Caring, Character and Community: What's Equity Got to Do With It?

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Abstract

For decades, The Center for Character and Social Responsibility has sought to support professionals, particularly within the field of education, in their efforts to build communities that foster both individual and collective flourishing. Such communities encourage youth and adults alike to develop their senses of self and character, and to put their values into action – both for their own growth and for the good of those around them. The CCSR community believes that this work can happen anywhere, and that individuals can, and often do, facilitate organizational progress. In this age of polarization [1] it is important to examine how people and organizations are working to build communities of care rather than barriers to connection, and to amplify the narrative that such growth is possible. Coleman and Barcay [2] reported on the ways in which leaders of educational institutions and community-based organizations use an ethic of care, a focus on their own and others' character development, and a commitment to community in order to create high-quality learning experiences and opportunities for all youth. This paper will report on how leaders in organizations that serve culturally and linguistically diverse youth integrate their own sense of character, as well as their commitment to creating communities in which all youth can flourish, into the work of building effective organizations.

Keywords: *Character, Caring, Community, Equity*

Introduction

During the second series of *Caring, Character, & Community*, the podcast of Boston University's Center for Character and Social Responsibility, Dr. Hardin L. K. Coleman interviewed six leaders of educational institutions and community-based organizations dedicated to creating and supporting high-quality learning experiences for all youth. Focused particularly on serving culturally and linguistically diverse students, these organizations pursue educational equity from a variety of angles, using different strategies and levers to create networks and to develop programming in support of positive youth development. We aimed to understand what draws leaders to this work, what it takes to build and lead effective organizations around it, and the roles of caring and character both in the outcome goals themselves, and in the work that must be done to pursue them effectively in the context of problematic systems.

Interviews took place during the spring and summer of 2022. They were conducted individually over Zoom, and were flexibly structured around the following prompts and questions. First, leaders were asked to introduce themselves, to describe their current organizations and positions, and to discuss what brought them to this work. As abstract themes, such as equity, collaboration, character, caring, and civic engagement began to emerge within each individual conversation, interviewees were invited to elaborate and comment upon them by means of clarifying questions about how these might factor into their work. Leaders were also asked about some of the challenges they have come to understand while working to create a more equitable system, as well as about what advice they might give to their younger selves, or to young professionals in earlier stages of similar careers. Conversations were guided by, but not limited to, this framework of questions and prompts; each one's open-ended nature often prompted storytelling and the sharing of illustrative examples.

In describing the work of their organizations, their own roles within them, and their beliefs about systems-change work in pursuit of equity, the six leaders we interviewed talked about their

personal histories and motivations; addressing barriers to equity; pursuing collaboration, dialogue, and engagement; inviting constituent participation; fostering accountability and collective responsibility; operating according to an ethic of care; the interaction of character and leadership; and the connection between civic action and efficacy.

Equity

When asked to introduce themselves and to describe their work, most leaders explicitly named equity as a core outcome goal of their current organizations, and a driving force behind their careers. They spoke about the desire to help shape educational systems such that demographic data are not predictive of student outcomes; all students should have access to high-quality learning environments in which they are helped to understand and develop their own abilities and potentials. While the organizations these individuals lead each contribute to this overarching goal using different methods and levers, our interviewees demonstrated broad agreement in how they discussed equity and the barriers they have encountered in its pursuit.

Personal History and Motivation

As they addressed the initial question of what brought them to the work they currently do, most interviewees shared personal stories about having seen, experienced, and/or come to understand inequity as it existed in the educational environments they inhabited during their childhood- and early-adulthood years. They cited examples of the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities they had noticed in how individual students were "tracked" into easy or challenging courses, as well as which demographic groups were represented in various student organizations and extracurricular opportunities. Leaders described having been troubled by these patterns, and curious about them – and, later, having been drawn to courses of study and career opportunities that would allow them to understand and work to address educational inequity.

Barriers

In talking about equity, the leaders we interviewed asserted that cultivating equitable educational practices requires identifying and breaking down the barriers that exist for various populations. These are wide-ranging, and can encompass issues from accessibility (in terms of timing, location, and language, for example), to socioeconomic limitations, to cultural divides and institutionalized prejudice. While interviewees did not go into exhaustive detail about the numerous barriers to equity that exist within educational institutions, they often made the direct connection from understanding *that* such barriers exist, to the necessity of working collaboratively with the populations they aim to serve in order to fully understand the realities of those barriers, and to begin to break them down.

Collaboration, Dialogue, and Engagement

Whether their organizations and projects were large or small, – and whether local, state-wide, national, or international, – our interviewees all discussed the importance of engaging multiple groups of constituents and stakeholders as they worked to serve young people effectively. It is not enough, leaders told us, to provide enriching educational and extracurricular opportunities when barriers to access are always present, not always obvious, and often baked into the way systems operate. Working towards equity requires an accurate conceptualization of the problems at hand, as well as possible solutions thereto, which necessitates that organizations collect representative data from young people, their families, school and organization staff, and other community partners.

Inviting Participation

Leaders identified that the earnest pursuit of educational equity opened their eyes to the many ways in which stakeholders tend to be systematically excluded from offering their perspectives and experiences – which leads to knowledge gaps that thwart productive action. In school contexts, for example, parents might be invited to participate in focus groups in order to gather data, but those focus groups may be situated at times and in locations that are inaccessible, unwelcoming, and intimidating for individuals and families in marginalized demographic groups. Truly engaging families and community members in this work requires more than simply inviting their participation; leaders described paying attention to the conditions and modes of communication that brought in more voices, and working conscientiously to create conditions that lead to the inclusion of perspectives that might otherwise not be represented in their data. A common theme was the belief that organizations that seek to advance equity do not contain all of the necessary expertise and resources to do so on their

own; rather, they expressed that it is critical to work *with* underserved communities in order to work *for* them.

Accountability and Collective Responsibilit*y*

In organizations that aim to advance equity, leaders described the importance of cultivating cultures of collaboration and collective responsibility, both within their own organizations, and in the institutions and organizations they seek to serve. Data should not only be representative, but should also be shared in ways that provide feedback about whether or not goals are being met, invite earnest reflection on what is being done, and provide avenues towards making change. When our interviewees talked about accountability, many were careful to explain that effective practices are not based on compliance and top-down enforcement, but rather on a foundation of shared values and goals, and a sense of mutual responsibility for working together to enact and achieve them. It is critical to this work, leaders asserted, to build cultures of trust within and among organizations – to forge partnerships, to learn from one another, and to come to see themselves more clearly – in order to support the reflection and responsiveness required for positive systemic change. In establishing and nurturing supportive networks of individuals and institutions that work together on these key goals, leaders help to create conditions of shared accountability for continual growth towards equity. When responsibility for progress resides within systems that are set up to iterate towards collective success, rather than being conceptualized on an individual evaluative level, it becomes a responsibility to one another, rooted in care for children and a dedication to pursuing positive outcomes for all students.

Caring and Character

An ethic of care was braided throughout our interviewees' descriptions of their work as organizational leaders, along with numerous allusions to character strengths: their own, as well as those they aim to cultivate in students and within their organizations.

Ethic of Care

As each discussed what brought them into this work, and the ways in which they have approached it, leaders referred often to their ultimate goal: wanting to do right by the children and families they serve. Most of the leaders we interviewed had worked in a variety of capacities in various educational settings, institutions, and systems over the course of their careers. They described having been motivated to improve outcomes for children as a result of their deeply held sense of social responsibility, alongside their understanding of the transformative power of the caring relationships they had witnessed and experienced in their own lives. In thinking about how care impacts their work, leaders were clear that fostering caring relationships between and among students and adults has been an essential part of their work, and a key factor in their success. They understood both individual and broader organizational changes as being direct results of relationships and networks thereof in which mutual care, trust, and understanding are actively fostered. Mentorship was discussed as a critically important and bidirectional framework: not only a support for individual student success, but also a transformational influence on the adults who learn from those students about their lives, and how best to support them.

Character and Leadership

When asked how they think about *character* as it relates to their work, some leaders described the ways in which building character strengths within students was a direct, desired outcome of their work, and all of them alluded to cultivating strengths and mindsets within their organizations: harnessing their members' ethic of care and desire to serve young people towards collective efficacy in putting that care to work. In talking both about the students they work with, and about their own leadership, our interviewees advocated for practicing and cultivating respect, open-mindedness, thoughtful listening, taking responsibility for one's own mistakes and shortcomings, and taking action towards a more equitable future based on the learning that occurs as a result of the above habits.

Civic Action and Experiences of Efficacy

As they described their approach to creating educational opportunities that advance equity, many leaders advocated for the importance of listening to student voices – not only in pursuit of accurate data, as discussed above, but also in creating the conditions for students to have experiences of effective civic engagement within the communities and institutions they inhabit. Equity work, done well, involves not only providing students with specific educational opportunities and helping to ensure they

can access them, but also inviting those students to participate actively in co-creating the institutions that aim to serve them. The benefits are manifold. By listening to students about their experiences and needs, and honoring their perspectives and contributions, institutions and organizations can learn how to better serve them; at the same time, young people can experience authentic, formative experiences of successful engagement that demonstrate to them that their voices matter, and that they are capable of making change, and progress towards greater equity, within imperfect systems. This has the potential to initiate a virtuous cycle, in which a sense of efficacy around making change, and an understanding of how to do so, leads to more change-making in pursuit of equity.

Conclusion

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from these conversations is that creating systems in which all children can have equitable access to opportunity is possible. It is apparent that, to create such systems demands perseverance, resilience, a willingness to collaborate, a strong sense of self, and an openness to be deeply caring of others. It also demands a willingness for leaders to be able to share their strengths and to be open to learning how to improve as a function of approximation errors. Another important conclusion is that success in this work is about system improvement and not about individual accomplishment. Effective leaders find a balance between their aspirations to be effective and creating systems that serve others. The final conclusion to be drawn from these interviews is that a focus on equity provides a powerful organizing principle for these leaders.

References

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