

client case study



HOW THE COMPASSIONATE DIALOGUE JOURNEY HELPED ONE EDUCATOR PROACTIVELY MANAGE OFFENSIVE OR TRIGGERING STUDENT COMMENTS

"When I first learned about the RIR, I was focused on practicality. The compassionate piece wasn't in the forefront. The Compassionate Dialogue Journey is what really helped me understand that part. It's not about changing someone's mind; it's about being compassionate with fellow human beings even when we disagree. That's the beautiful piece."

-Jennifer Horton

*Western Placer Unified School District
College & Career Coordinator*

HIGHLIGHTS

Western Placer Unified School District is located in north central California. It proudly serves approximately 8,000 students.

Challenges

- A lack of assuredness in how to handle triggering moments with colleagues and students
- A feeling of guilt in instances of personal inaction or non-response
- A struggle with being confident in and reconciling personal identity in equity-based conversations

Solution

- A more personal exploration of the "why" behind Compassionate Dialogue and how it can be a form of self-care
- Additional practice using the RIR Protocol
- Tools and prompts specifically to address feelings and identity

Results

- Seeing triggering situations with students and colleagues as opportunities to learn and connect
- Minimizing guilt in triggering situations and prioritizing growth, leading to deeper internal awareness and more external action
- Empowering ownership of identity in equity-based conversations

CHALLENGES

Jennifer Horton had prior experience with Epoch Education's equity work via trainings in Western Placer in Central California. The RIR Protocol (Recognize, Interrupt, Repair) felt like a welcomed tool, especially since—like all of us at times—she felt a need and desire to handle uncomfortable moments more productively but wasn't always sure how.

"Let's Talk About Race [Dr. Dome's first book] helped me understand the RIR and become more confident in using it," Jennifer said. "And when I heard about the CDJ, I knew I needed more practice. I will always, always be practicing."

For Jennifer, the impetus to continue her journey did not come as a result of a specific incident or concern. However, she describes Placer County as "a conservative area compared to others in California," so she sought out additional support on the equity-front to help her and her colleagues healthfully manage interactions with one another and with students.

"When I was teaching in the classroom, I struggled with how to deal with some of the things the kids would say," she said. "I asked around. A few other teachers recommended advice from websites that didn't feel very helpful, but it was all we thought we had."

In facilitating youth development trainings, she again discovered many of her colleagues had the same questions. They were constantly looking for ways to interact with and respond to students when something was said that felt offensive or unkind.

"For example, I was supervising lunch duty once and asked a student to pick up a piece of trash. The student looked down, shook his head no, and replied, 'what do you think I am, Asian?' That triggered me," Jennifer said. "In situations like that, I'm definitely not going to get mad at the student. But silence doesn't work either and just leaves you feeling bad after. We need a different approach."

SOLUTIONS

The RIR Protocol and Compassionate Dialogue Journey have offered Jennifer just that: a different approach, one rooted in engaging. To keep her skills sharp, she practices the Protocol with her teammates using Epoch Education's Conversation Starter Cards.

"Sometimes we'll pull a card, and some people don't understand what's wrong. Sometimes I don't either. So we have to work it out together without shaming each other," she said. "It's a conversation about, 'wow, I never thought about how this could be harmful. What else don't I know?'"

Internally, Jennifer found the Cycle of Inference and the Feelings Wheel resources incredibly impactful, especially when explained more in-depth in the *Compassionate Dialogue Journey*.

"Now that they've sunk in, a lot has changed for me internally. A big thing for me is thinking where I'm at on the Cycle of Inference and how that informs my actions. I've also printed out the Feelings Wheel and posted it in the area where I work so others can see it too," she said. "I will ask myself things like, 'Am I really mad? Or am I frustrated?' Then it leads to, 'Does what I'm frustrated about even have to do with this person?' It helps me check how I respond."

She implemented these tools in real-time during that lunchtime student interaction.

SOLUTIONS (CONTINUED)

"When he made that comment about not being Asian, I said 'That's interesting. Why did you say that?' The student went blank," Jennifer said. "It was apparent really quickly that the student had no idea that what he was saying was offensive. I was able to not get angry and instead have a conversation about why that might be hurtful to people."

RESULTS/IMPACT

Having a tool to navigate uncomfortable moments or conflict-and one that is both sharable and at-the-ready-has been transformative for Jennifer.

"Just being able to respond in the moment when something happens that doesn't sit right with me instead of getting mad at myself later for not saying or doing anything has been huge," she said. "I now have a process I can use to respond instead of react."

The focus on identity in the *Compassionate Dialogue Journey*, in particular, hit home as well.

"I used to struggle with showing up as a white heterosexual woman in these equity conversations," she said. "Now I know how important it is to show up and use those identities so we can connect more and start from a place of honesty. Now, when I'm introducing myself for work, I've been challenging myself to come in and say something like, 'this is who I am.'" It's great to be able to think it through together in conversation."

For Jennifer, these changes have made a positive impact outside of work, too.

"The Protocol has changed so much for me, and still I will always be on this journey. Both are true," she said. "Even away from work, I've been able to have deep conversations with family members that wouldn't have been possible before. I've learned that it's not my job to change someone's mind. What I want to be responsible for is being compassionate with myself and other people."