s been broken is through learning how to listen on a much deeper level.

> *"I think once people have an experience of being listened to, even though they’re still full of all sorts of trepidation and doubt, they’re willing to take just another leap going into the next day or the next meeting." (Participant) (NEP Facilitator?)*

> *“I think that the turning point was when we, we did a lot of practicing of active listening which I've done before,* ***but really learning to actively listen and not form our own answers or questions before someone is finished but really be in the moment.*** *I think using that technique or that skill allowed people to feel safe enough to really share some really personal stories that moved us all to another level.” (Participant)*

So how did NEP teach people to listen so well? As one participant stated, “I’ve done active listening before.” What was different this time?

NEP found in its researches a new type of listening practice called constructivist listening. This listening practice was initially developed largely by Julian Weissglass (1990). Constructivist listening is designed to be for the benefit of the speaker, to enable them to process their thoughts *and* feelings in a safe context. There are several formal structured activities for constructivist listening, including a dyad, support group, and personal experience panel. In a dyad, two people take turns speaking for a designated period of time, usually two or three minutes, and the listener does not interrupt or comment. The content of what each person says is kept confidential by the listener, and each agrees not to criticize any third parties. Weissglass emphasizes it is necessary to create situations safe enough so that people can be listened to about their deepest feelings –places where no one will be criticized or ridiculed for showing his or her feelings. This is especially true when talking about race and oppression.

NEP facilitators used two forms of constructivist listening with the Early Learning Committee: dyads and personal experience panels. For the dyad, the facilitators offered this description*: "I agree to listen to and think about you for a fixed period of time in exchange for you doing the same for me. I keep in mind that my listening is for your benefit so I do not ask questions for my information."*

NEP implemented dyads at the onset of every meeting with the Early Learning Committee as a commitment to ensuring that every voice in the room had a chance to speak, be listened to, and participate in constructing new meaning (both for the speaker and for the group).

> *"I came back after the first couple of meetings so impressed with their (NEP's) ability to honor the group that was there in terms of all of the emotional baggage people were bringing to the table. To help us all at this initial part of the process* ***to become better listeners."***

NEP facilitated a personal experience panel at one meeting, and followed this structure with dyads for each individual to share their own story on the topic one-to-one. The personal experience panel structure invites a small set of people (in this case five) to share their story in response to a prompt such as, "Share an early memory about race that pained or confused you." Similar to the dyad structure, panelists have a structured amount of time to talk and be listened to. *"The key is not to talk about their stories but just to listen to their stories, just like in the dyad. So you don't talk about them afterwards." (NEP Facilitator).* This frees people to focus on their personal experience that needs to be shared and their own process of making meaning as they talk. For the listener, the focus is on the gift they are giving by listening. The promise not to talk about the speaker's story, just to listen, forms an uncommon bond between speakers and listeners, a shared experience and understanding that is honored by not talking about it with others outside the group. The prompt is also purposefully about something that occurred in the past. *"It's too difficult to step outside yourself and tell a story about yourself in the present" (NEP Facilitator).* However, our past experiences and emotions continue to inform our present thoughts and actions.

> *"I think that was at least for me as well as other people a combination of listening to those five people's stories…it was a turning point because I always think that I've done a lot of traveling and I grew up in New York with a lot of diversity and thought that I had a broader perspective and after listening to the passion and the intensity of her [another participant] story and her community's life experience it really resonated. We just have to look at it a little bit differently because a lot of children haven't had my life and my kids' life experience."*

It is NEP's premise that through the story telling, a counter narrative is created around race and culture. NEP has found that often people don't have adequate language to have productive conversations around race or culture in the abstract. So instead of forcing a new language on of people, they are invited simply to tell personal stories, without having to defend or legitimize them, but rather with the reassurance that they will be listened to.

> *"People also don't have the experience of having productive conversations around issues of race and culture. They usually don't go well and most people have had an experience where it didn't go well and they're not actually jumping up and down to come back and do that again" (NEP facilitators).*

Yet, these personal experience panels did go well with this group of early learning specialists, and people actually enjoyed them. In addition to supporting a new narrative to emerge, the prompts appeared to be key to inviting a participatory non-judgmental atmosphere, yet one in which the depth of pain and hurt, particularly from one's past, could surface. Once participants had the experience of being heard (and recognized their own power as a listener), then the kinds of conversations about the work at hand, the complex problem the group was confronting, opened up. The possibility for creating shared understanding was within reach.

E. Advancing Learning Through Metaphor

The concept of metaphor is also instrumental for NEP in understanding how groups of people and organizations can change. Metaphors allow people to use a familiar, typically concrete and simple concept, , to describe a less familiar, more abstract or complex concept. Through the association, the mind makes the leap to a new understanding. Gaining new understanding through applying an old understanding to a new area is one of the human capacities of consciousness. This capacity is essential when bridging the divide across culture and life experience. One can never literally "walk in someone else's shoes" but through the use of metaphor, people have the capacity to imagine what it might be like to live an unknown experience, connect it to a known universal experience (not belonging, feeling less than, etc.) and develop greater empathy.

One of NEP's strengths has been its ability to adapt to the groups they work with and to acknowledge that groups have their own collective intelligence, resourcefulness and wisdom that is yearning for connection, for healing and for collective action. When the group offers an opening based on their own resourcefulness, NEP grabs it. This happened in WA when an

Early Learning committee member offered a powerful metaphor that generated an opportunity for the group to use their imagination and increase their empathy.

One of the participants, in perhaps the first meeting with NEP, compared his experience to serving on anti-bias committees as akin to an experience of Charlie Brown from the classic American “Peanuts” comic.

> *“I said have you read Charles Schultz's "Peanuts?" They said, "Yes, we have." I said, "Do you remember the segments in the fall leading to football season where Charlie Brown wants to kick the football and Lucy holds the football? Charlie Brown runs in to kick the football and Lucy jerks the football away and Charlie Brown is laying on his back saying 'I knew she was going to do it. I don't know why I allowed you to sucker me into doing this.’ She gives a very rational explanation as to why she jerks it away." So I used this analogy with the group and I said, All these bias and fairness reviews that I've been participating in have came to naught. It was like I really wanted a relevant culturally competent curriculum but it keeps getting jerked away from me.”*

The Charlie Brown metaphor was powerful. Everyone in the room resonated with the feeling of getting suckered into something. On so many levels this mini-story aligned with the experience of those who felt they hadn’t been heard: the earnest desire to create a culturally competent document (to kick the football), the responses from the decision makers (Lucy’s rational explanation of why she took the football away), and the experience of it happening again and again, (Charlie Brown laying on his back saying, “I knew she was going to do it).”

Even the committee leaders could relate and understand “what happened” through the use of this metaphor. One of the leaders who had been part of the first experience said this of the Charlie Brown story:

> *"I think it was perfect. It so much described the people's personal experience, anyone who had gone through it. He had served with me on that committee where we had done the training and written up the recommendations and then they got dropped. So he had been dissed three times. I understood it and I think there were other people in the room that felt the same way. It was just a very graphic example of how people keep coming back hoping that this time it's going to be different and then it isn't.”*

The use of metaphors is linked to the idea of ritual as well. John Heron builds on the idea of metaphor and describes how metaphors are used in rituals to further learning. He says this of rituals:

> *“My belief and experience is that appropriate rituals subtly transfigure the whole subsequent learning process.”*

He goes on to say that rituals (which often employ metaphors) engage our imagination and speak to our emotional intelligence, inviting and inspiring deeper participation. A ritual can be something as simple as evoking an image, a metaphor or a story as a way of connecting the participants to a deeper level of emotional and intellectual engagement. This is precisely what happened with the Charlie Brown metaphor/story. It became a kind of ritual, used as a touchstone throughout the process. As a result, people made a commitment not to jerk the football away again, meaning that they were going to really listen and incorporate representations of cultural beliefs in a radically new way in the early learning document. It was a tall order, considering the history.

> *"I think everyone realized it was very important and that we couldn't mess this up. If we messed up this one I don't know what we would have done. So I think there was a sense that this is really important to get this right and that it was going to take what it was going to take.”*

In the end, when the group completed their document, when everyone had participated in the making dramatic changes, the Charlie Brown metaphor was evoked again.

> *“That's why there was such a ceremony around bringing him a football at our last get together* (which all the participants signed) *and such a ceremony about having the football on the back page* (there is an image of a football on the back page of the final document) *because everyone wanted to say he kicked it. Nobody pulled it away from him or out from under him. He was actually able to kick that football and it felt so good!”*

Bringing the football to the final meeting, signing it, and kicking it speaks to Heron’s sense of the importance of ritual. This was a story that had arisen from the actual process that participants were engaged in, so the ritual was an authentic, organic one, not a contrived one imposed on the group from outside. The story had deepened people’s awareness of the problem, invited greater participation and even heightened their commitment and sense of accountability to the outcome. By bringing the physical football to the final meeting, it also created a sense of closure and celebration of what the group had accomplished.

F. Moving Towards a New Container

The early aspects of NEP's facilitation laid the foundation for the group to move beyond their impasse. Intervening with the participants by speaking with them directly after the formal meeting, building a learning community through community agreements, teaching and practicing constructivist listening skills through dyads and personal experience panels allowed for people to feel heard and respected and to develop empathy for one another. This alone is significant progress. However, while the individuals may have developed respect and empathy, many still did not understand what was so offensive about the 2005 benchmarks. At least now, people could without fear of blame, simply state; "I don't understand." This didn't make them bad people, it was a simple truth. Not everyone could know what was not captured in the 2005 document.

One of the participants in the committee who had been an outspoken advocate for making dramatic changes to the document, Martina Welshula, at one point asked the group if she could have the floor for an hour to spend some time describing what was missing from the 2005 document. Martina Welshula is of native American descent and her background includes getting her start as a volunteer in her daughter's Head Start classroom as a young single mother, to moving towards working as Head Start Director for more than four programs serving 3-5 year olds in centers on reservations. She now has a PhD in early childhood development and is a passionate advocate for the field's commitment to holistic education and empowerment of women. She has served as President of Spokane Tribal College and she currently works for a Drug and Alcohol rehabilitation center, "The Healing Lodge," that rehabilitates young Native American teenagers ages 13 – 18. A mother of six, she continues to volunteer on a variety of policy councils and community groups throughout Washington State. While she hadn't planned to do a presentation at this meeting, by coincidence she had a disk drive with her from a presentation on "Indigenous Worldview" she had given recently to another audience. While this wasn't part of the agenda, NEP checked in with the group, everyone agreed it would be a good use of time and so the previously planned agenda was set aside and the group gave Martina the floor.

> *"Someone said I still don't get what Martina's issue is. It so was not a part of their reality. This is just something where you're unconsciously incompetent about because you have no clue" (Martina).*

For many people, Martina's presentation was the first time they began to understand how much they didn't previously know. John powell refers to this lack of awareness as "implicit or unconscious bias."

> *"In other words, people who consciously value racial equality can act and make decisions based upon racial biases without even being aware that they have any biases at all. When a person's actions or decisions are at odds with their intentions, we call this Implicit Bias or Unconscious Bias" (Powell, Cagampagn Heller, Bundalli, June 2011).*

Martina's presentation described how indigenous languages are primarily verb based. The use of verbs describes the universe as unfolding before us and reality as something in which we actively participate in creating. The English language is primarily noun based in which the universe is objectified, with reality happening primarily outside of us. The presentation also described the importance of relationships and interdependence in indigenous culture and how certain words in English that focus on individualism and autonomy feel much more harsh and ego-centric to Native American people. It was a complex presentation that included visual images, indigenous symbols, a description of indigenous spirituality as well as the analysis of the role of language in shaping one's perception of reality. While it was complex, she was able to make the presentation in about an hour and people had time to ask questions and share their responses to the presentation as well. For many people, this was a major turning point in the process.

> *"She and her other colleagues from the tribes were saying this whole approach [the 2005 benchmarks] is taking a deficit approach and it's cultural genocide to our children.* ***I think a lot of people in the room couldn't, me included, couldn't quite understand that*** *until she said I want to do a presentation for you.* ***I think a lot of light bulbs went off at that point where people understood oh…. this is a whole different way of looking at how people learn."***

After Martina's presentation and the follow-up discussion, she put a proposal on the table; she wanted to start over with the 2012 benchmarks. Up until that point, the group was operating under the assumption that changes were going to be made, but made to the existing 2005 benchmarks document. Martina wanted to throw out the 2005 document and start fresh. NEP suggested the group consider "a new container" in which to place new ideas about early learning. The new container would include a different value system that honored both interdependent and independent ideals for children, both the community and the individual, and in general start from a much more inclusive frame than was previously present. Good ideas from the 2005 document could be included in the new container too, but the group agreed, they needed a truly fresh start.

> *"We took a vote and we said, okay, we're going to start over with a new container. I just remember she [Martina] cried. She was so moved because I don't think she*

expected that. The fact that we trusted her, that we really listened to her, that we were actually responding to something that was so important to her and saying, okay, we get it. We understand and we're going to take the steps to really move on that. I know it was a real turning point for her and I think for every other person of color in the room."

It was at this point that the energy of the group shifted. The group moved from being completely blocked and at odds with one another in the first meeting, to respectfully sitting in dissonance shortly thereafter, to true understanding after Martina's presentation. Once this occurred, people felt uninhibited sharing ideas, considering new ways of looking at things, and confident that while they didn't know exactly what the final document would look like, they were headed the right direction.

G. Support from Leadership

One of the key factors that allowed the next phase of work to occur, (and actually had been at play since the very beginning) was the flexibility and humility of the leadership. Bette Hyde, Director of the Department of Early Learning for the State of Washington, reporting to the governor, and Nina Auerbach, Director of Thrive by Five, a major funder of early learning work throughout the state, worked together to bring in NEP, support their unconventional approach, and in particular extend the deadline for which the 2012 Benchmarks could be turned in, which required negotiation with the Governor.

"I think the things that did impress me were Bette and Nina being willing to take as long as was necessary to get this work done. And willing to put themselves out there and say, I don't care what the Governor says or I don't care what the legislature says we are going to take as long as we need. We're not going to be limited by artificial deadlines we need to get this right."

Many of the participants were moved by Bette and other institutional leaders' courage and willingness to engage fully in the process. Bette and Nina, as well as other leaders, came to ~~all~~ most of the meetings, participated in the constructivist listening exercises, took turns taking notes during committee meetings, in addition to offering to extend the timeline.

"It was a system, it was a cross-cutting system from the ground to the highest levels of institutional authority that actually stayed in the same conversation over a period of time. When was the last time that's happened? It was hugely significant" (NEP Facilitator).

"I said to them let's take more time. This is the deadline I gave you and let's extend it because we have more work to do. I think they were actually surprised. One of the members said that's when I first realized that you were serious about this. You really wanted our input. It seemed to make a real big difference. I didn't say, hey, let's take two years but let's take another month and then, okay, we'll add two weeks" (Bette Hyde, Department of Early Learning Director).

A number of approaches that were part of this process may give other busy practitioners cause for concern. Stopping the process to tell stories? Throwing out the agenda to hear one person's description on their world view? Throwing out your previous document and starting from scratch? Time lines are real factors for many people. For those readers who feel this wouldn't be possible in your jurisdiction, consider the following. The process actually only took 6 weeks longer than anticipated. The deadline was somewhat arbitrary and only put in place to ensure a product was complete and not left undone. This is the real purpose of most deadlines.

The group also recognized that all the slowing down that occurred in the front end of the process allowed for the final push to occur much more efficiently.

"I mentioned the beginning took a long time but after that we took off faster. We got the work done when I think about it fast...because the relationships were there."

PART III. THE WORK GETS DONE

A. Slowing Down to Speed Up

Ultimately, the group's early work on relational healing allowed for a different kind of productive conversation to ensue that wasn't rushed or dismissive.

"Well I think [the worked flowed] because people were quick to say what they liked, what they didn't like and to talk about something in a way that they felt heard. Once we got to the work it took off because everyone had the opportunity to talk and communicate and to express themselves and we did move quickly once we got to that point, because then we had stronger relationships and partnerships as a result of that leg work."

Not only did the work of the second half of the process occur relatively rapidly, people invested a large amount of hours.

"I think that if I would calculate the number of hours both at the large group meetings, the small group meetings, the conference call meetings, the review pieces independent of meetings….wow! But I think we also created a something that was truly unique in this kind of document."

Once the work began to march forward, committees were formed, including a writing committee, an outreach committee, and others. The outreach committee made a commitment to vet the document thoroughly. And they upheld this commitment. The chair of the committee recruited "ambassadors" to reach out to a much broader set of populations, communities, professionals, para-professionals, and used a variety of methods to solicit feedback. Some ambassadors met communities in their own environments, many ambassadors were native speakers of non-English speaking groups, and they also created an online feedback form for people who preferred to give feedback this way. Throughout the process, there was a tone of "we are going to get this right this time!"

"We found ambassadors from all walks of life....so we have people from the Latino community, parents, we had such a range of ambassadors that called meetings with their constituents or made personal phone calls to their constituents to get questions answered. I went to people from health to mental health to parent groups to doulas…I know we got more input."

Collecting feedback is only one step in the process however. Organizing the feedback and making sense of it to ensure vital ideas were not lost, especially with such a large scale of feedback, was challenging.

"The writer the group hired also took every piece of information and kind of collated it and organized it and as a larger group we really looked at it carefully and the group that was the writing group, we made changes based on that input, and then went out and did it [the outreach process] again."

Some of what they carried with them after all the story telling and listening was a deeper sense of accountability to one another and accountability to a shared vision. It was clear that the group took their mandate of producing a quality document extremely seriously.

The group felt accountable to one another after the story telling had occurred, because it was if they carried each other's stories. One of the NEP Facilitators describes the way in which people take on a sense of responsibility for each other after having really listened to another's life story like this:

"I think another impetus was [for getting the work done] *how responsible people felt and because they had had a shared experience through this process they felt more accountable to one another. When somebody shares a piece of their story with you it's*

an extraordinary gift because you then carry that piece of their story. What it helps people do is feel more accountable to that person when they're not around because I'm sharing a piece of that story. It's a gift. It's an extraordinary gift but it doesn't come without responsibility to carry people's stories" (NEP Facilitator).

There was also a strong sense of vision, and of hope, that it was possible to do something truly different.

"Maybe it is that kind of underlying hope or maybe this kind of feeling like that we were part of something really exciting, really cutting edge and this could be something really amazing. I think that once we quit fighting, once we broke through the kind of resistance, I think that we found that we're all on the right seat of the bus and that we were all going together on this journey that it started to feel like, wow. It was exciting. Look what we're creating."

john powell discuss this kind of communication and approach to organizational change as a shift from "us/them" to "we". In his tool kit, "Race Matters: How to Talk About Race" which emphasizes the importance of creating empathetic space and building connections through personal narratives, he explains that in moving forward to change "racialized outcomes", the focus of our communication must be around finding the shared values, and shared interests in improving our communities. He explains that our conversations must move away from…

"*…separating people in need from everybody else, and acknowledge that the healthiest individuals are those nurtured by a community invested in everyone's success" (powell, Cagampagn Heller, Bundalli, June 2011).*

The quote above describes how the group came to realize they had shared values and interests and were working together to improve outcomes for individual children and the entire community simultaneously.

Not only did the work progress quickly once the group had come together and realized they were all fighting for the same thing, but NEP's support continued throughout the process. One of the unique aspects of NEP's facilitation is that unlike typical "unlearning racism" workshops, NEP doesn't come in and teach techniques for communicating about race in the abstract, but does so while the participants are engaged in real work. This allows the on-going work of making implicit bias conscious, listening truly attentively and without attachment to outcome, and searching for common ground to occur regularly. While one may be deeply moved about the power of listening in a workshop, actually putting that inspiration into action is much more difficult. Research in professional development and leadership has come to realize that often the coaching component is the missing link in adult learning that supports the application of new knowledge to real life.

B. Other Critical Factors

The National Equity Project partnered with another consulting organization, Cedar River. This firm was able to provide a talented writer who was able to fall into the newly defined culture of the group and help translate their thoughts and ideas to the written page.

> *"I also think that the writer was amazing. She really was an unsung hero because she took the information and transformed it without judgment. I think having someone who was a writer who was so open and didn't have a hidden agenda was so valuable."*

Cedar River joined the process when the group was ready for timelines and deliverables and needed some help keeping them on track with their products. Both the writer and the project manager navigated the worlds of timelines and creative ideas extremely well. The writer summarized her approach as follows:

> *"Understanding the background, from the challenges with the benchmarks and understanding what this group was trying to do this time with the guidelines. I tried to really listen, myself, to what people were saying they wanted in the document and reflect back to them, 'so then would this work?' Or 'do you mean something like this?' And as I told the document sub-group numerous times this is not my document, this is your document and when this gets done I go away and you guys are the ones who will be using it and implementing it and sharing it with other people. So I may suggest things that look good to me but I'm not the audience and I'm not the one who needs to be happy with it…."*

Though the writer probably had superb listening skills prior to joining the early learning guidelines group, it appeared that because the group had defined their culture and values so strongly, individuals joining the process mid-way through were easily incorporated into the process.

C. Reflections and Learning

One of the primary purposes for sharing this case with others collaborating in groups is to inspire them to replicate aspects of this process. It was not NEP alone, or the group alone that accomplished this task, but a system working together. Within that system there were three essential conditions that allowed for transformation to occur:

- Courageous community advocates

- Committed leaders with decision-making authority, and
- Effective facilitation based in a blameless analysis of racialized outcomes embedded within complex systems.

1) **Courageous community advocates.** There were a number of community advocates who were outspoken, direct, and unwavering in their commitment to true cultural competency. Martina in particular, coined a phrase; 'cultural genocide" which was extremely charged. Other advocates including Ben Kodama who shared the Charlie Brown Metaphor, were not concerned about being liked or making the process easy. This kind of urgency, and even discomfort, is a critical piece of systems change.

2) **Committed leaders with decision-making authority.** The leadership from the State Department of Early Learning and from Thrive by Five Washington was essential. They had a strong vision for equity, and were able to uphold and honor the value of equity. The individual leaders were humble enough to say, "I am learning with you. I don't have all the answers. I am willing to step into the unknown." In addition, leaders with the power to make decisions about timelines, about the look and feel of the document, about creating a new container, were present and actively involved in the process. This kind of commitment and deep participation from leaders in authority is not common and in this case, made an enormous difference.

3) **Effective, blameless facilitation with a complex systems lens**. Finally, NEP offered a kind of facilitation that is unique. Among organization development approaches, theirs draws on complex adaptive systems, cognitive behavioral science, emotional and relational healing, whole person learning, and overlays these theories and models on an analysis of race in such a way as to empower each individual involved regardless of their own race or life experience to find what they have to contribute to improving outcomes for children, families and communities.

NEP's approach brought essential support to this group's transformation, and for this group, the following elements of NEP's facilitation were particularly important:

- A **blame-free analysis of race** that invited participation rather than division
- A **complex systems understanding** to diagnose the problem, and move though a variety of stages of the process that led to transformation
- Building an **intentional learning community** with **charismatic presence**
- A **flexible, responsive facilitation** approach; willingness to throw out the agenda
- Attention to the **need for healing** and opportunities to release pain and other emotions
- Taking the time to **support deep listening** and attention to **developing relationships**

- Using **metaphor** to advance learning and **empathy**
- **On-going coaching** and reinforcement of new learning integrated throughout the real work

We hope this report provides insight and inspiration for practitioners who face similarly complex situations that present such substantial questions as:

- How to begin when a group is experiencing severe discord?
- What are ways of leveraging both outspoken advocates and commitment from leadership?
- How can advocates who make us uncomfortable still be celebrated?
- How can leaders whose authority we recognize be supported to step into the unknown?
- What does it mean to move forward with outspoken advocates but no support from leadership?
- What does it mean when a leader has a vision, but there is no one willing to make the group uncomfortable with the full truth?

NEP's approach provided multiple examples of unique ways of attending to these common questions.

Using a complex adaptive systems framework, NEP was able to diagnose the problem as being on the edge of chaos. They recognized that the group needed an intervention outside the scope of a usual facilitation approach. Certain individuals needed a one-on-one session immediately if they were going to return. They realized there are moments in professional life where personal pain is so great that no amount of technical or operational procedures will overcome the need to give voice to the pain and release it. In situations related to race this is often the case. NEP was able to identify this situation quickly, and have the necessary off-line conversations to convince individuals to continue to engage in the process. And they used an analysis of race that explained the way in which systems perpetuate racialized outcomes even while the actors may not be racist.

Once this intervention happened (while the group was still in a realm of complexity in which there was not agreement about the cause of the problem or the solution), NEP guided the group through a process of building an intentional learning community. Rather than expecting a group in huge discord to develop their own group agreements, NEP invited the group to assent to a set of agreements through positive invitation. The group agreements were comforting and invited the group to interact with one another in a new way. NEP's "charismatic presence" throughout the building a learning community process, including using both soothing and enthusiastic tones, using eye contact and body language, assisted in the group's ability to decrease their anxiety and engage in the work ahead. NEP also recognized the value of emotional and relational healing, and facilitated a group dynamic to

heal from the consequences of race and privilege dynamics which allowed for the group to identify their shared responsibility to one another.

One of NEP's core interventions was teaching listening skills using the theory and approach of constructivist listening. The simple structure allowed for people to understand their listening as a gift and develop relational bonds, to learn to really stop and listen without having to consider their next question or the consequence of the person's speech, but to trust that their listening would make a difference. The combination of both dyad and personal experience panels with carefully crafted prompts as well as thoughtful facilitation of the process, enabled the participants (many of whom had already had training on listening) to learn new and more profound ways of listening. The experience of telling one's personal story while being heard was also essential. The meaning making that occurs as one tells their story to a listener or group of listeners who care is an essential piece of healing the pain of racism and oppression.

NEP's encouragement of metaphor and ritual to advance learning and connection was also a key component to their success. The Charlie Brown metaphor exemplified this, in the way that the group made a symbolic and real commitment not to ever "yank the football away" again, i.e. to truly incorporate feedback on bias and make the early learning document culturally representative and appealing to multiple cultural groups. Another way in which NEP effectively used metaphor to move beyond an impasse was the use of "a new container." Whether or not to throw the old benchmarks out and start with a blank slate or use the old benchmarks as a draft had been an area the group could not reach agreement on. By introducing the idea of "a new container," a third option appeared that the group could agree to.

Finally, NEP's on-going coaching throughout the process to remind participants of their commitments to one another and to model communication that was inclusive rather than divisive was instrumental in supporting the group's success. They proved the value of slowing down. Slowing down is not synonymous with getting behind. NEP asked the group to define for themselves: what is the purpose of this deadline? Then honor that purpose, not the date.

In conclusion, the combination of outspoken advocates who refused to be silent around their advocacy for their communities' needs, leaders in positions of authority who were visionary,

humble and willing to participate as equals, and a unique facilitation approach enabled the Washington Early Learning Committee to create a document embraced by multiple groups.[2]

In addition to these critical factors, we hope to leave practitioners inspired to take new risks. To listen to the advocates who make groups uncomfortable or to perhaps speak up again if you are an advocate who has felt dismissed. To reconsider a deadline and attend to the need for a group to heal from the pain of oppression. When talking about race, consider how you can switch from an "us/them" perspective to a "we" perspective. Perhaps if you are a leader or decision maker, or a board member who supports such leaders, consider the value of stepping into the unknown.

In the end, for those whose life mission is serving children and families, making space to bring more of our stories to the table, to listen to each other courageously, patiently and honestly can make the difference of a plan or document that is genuinely helpful or not. All the early learning committee members recognize as well, that this document now is a living one. It is not perfect. It is one that that invites a real conversation. It was created in a framework of inclusion and the listening will continue.

> *"I want it to be used. I want people to give us feedback about it. I don't pretend that it's perfect. I know there are going to be things that people will find that we can make better the next time. My greatest hope is to have people say, "oh I'm using this and talking to parents about it. It helps me to do a better job". And the people saying that are people that represent the full continuum of talent and cultures in our state." (Bette Hyde, Director of Early Learning of Washington State).*

[2] The document can be viewed online at: http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/development/docs/Guidelines.pdf.

AFTERWORD

It should be noted that while the two very significant accomplished were made -- completing a radically new version of the early learning benchmarks, and empowering a group of individuals with the awareness, knowledge, and skills to productively have conversations about race -- the work of transforming systems doesn't stop there. It is actually only a drop in the bucket. Creating the document is just one phase of the work. If the re-imagined document is simply inserted into the same system and disseminated in the same ways as have been done historically, it will not realize its full potential. Leaders need to re-imagine the ways in which the document is introduced, the ways in which people are encouraged to give feedback or to use the document, and the ways the public interacts with the State Department of Early Learning and other public and private organizations.

Engaging with community members, listening to those with less access or avenues to share their voice and perspective, slowing down, being courageous and speaking up, are all life-long commitments necessary for true systems change. The individuals who participated in this process can be the pioneers now as they go back into their respective organizations and committees and be leaders. They need to act in accordance with what they have learned, penetrate their systems, and continue the process of complex systems change.

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