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Beneath the Veneers of Resistance and Professionalism

by Intisar Shareef and Janet Gonzalez-Mena

Intisar Shareef is a full time instructor at Contra Costa College and also teaches at San Francisco State University. Holding a doctorate degree in early childhood education, Intisar feels this area is the most rewarding because she's able to work with children, families, and communities. Her ongoing quest is to help develop learning environments that are equitable, transformative, and fun.

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Imagine this scene. Gathered around a bulletin board are some staff members of a medium sized child care center. One reads a notice aloud to the others:

Staff Development Training
Infant-Toddler Caregiving Routines
Wednesday, 12:30 to 1:30

All staff required to attend

Following the reading, whiffs of conversation float quietly through the air:

"What's this training for anyway?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"I'm not being trained for another thing."

"I'm going to be sick on Wednesday. I can feel it coming on."

Can you imagine being the person conducting the staff development with that kind of response just to the notice? The co-authors have both been there. Resistance in trainees is sometimes hard to detect because they are so polite. Other times it is blatant, even though it remains nonverbal.

What usually happens when a trainer meets resistance? The temptation is to just ignore it. But what if you brought unspoken thoughts to

the surface? The co-authors decided to do just that through using role play.

"Caregiving Routines" was the title of a workshop given by the co-authors during an infant-toddler training-of-trainers institute. Our goal was to teach trainers some ways to educate their trainees about "diapering with respect." The concept to get across was the importance of relating to the child in an intimate one-on-one exchange during diapering. We wanted to bring home the point that the quality of the interaction is as important as the physical act of diapering.

Diapering was only the surface issue. We also wanted to explore the subject of trainee resistance. We have both been in situations where trainees were bored, restless, or just plain rude to us. We took those attitudes as signs of resistance to what we were trying to teach. What's behind resistance? That's what we wanted to get at.

The resistance part started as a role play. Intisar, who is African-American, played the trainee and Janet, European-American, played the trainer. The Janet-trainer used a hands-on exercise to show Intisar-trainee the difference between treating someone with respect and treating someone as an object.

When Janet had done the exercise in the past, the exercise ended when each role player made it clear that they had experienced being treated as an object and they didn't like it. But this time we took it a step further. We turned to the audience and asked, "Will the lesson work? Will the trainee actually change her behavior because of this training?"

"Finding out what was really going on here is the next step of our role play," said Intisar.

"We will now examine the thoughts of both the trainer and trainee," said Janet.

Janet, in the role of trainer, went first. She turned to the workshop participants and told them that she hoped this lesson had done some good, because the trainee had a bad attitude toward changing diapers. "She's disrespectful. Her manner says that she just wants to get it over with. I hope she sees the connection between this exercise and a needed change in her behavior." That was Janet's assessment of trainee Intisar.

Then the audience was given the opportunity to learn the trainee's thoughts. Intisar, as trainee, let them have it! "I don't want to be told how to change diapers. I feel like I've been cleaning up poop all my life, and now somebody wants me to pretend I *like* doing it. As a woman of color, I feel like I have to clean up the poop of the world and I'm really sick of it."

Those words stunned the audience. Apparently no one expected to hear about oppression. People were uncomfortable, but they sat up and took notice. Every sleepy eye popped wide open even though the hour was late and it had been a long day. The silence was so intense that you could almost feel it on your skin.

We were told later that the presentation was too threatening and that people were uncomfortable. It was easy to see that. But uncomfortable or not, the participants were completely engaged.

Intisar broke the silence when she said, "I'm stepping out of my role for a minute, because I want to know something. If you were the trainer, what would you say to me if you even suspected I was feeling the way I just told you I was?"

The hands shot up. Lots of people had an answer. The responses centered on *fixing* the perceived problem of the caregiver's resistance. Suggestions ranged from demotion to promotion and everything in between. Just get her out of the diapering business was the consensus. "Move her to work with older kids" was one solution. "Put her to work in the office" was another. "She doesn't belong in child care with that attitude."

What was most difficult to get at or express was how to relate to the trainee/caregiver's lived experience as an oppressed person or her perceptions and feelings about her situation in life. Very few people wanted to go there. It took a lot of work to get even one participant to accept and acknowledge the feelings of the trainee, even though every person in that room had been taught to say to children, "You really have some strong feelings; do you want to talk about them?" No one wanted to say that to Intisar. No one seemed to want to hear any more about how she felt. Speaking of oppression was taboo in that room that day.

What prevents us as trainers and educators from finding out more about people whose experiences in life may be different from our own? We were given a clue in the workshop when a participant stated that Intisar's attitude in the role as trainee put her off. Intisar's response (back in the role) was to "claim and hold" the "attitude" and not apologize for it. She felt it was important to name the unspoken. Those watching saw her acting as though she were proud of her attitude. Some understood her pride; others didn't, but continued to think her attitude was getting in the way.

Intisar came out of her role again and explained something further about "attitude." She said, "The

trainee was labeled by some participants as having an 'attitude' (meaning a bad attitude) — for her resistance, refusal, not being approachable. However, the trainer also had an attitude. Did you consider that? She wasn't willing to accept total responsibility for the disconnection between the two of them.

"I would label the trainer's attitude as aloof, patronizing, and superior, which is often seem as having a 'professional attitude' and therefore not seen as 'bad.' Herein may be ground for further dialog and self-inquiry. What hurts, fears, and prejudgments are we hiding beneath our veneers of resistance and professionalism, sometimes seen as inferiority and superiority?"

Our attempts to pull the covers off of both trainer and trainee gave us a brief glimpse at how rich and deep our conversations could be if we attempted to examine our true feelings.

If and when we consciously form diverse training teams that reflect an assortment of opinions; if and when we value the inclusion of opposing opinions; if and when we create learning environments that encourage honest and contrasting points of view, we will then begin an important journey toward transformative education.

Transformative education is a process that allows us to see the enormity of the human experience. Transformative education allows for the roles of teacher and learner to be fluid and reciprocal, because it's a process that searches for the missing voices rather than assuming that one voice can speak for everyone.

If we are truly going to respect children, we must begin to respect our adult selves. The consciousness of respect must permeate everything we do, including training.