

client case study

HOW THE COMPASSIONATE DIALOGUE JOURNEY EMPOWERED ONE BLACK EDUCATOR TO SHOW UP FULLY IN DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

"This work [CDJ] was self care for me because for me and many of my fellow Black colleagues. We have to get to a point where we can take care of ourselves and not be afraid to be in these spaces. Because if we're not the voice of our community, then it goes without. Sure, being the only one in certain situations is hard, frustrating, exhausting . . . however, what I learned through CDJ is that it's okay to be in that space, to feel these things. It's time we figure out how to move in this space and say the thing and be okay saying the thing in a way that pushes us forward."

-Angie Barfield, Ed.D.

*The Office of the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools
Program Specialist, Student Equity & Empowerment*

HIGHLIGHTS

The Fresno County Office of Education serves over 32 multi-cultural districts in California with more than 200,000 students.

Challenges

- Navigating a lack of Black educational leaders in this space
- Seeking a way to communicate about challenging topics in a way that's mutually effective and in support of the common goal: serving students
- Finding more ways to support and engage with students

Solution

- A deeper exploration of "why" behind the RIR Protocol
- A source of tools and prompts specifically to address relationship to equity, conflict, and identity
- A way to move through Compassionate Dialogue as a group with opportunities to practice/engage

Results

- A framework for educators and staff to healthily engage with students and one another
- A toolkit and process to empower speaking up in situations/conversations in which there are very few Black voices
- A boost in confidence in overall ability to communicate authentically and effectively

CHALLENGES

Just because you have diversity in a space doesn't mean there is diversity in how the leaders of those spaces think. Angie Barfield, a Program Specialist for Student Equity and Empowerment with the Office of the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools [FCSS], knows this well. As one of the few Black leaders in her organization, she had many conversations in the post-George Floyd era about the difference between allyship and action but often felt she had to self-edit around the stereotype of being perceived as the “angry Black woman.”

“I came to *LTAR* (*Let's Talk About Race*) and the RIR (Epoch Education's RIR Protocol) because we clearly need to be able to talk about these things in a real way,” Angie said. “I wanted to find a way I could bring my colleagues along to all empower each other to help our districts and communities.”

In her role in particular, Angie solely focuses on leadership, advocacy, and empowerment of all students, and specifically Black youth. But she noticed that in working with the students, another group was struggling, too.

“When you're working with students, you're indirectly working with their advisors, teachers, etc. because they're in space with them. We started to see faculty saying, ‘I need help too,’ and ‘I don't know how to speak to my students.’ So this was for all of us.”

SOLUTIONS

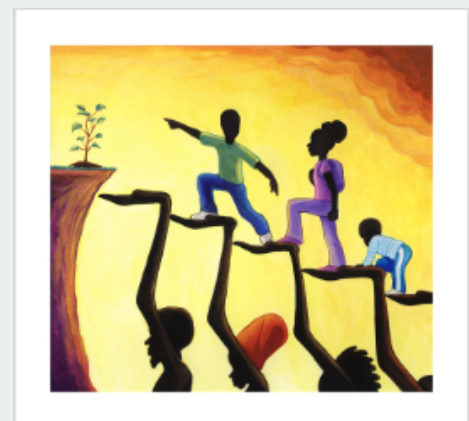
Angie felt the RIR Protocol provided a way to elevate student voice and, at the same time, build support and infrastructure for that to happen on a faculty- and environment- level.

“As I got into some of these big conversations of race and things, I realized if we don't communicate thoughtfully, we're going to defeat the whole purpose. We're humans, and we should treat each other that way. The CDJ was the next step for me because not only was I not the only Black person there, but I got to hear from others who don't look like me and see how they move through situations to better inform my ability to build healthier environments for these kids.”

She particularly resonated with the Equity Avatar activity—one in which you choose an external source (piece of art, song, etc.) that describes where you feel you're at on your equity journey. Angie says she felt this process to be both the most challenging and the most rewarding of the CDJ activities.

“It was especially helpful to be reminded that the avatar can change. And it challenged me to look deep into who I am and how I felt about where I am,” she said. “I can use this with others to have them begin the process, too. If we're going to have a compassionate conversation, it's helpful to be able to say, ‘let's get in touch with who you are first,’ because nothing is going to move or impact you more than understanding and loving yourself first. The avatar activity is a great example of this. When I invite others to do this, a lot of times, they're like, ‘whoa.’”

Angie's avatar (at this juncture—because it can change, remember) is a picture, *Ujima Steps* by Marcus Kwame.



SOLUTIONS (CONTINUED)

"It's supposed to be the adults uplifting the youth getting to the plant of life," Angie said. "Imagine if one of those hands wasn't in the place it was supposed to be. We'd lose one or more. I work with young people but also the community so they find success in taking these steps. Educational leaders, religious leaders, community leaders . . . we are those hands. When the youth take steps moving forward, they need to see a future they want to get to. We just need to make sure it's there and it holds."

RESULTS/IMPACT

After moving through the *Compassionate Dialogue Journey*, Angie feels more empowered in challenging situations. For example, working with Black youth specifically, she often feels an undercurrent of people on the outside wondering 'why just them?'

"It gets frustrating to have to constantly explain to people why the focus is here and not everywhere," she said. "I can feel myself now at a point where I can hear my tone changing, starting to elevate. And I know I can't do that because I'm going to lose, unfortunately. I don't have the privileges of some of my white female colleagues who might be able to say the same things and get a different reaction."

Angie says the RIR Protocol and CDJ have given her another way forward.

"This work shows a different way to be in that space and still accomplish what I want to accomplish without watering myself down or detesting those I share those spaces with," she said. "I appreciate Nancy because, for many of us, she's the example of moving in this space and not losing it all. I trusted her to walk me through it (the CDJ). I wasn't frustrated during this process because she laid the ground rules first. She gave us permission to be who we are. I didn't feel like I had to show up any other way than myself."

The tools Angie learned also functioned as a form of self-care.

"I know now that it's okay to say sometimes, 'I can't help you with that, but here are some resources.' And if someone still feels like I'm the angry Black female or dismissive, that's not my bucket of water to carry," she said. "I took away from all of this how to be who I am as a Black woman in these conversations and how to protect myself without leaving a wreck. We need tools. Even firefighters wear suits."

She even uses CDJ practices in her marriage now.

"I find myself not having to elevate my voice. Giving myself permission to remove myself from spaces so I can recognize something, interrupt it, and repair it. Because when I'm angry, I can't do any of that at all," she said. "Of course, all of this is about application, but it's the part about caring for yourself through that application that has really stuck with me."