

Parents and Teachers: Introduction

Cultivating Leadership Among Public School Parents and Educators

Arts for Action is an experimental advocacy project to involve parents and educators from the Cambridge Public Schools in innovative social change strategies. Arts for Action enlisted facilitators from VISIONS to help parents and teachers brainstorm innovative solutions to the race, class, language and gender disparities in academic achievement.

Visions, Inc. is a multiracial organization that conducts experiential workshops in team building, conflict resolution, and leadership development. VISIONS, Inc. facilitators encouraged workshop participants to share power, experiment with formats and reframe the issues at hand.

VISIONS, Inc. Guidelines for Productive Multicultural/Inclusive Work Sessions

In order to capitalize on our unique cultural perspectives and expertise, we seek to apply the following guidelines to our interactions:

Try on each other's ideas, feelings and ways of doing things for the purpose of greater understanding and exploring all possible approaches. Keep what you like and let go of the rest at the end of the work session.

It's Ok to disagree. One of the necessary ingredients for differences to be expressed and valued is that people let go of the need to be, think or act the same.

It's not Ok to blame, shame or attack ourselves or others because of our differences.

Practice self-focus. Begin by talking about your own experience. It is helpful to make "I" statements when speaking about yourself and your experience, rather than saying "you", "we" or "one". When you intend to refer to others, be specific about who those others are -- by name or group. When you really speaking about your own experience or opinion, use "I have found....." or "I think ...".

Notice both the process and content during work sessions. Content is what we say, while process is how and why we say or do something and how the group members react. Notice who's active and who's not, who's comfortable and who's not, who's interested and who's not, including yourself, ask about it, and share your own thoughts and feelings as well.

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Practice "both/and" thinking. Look for ways to fit ideas together and not set up an "either/or" process or a competition between ideas. Look for the existence of many truths from the perspective of the many cultural backgrounds involved.

Be aware of both intent and impact of your actions. The impact of our behavior and decisions on others will determine the success of inclusive work sessions. A major inclusion strategy is to learn and hear when our behaviors and decisions are having a negative impact even when we don't intend them to and to be willing to change that negative impact if it results in persons or groups being treated as "less than" or excluded. This guideline will require us to take risks with new ways of thinking and feeling, to share our reactions to others and to exchange honest feedback about the impact of our words and actions on each other. We can be both well-intentioned AND still say hurtful things and at the same time, be open to how to behaving differently with people who are different from us and who prefer and need different behaviors from us to feel fully valued and included in their relationships with us.

Confidentiality with regard to personal sharing is important. You can share the public work of the group, your own stories and perspectives and your own learning and areas for growth. Allow others to tell their own personal stories, opinions and learnings.

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This initiative grew out of a frustration with the status quo among parents, educators and elected officials who shared a desire to change the conversation about public school education.

The goal was to help educators, parents and students:

- develop an empowering group process,
- Introduce a common language to analyze power imbalances connected to race, class, gender, language and other "isms,"
- use role plays, theater techniques, and personal stories that draw on the experiences of the participants themselves to develop advocacy-based problem-solving skills.

Arts for Action ran interactive training workshops, conducted community forums, attended local school board meetings and used theater techniques to bring their concerns and ideas for change to the broader Cambridge community.

Getting Started

Identifying the Project Goals

VISIONS facilitators and local community leaders met for several months prior to convening the workshops and identified the following goals for the program:

- To shift focus from symptoms to underlying causes of disparities in academic achievement, including teacher expectations and training, culturally and socially relevant pedagogy, and knowledge of available resources.
- To move beyond the local politics of school officials, teachers' unions and school committees where dialogue revolves around issues brought up by those who lobby the most.
- To generate fresh approaches in coalition with those most adversely affected by the current system.
- To recuperate the wisdom and energy of those who feel excluded from, or disempowered by, the traditional school experience and to highlight the perspectives of those who have historically been at the periphery of the debate.
- To combine community organizing, theatre strategies and educational training to develop and broaden the skills of local community and school leaders.

Recruiting Participants and Arranging Meeting Space

An effort was made to recruit parents of color using flyers describing the project in several languages. Meetings were held with school administrators and teachers associations to enlist their participation. The principal of a local elementary school offered space for a community forum and parents also helped arrange meeting space for the workshops. Funds from the Mott Foundation were vital to provide workshop participants with meals, child care, and nominal stipends and to cover the facilitation costs. Parents who completed the first training facilitated, provided administrative support, and helped recruit participants for subsequent trainings.

Classroom Methods

Running the Sessions/Discussion Methods

The pilot groups began with a 6-week training program for interested parents and teachers. Sessions were held for 2 hours once a week in the evenings. Food was served and child care was provided. In both groups, parents decided to add a seventh week to prepare for the community forum. The sessions were organized to provide participants with opportunities to share their stories and develop collective resources for taking concrete future action.

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Each session began with a “group round” in which individuals shared feelings and updates on obstacles and accomplishments relating to their experiences with Cambridge schools. This reflective process allowed for group bonding and enabled participants to experience the individual and collective power of their “small” but weekly accomplishments. Further, the rounds process created a space where all participants had the opportunity to discuss issues important to them.

The second part of each session sought to provide tools for analyzing racism, sexism, classism and other “isms.” The trainings typically taught and discussed theory and advocacy tools through stories. Some participants were very receptive to big picture thinking and read additional material that was not assigned as homework. A significant amount of time in the first four classes was used to identify key issues important to the parent participants. In the fifth session, participants developed strategies for presenting these issues to the community. The last few sessions focused on preparing for the community forum.

The Public Forum

The public forum worked well in engaging audiences in the experiences of the workshop participants. Workshop members organized the program around role plays and skits. They used forum theater techniques to pose problems and to enlist audience participation. Members of the audience were asked how they might resolve the conflict that had just been performed. They were asked not to “tell” their idea but to “show” their idea. To do this they were invited to replace one of the protagonists and re-enact the same script using their idea.

"The theatre part was powerful and therapeutic somehow. Let's do more and have more time and preparation. Also we must keep the audience participation. That really worked well."

This helped the forum audiences better understand parents' issues and points of views and to rethink options for improving the Cambridge school system. The superintendent of the Cambridge public schools, two elementary school principals, school committee members, students, and several youth workers attended. Some engaged actively in the forum and were inspired to use the methods in their own groups. The childcare providers and younger children also contributed to the second half of the event. The Cambridge City Council passed a resolution in support of Arts for Action.

Notes from the Arts for Action Community Forum in 2002:

Theatre was a powerfully accessible tool for expressing and testing the concerns of the Arts for Action group. Members of the school and the community gathered in the school gym where everyone was encouraged to

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participate in the forum theater techniques. Forum theater invites the audience to re-enact scenes of conflict in order to consider more constructive approaches through role plays.

Tim Mitchell describes below two of the forum theater skits that were performed that night. After the scenes were played out once by the Arts for Action workshop members, the audience then broke up into small groups in which they generated options to mediate the conflict in two of the scenes. Individuals from each of the groups came up front to re-enact the scene, facilitated by one of the Arts for Action parent participants (who served as the "joker" or moderator).

*** A classroom in which a teacher has no idea how to manage a class, which includes LDHD/ADD/ADHD students along with regular students. The teacher, chair bound, tries to get the class to learn in a very traditional manner with turn to page 15 etc. and rows of desks, but the students quickly lose interest. Meanwhile, one young student (played by an actual young student who was dead-on in his performance) clearly cannot sit still at all and claims to be finished immediately. Another student gives up on the class and leaves. And the rest of the students talk all over each other and nothing gets done. Eventually some of the students turn their back on the teacher all together.**

This was a tough class! Quite a few folks from the audience tried various strategies to deal with the students, with very limited success (though they did identify the problems much more distinctly). After the interventions, the audience met in two groups for Visions led discussions, but with the goal of coming back to play the scene again. We had tremendous buy in on this. In my group the two Principals who were in the audience that night agreed to implement our group ideas about resources and teacher training by going into the class as co-teachers. We also had the idea of identifying the students who were potential leaders in the class, and involving the students in the making of the ground rules of the class. When the two Principals were up there (which is really brave when you think about it...so I was very pleased to see them feel they could)...they really took it to the next level by effectively lowering class size (two groups) and by developing a discussion about respect and about being heard in class. The two Principals, as co-teachers in the scene, also raised the idea that "everyone else has given up on you, but we stayed" which seemed to have a great effect too. Still, our students were strong and tough...they did not roll over in the scene...though everyone agreed that good first steps had been taken and that several ideas that could be advocated for had been identified. The lists of ideas from the group discussions were read aloud.

The other discussion group tried alternative learning styles. They also tried consequences (sent to Principals office), but mitigated that with a scene in the Principals office about getting help for the young man in question rather than punishing him. They also tried co-teachers, but one co-teacher was assigned

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to run interference with the trouble-maker, which was well intentioned, but questionable. The interventions came from parents, teachers and youth leaders in the audience. The audience was small, but very well engaged.

*** A Parent Teacher Conference. The scene begins overhearing the positive conversation between a teacher and a favorite parent (an Asian student's mother). Our parent walks in with her daughter and has trouble getting noticed. Then she tried to explain that her daughter is now getting low grades for not doing homework, but that she has witnessed the homework being done at home. The teacher doesn't want to hear it, and explains that she doesn't have time to track or grade everyone's homework. All she knows is that it wasn't turned in (at the proper time and place...an unclear rule). The discussion goes round and round with no real help from the teacher who finally says take it up with the Principal. I heard the people in the audience around me say "that's too real" when they saw this scene.**

The first interventions were very revealing because, as happened in rehearsal, the mother admonished the daughter in front of the teacher, but our daughter did a great job of showing the problem with that. Then it took several replacements to show that both the parent and the teacher had to be replaced at the same time in order for the scene to work out. In other words, behaviors on both sides were based on assumptions that needed to be changed. Finally, it was the teacher's willingness to accept the homework that the audience felt was a resolution, but we didn't go far enough with this. I would have liked to see the double replacement labeled magic (meaning it was not a realistic option), and then spend some time figuring out what the original teacher assumed about this mother and child, and vice versa. But we did reveal that a parent teacher conference, as it is now, can sometimes be the source of conflict rather than the place for resolution. Class size and busy-work homework are also issues. Race was a visible factor in the scene, but we didn't reach this level in discussion even though the original impulse for the scene came from parents of color being ignored. Our Moderator did a good job, but did not pick up on this miss. Still, lots was shown and the scene had lots of comment and energy.

During our earlier meetings, the parent's group also did some very good images of the issues they had been discussing and the young person's group Fyah! did a great job of breaking them down and talking them through. One of the best showed the body language, similarity between cop and teacher from the point of view of the young men.

We definitely stirred interest! A couple of youth group directors, at least one of the two Principals, and an administrator from the Community Police Review Board approached me afterwards to follow up.

Tim Mitchell, an actor, teacher, and Ph.D. Candidate in theater at Cornell, introduced members of Arts for Action to these interactive theatre techniques

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during the workshops that preceded the community forum. Mitchell attended the community forum and took these notes.

When It Worked

Measuring Success

The project sought to help participants redefine success. This meant moving beyond measures focused on overcoming obstacles to individual achievement to more systemic understandings of problems and strategies to address them.

The specific goals of the sessions were met when participants:

- Identified priorities, barriers, and concrete steps for action, including how to advocate for systemic changes within schools.
- Organized and ran the meetings.
- Explored theatre techniques for social action.
- Bonded and continued to meet and work together after the sessions ended.
- Experienced renewed confidence in their own capacity to advocate for change.

"This group was great. It gave me the extra competence I need to advocate for my child. It gave me new skills as I went into this meeting with my son's teachers... Early in the conversation [with the teacher], she says, "Your letter was well written", as if they were surprised. ... I would like to run a program like Arts for Action with this group [at the Windsor Health Center that runs a program for 85 families]."

Challenges:

Time was a major challenge. It was especially difficult to keep the rounds from taking up too much of the sessions, as facilitators also wanted to focus on larger themes and incorporate techniques for reframing the analysis of problems.

Recruiting interested teachers proved difficult. Many do not live in the district and are not otherwise involved in community affairs. They were reluctant to commit the time to attend evening workshops.

Organizing the community forum was a major effort that promoted a sense of involvement between the workshop participants and the larger community. However, the community forum became the culmination of the project rather than a vehicle for building momentum. Insufficient was paid to questions about how to sustain a project that depends upon volunteers and foundation funding.