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Teacher Inquiry for Equity: Collaborating to Improve Teaching and Learning

Collaborative dialogue and inquiry among teachers helps promote more equitable learning opportunities and outcomes for students.

Sarah Capitelli (2006), a first-/second-grade teacher, chose to teach at Melrose Academy in Oakland, CA, because of its Spanish bilingual program. Over the years, though, she became increasingly troubled by the fact that many of the students who had been in her “low” English language development (ELD) classes were simply not prepared to make the transition to learning solely in English—even after being in the school at least four years. She wrote, “I was fiercely committed to the idea that bilingual education could work. It was devastating to realize that it was not working for so many students” (p. 29).

Wondering what it would take to make bilingual education work, Sarah examined assessment results, studied data from several focus students, and consulted her teaching journal. She sought to address her frustration that students in the “low” group didn’t seem to talk in class; she believed that increasing students’ participation was crucial to learning English. At first the data revealed nothing new; her students still fell into persistent high, medium, and low categories. So she decided to collect one more form of data—a survey showing how often students talked in English and Spanish in various situations inside and outside her classroom. Sarah, her instructional assistant Mrs. Lopez (pseudonym), and her students each completed the survey independently. The results uncovered something new: the students and Mrs. Lopez consistently rated the students’ participation higher than Sarah had.

Because their perceptions differed, Sarah turned to the school’s instructional coach to collect and then help interpret additional data. This collaboration, described more fully below, helped Sarah realize that she had been “fixated on the idea that [her] students, particularly girls, did

not talk enough during English class” (p. 36). Sarah now understood that her assumptions had kept her from seeing ways in which students were participating. By listening more closely to what students were saying when they spoke Spanish, Sarah learned that they were discussing the lesson and helping each other. Based on these insights, she continued her practice of speaking only in English during English class—an important component of the bilingual program. However, she eliminated her rule that students were only allowed to speak in English and began to encourage them to speak in both languages. This change prompted students to speak more—first in Spanish, then gradually in English—and their learning improved.

INTRODUCTION

Like other teachers across the United States, Sarah Capitelli faced a puzzling and difficult teaching challenge—confronting a systematic pattern of underachievement and her unintentional role in perpetuating this pattern. Such patterns of student success and failure based on socioeconomic status, race, and language continue to be predictable and persistent despite decades of educational reform. However, Sarah’s and her school’s responses contrast sharply with dominant paradigms for responding to large gaps in students’ achievement (e.g., implementation of highly scripted curriculum, increased use of “test prep” curricula). For Sarah and her school, *collaboration* with students, instructional assistants, and teachers was crucial to seeing her practice differently and making change. We refer to this stance as *inquiry for equity*, which is characterized by 1) collaborative efforts to seek out effective teaching practices rooted in social justice traditions and

2) the examination of specific evidence regarding which students are and are not being reached.

As the opening vignette illustrates, a teacher's or school's commitment to social justice does not in and of itself guarantee that all students will learn. Rather, it is critical that teachers work together as they take a questioning stance to teaching practice; such collaboration has the potential to ensure that findings do not reinforce stereotypes or ineffective teaching practices. Who is learning? Who is not succeeding? What do I need to change in order for students to learn? How can I collaborate with my colleagues and my students to uncover my assumptions and improve my teaching?

Such questions were taken up by educators in their classrooms, schools, and cross-school inquiry groups during the Teacher Research Collaborative (TRC). This three-year national project brought together educators, including Sarah, to explore how collaborative teacher inquiry might be harnessed to address educational inequities faced by students. We worked and learned alongside these experienced educators—Linda Friedrich as a facilitator of the project and Marilyn McKinney as an outside researcher. By sharing our insights from TRC, we hope to encourage other educators and researchers to consider possibilities for collaborating and engaging the expertise of teachers in working toward more equitable outcomes for students.

We acknowledge the tensions and challenges encountered by teachers who take on collective responsibility for researching their own practice and asking hard questions in order to realize more equitable learning. As Sarah learned, this can lead to stories that are hard to hear and requires support from others to catalyze real change. After presenting TRC's definition of inquiry for equity and our methods, we illustrate how teachers worked together to hear students' voices and sustain authentic opportunities for collaborative inquiry in order to interrupt patterns of oppression. In doing so, we highlight positive yet incomplete steps toward realizing this vision.

WHAT IS INQUIRY FOR EQUITY?

Inquiry for equity involves teachers collaboratively examining their practice in order to

support the learning, development, and achievement of students who have historically been underserved by schools. From teacher research, this work draws a definition of inquiry as the systematic study of one's practice in order to strengthen teaching, often working closely with other teachers in the process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 1999; MacLean & Mohr, 1999; Malarkey, 2006). Perhaps more important, inquiry for equity posits that developing an inquiry stance supports teachers in establishing a sense of efficacy with regard to their capacity for making a difference in students' learning and contributing to the body of knowledge about more equitable teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Fecho & Allen, 2003).

Inquiry for equity also draws on the related tradition of whole-school inquiry. This entails educators engaging in *collaborative* inquiry processes that support: shared development of curricula and assessments (e.g., LeMahieu & Friedrich, 2007), collective examination of the artifacts of teaching and learning to improve teaching (e.g., Curry, 2008; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003), and joint analysis of achievement data. Our thinking about inquiry for equity recognizes systemic barriers. Sometimes when inquiries address unquestioned, hidden assumptions, others may co-opt the process, thereby leading to "legitimization of an unjust status quo" (Herr & Anderson, 2008, p. 384).

Finally, inquiry for equity builds on the work of generations of educators committed to social justice. Specifically, this work addresses inequities faced by students and inequitable patterns of achievement in schools (e.g., Carter, 2005; Cone, 2003), as well as ways in which assumptions, biases, and lack of knowledge get in the way of teaching students most effectively (e.g., Ballenger, 2005; Banford, 1996; Fecho & Allen, 2003; Herr, 1999a & b; Obidah & Teel, 2001). This social justice and equity tradition also attends to the emotional or "human" dimensions of inquiry and proposes structures and strategies to support teachers and school faculties in examining ways of knowing oneself and confronting one's own biases (e.g., Friedman, 2006; Weissglass, 1990).

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Drawing on all three traditions, inquiry for equity emphasizes the importance of safety and trust as well as the necessity of engaging in hard conversations about difficult issues that emerge from teachers' research (e.g., lack of success with teaching underserved students). While many teacher-researchers and teacher-research groups do focus on questions of equity, inquiry does not necessarily lead to addressing inequities or changing patterns of inequitable achievement. In fact, inquiry can have the unintended consequence of reproducing patterns of oppression (e.g., Sarah's initial analysis reinforced her perceptions about the efforts of students labeled as "low"). On the flip side, some approaches to addressing inequities do not engage teachers, but rather frame teachers as a part of the problem. Such reforms may impose externally developed curricula and construct teachers as implementers rather than as contributors to the knowledge base (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) and social change (Bell, 1997).

CONTEXT AND METHODS

The teachers whose work is featured in this article are among 25 educators from urban areas across the United States who were involved in the Teacher Research Collaborative (TRC) for three years as they conducted research about their own practice and established and facilitated collaborative inquiry groups. The TRC was a collaboration among teachers, teacher educators, and staff from the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), the Bay Area Writing Project (BWP) at the University of California, Berkeley, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the National Writing Project (NWP). During two national summer institutes held in Berkeley and the ongoing local inquiry group meetings, these educators explored how reflective practices and processes developed by the teacher-research and inquiry movements could be channeled toward improving student learning and ultimately obtaining more equitable student outcomes.

Data provided in this article are drawn from TRC's formative self-evaluation. The evaluation's primary purposes were to document participants' inquiries and leadership of inquiry groups (including the challenges they faced) and to understand

the development of participants' thinking about inquiry, equity, and inquiry–equity connections. In addition, we collected feedback about the program. The five TRC facilitators representing the collaborating organizations used the data to shape the content and processes of the two national institutes and, along with the external researcher, to draft progress reports to funders. In addition, the facilitators drew on the interviews as they coached partici-

pants who were drafting essays for *Working toward Equity* (Friedrich, Tateishi, Malarkey, Simons, & Williams, 2006).

In total, 57 30–60-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted at three points in time; all but the initial inter-

views were audio-recorded and transcribed. All five TRC facilitators, including Linda, and one outside researcher, Marilyn, conducted interviews. Facilitators conducted interviews with the teachers with whom they worked most closely so that they could ask them to elaborate on their challenges as well as their successes. We also incorporated TRC participants' and facilitators' draft manuscripts and published essays into the analysis for this article.

To analyze the data, we recorded notes and quotations into matrices organized according to five categories representing core strands of TRC's work: (a) features of each inquiry community; (b) approaches employed to examine equity; (c) statements about leadership; (d) challenges faced and questions asked; and (e) promising practices. We then identified important themes about the practices and structures that support and sustain inquiry for equity.

While the themes presented derive from our analysis of all TRC participants' work, we feature the work of six participants who represent a range of school and reform organization contexts and whose work was sustained over at least two years to allow us to learn about how inquiry for equity unfolds over time. Further, they and their inquiry groups experienced successes in changing practice and affecting student learning.

COLLABORATING TO LEARN FROM STUDENTS

Taking students' voices and perspectives seriously often prompts teachers to confront their

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own assumptions, particularly with regard to race, language, and culture, which in turn may promote more effective and equitable learning environments (e.g., *Cityscapes*, 1996; Freedman, Simons, Kalnin, Casareno, & the M-CLASS teams, 1999; Obidah & Teel, 2001). However, as shown in the opening vignette, teachers working alone rarely gain sufficient distance to understand why practice isn't working; hidden assumptions and tacit theories of action get in the way of validly interpreting data and making change (Herr, 1999a; Weinbaum, Allen, Blythe, Simon, Seidel, & Rubin, 2004). Seeing, analyzing, and responding to teaching challenges becomes more complex when teachers work to address systemic inequities and oppression. In such situations, teachers confront personal histories and internalizations of deeply embedded cultural assumptions about race, gender, social class, and other social factors (Pruitt & Jones, 2006). We learned from TRC participants that collaborating with others who are also committed to confronting inequities represents an essential component in "reorienting their view of reality as well as their view of their role" (Herr & Anderson, 2008, p. 384).

Reorienting Beliefs about Student Participation

In the opening vignette, Sarah Capitelli (2006) confronted survey results from students and her instructional assistant that challenged her hidden assumptions about students' classroom participation. Sarah reflected on her feelings about the data: "Suddenly my good intentions are being challenged by discrepancies that I have never made room for in my classroom, in my inquiry, or in my mind" (p. 33). Sarah could have refrained from questioning these inconsistencies further; instead, she asked Karina (all student names pseudonyms), an instructional coach who shares the students' cultural background, to interview the children about their responses and Sarah's perceptions of their participation. Karina learned that students believed they *were* participating as they talked with each other, either on the rug during various instructional activities or at their tables, and when they answered Sarah's questions. At Karina's urging, Sarah listened to an interview with Lilia, one of the children about whom she was

most concerned. In a narrative, Sarah shared Lilia's words and her own reaction to the interview:

"I talk in class," I heard Lilia say. "But I know that Ms. Sarah thinks that I don't talk enough. I know that she thinks that I need to do better. But I do talk in class. I do my best." Her voice, loud, strong, and confident, rings in my ears. I play the tape over and over again, hoping that I'm not hearing what I know that I am. . . . Lilia is aware of my frustration with her and my opinion of her as a student, and she doesn't agree with me. Lilia knows things about me that I don't even know about myself. (Capitelli, 2006, p. 34)

For Sarah, collaboration with a respected colleague was crucial in helping her draw lessons from students' comments, revealing the cultural bias in her assumptions about students' participation. Sarah realized she was focusing on what the children *weren't* doing—speaking to her in English—during English Language Development time, rather than what they *were* doing—speaking to each other in Spanish. By recognizing her own cultural bias, Sarah was able not only to make changes in her immediate teaching practices, but was also able to change her approach to inquiry thereafter.

Because I have come to realize that my analysis is shaped by my own perceptions, beliefs, and experiences, I never look at my data alone. . . . My experiences with inquiry have shown me that I tend to organize my data based on my viewpoint as a white, well-educated, middle-class woman. When the data are organized in this way . . . the results often reinforce what I already think I know about my students. . . . I can't make changes in my practice, in my program, or at my school until I question this paradigm. (Capitelli, 2006, p. 35)

Sarah's reflection underscores why collaboration matters in inquiry for equity; without it, well-intentioned teachers risk overlooking their assumptions and reinforcing inequitable patterns.

Reading Professional Literature and Interpreting Data Together

Gwendolyn Williams and her colleagues at Atlanta's Peachtree Urban Writing Project formed a

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Focus Questions

- What is equity?
- What does an equitable outcome mean when working with students in your classroom?
- How do you determine what an equitable outcome should be?
- How do you keep equity at the core of teaching?
- What are the actual strategies to use or concentrate on to place equity at the core of the teaching?

(Williams, 2006, p. 62)

Figure 1. Five questions that served as the focus of our research

cross-school inquiry community and began by exploring definitions of equity. This process was framed by five questions (see Figure 1), including “What does an equitable outcome mean when working with students in your classroom?” These questions allowed the teachers to explore the systemic inequities they and their students faced as African Americans, and then to consider inequities in their own classrooms and teaching practices. Members of the group kept reflective journals, responded orally to each other’s journal entries during meetings, and discussed professional readings, such as Edelsky’s (1999) *Making Justice Our Project*, which stimulated their thinking about equity (Williams, 2006).

Elizabeth Bland, a first-grade teacher, explained how sharing her journal observations and discussing Edelsky’s work with writing project colleagues pushed her to examine her assumptions about Mikita, a first grader. In an essay about her inquiry, based on her reflective journal, Elizabeth shared her observations about Mikita’s work habits as a writer.

When we initially began working with writing, she [Mikita] would spend a lot of time just sitting there, quietly drumming on the desk with her fingers and often required a nudge to get started. I would say, “Mikita, we don’t have much time, what are you doing?”

“I’m thinking, that’s all.”

“Thinking about what?”

“The next thing that I’m going to write.”

“Well, just write your thoughts on the paper.”

(Bland, n.d.)

To Elizabeth, Mikita appeared to be “wasting” precious writing time by not getting started and this prompted Elizabeth to become “very concerned” (Bland, n.d.). Elizabeth shared her observations and worry with Mikita’s math teacher, who observed similar behavior patterns but interpreted them differently — as Mikita “. . . pondering before she completed her assigned tasks” (Bland, n.d.). Elizabeth recounted how her perceptions of Mikita began to change through conversation with other teachers:

After my conference with the Math teacher, I recalled some information we discussed in our study group about the book Making Justice Our Project where the author talked about how we take our own plans and agendas and force them on students. . . . I found that we often label students as slow because of the way they work. Through observation and conferencing with Mikita, I discovered that she was slow because she wanted to add more depth to her writing, and to be thorough. (Bland, n.d.)

Elizabeth’s reflections emphasize that, like Sarah, data collection initially reinforced (mis)perceptions about a child’s work habits. Collaboration, first informally with the math teacher and then formally with her study group, helped her see Mikita in a different light and envision possibilities for change. Additional data collection helped her to understand Mikita and make room for her approach to learning. As Elizabeth explained, “There is a relationship that is fostered in study groups between theory, talk, teacher reflection, and classroom practice. Reflection and empirical investigation give us an edge and allow us to become ‘transformative’” (Bland, n.d.).

Collaborating to analyze and interpret data supported these teachers in developing a richer understanding of their students and pressed them to interrogate their own assumptions and biases. For both Sarah and Elizabeth, this process served as a catalyst for critiquing and improving teaching practice—that is, for taking action to effect change. In these cases, collaboration did not end with analysis, but rather involved sharing and testing ideas for more effective teaching. Their processes incorporate two forms of validity for action research described by Herr and Anderson (2008): “democratic validity,” which involves collaboration with critical stake holders, and

“catalytic validity,” which refers to the extent to which inquiries foster necessary changes (p. 384).

COLLABORATING TO SUPPORT AND SUSTAIN AN EQUITY FOCUS

I want [teacher research at my school] to last; I want it to be purposeful. It will not last unless it is directly tied to our own sense of success in our classrooms as well as student achievement. (Deborah Juarez, Interview, 2003)

As teachers collaboratively work towards interrupting patterns of inequitable achievement, they develop relationships grounded in analyzing their teaching and its impact on student learning and development; in the process, they come to value multiple and diverse perspectives. Over time, they become invested in each other’s work and in the success of one another’s students, thus building a sense of mutual accountability (Juarez, 2006). This contrasts sharply with teachers’ lack of investment in externally imposed accountability mandates, echoing Herr’s (1999a) findings about the differences between authentic participation (p. 237) in grassroots structures and co-optation in officially sanctioned forums. Building a sense of mutual accountability is not a simple task; along the way, the TRC teachers worked to develop and implement facilitative structures that helped maintain a focus on student learning, bring multiple perspectives into conversations, and balance safety and risk.

Mutual Responsibility and Accountability

Establishing regular and ongoing opportunities for teachers to learn about one another’s students, practices, and struggles creates a sense of shared responsibility for success. McKamey (2006) and two colleagues from a San Francisco high school formed a small group to explore ways of improving their practice as teachers of African American students. They committed to holding structured biweekly meetings and began their inquiry “[b]y identifying what high-achieving African American students do in our classrooms,” thereby allowing them to “learn something about the ways in which we need to change our practice to increase the achievement of *all* African American students”

(p. 46). To maintain momentum and enthusiasm for their work, the group developed a protocol for sharing that made explicit their inquiries’ foci and also emphasized that group members were expected to challenge each other’s thinking (see the sidebar on p. 247 for a glimpse of their process). McKamey describes how each presenting teacher started off the conversation by explaining:

- the ways in which the teacher is not satisfied with the achievement of a particular student or groups of students (the story)
- the evidence the teacher has that the student or students are not achieving (grades/participation)
- what the teacher has been doing (practice)
- what the teacher thinks might be happening in terms of her practice and student achievement (critique of practice). (p. 57)

Other members of the group took notes while the teacher was speaking, and one group member summarized what she had heard. Next, the presenter clarified and expanded her description. All then engaged in conversation, seeking to uncover the presenting teacher’s central question. One group member prepared notes, which helped individuals shape research questions. McKamey explained the group’s rationale for agreeing on a structured protocol:

We decided to give a fair amount of formal structure to our meetings, because we wanted to have a predictable, rigorous approach to our work. We also did not want to get derailed by conversations that did not center on African American students or on our own practice. (p. 52)

One teacher used this process to analyze what she considered to be “good writing.” Although she valued the writing completed by her African American students, she realized that her assessment system didn’t reflect her beliefs. She then created new rubrics reflecting those qualities, thereby recognizing and building on the strengths of her African American students. McKamey and her colleagues believed that the process of critically questioning each other’s practices allowed them to make deeper changes more quickly than if each had been working alone:

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We held each other accountable to make a change based on what we talked about. So we didn't wait until all of the evidence was in [or] to really write it out to make a change in our practice. That was the driving thing, educate these kids better right now. (McKamey, Interview, 2004)

It is important to note that focusing on their students' successes strengthened their beliefs in the capacity of their students and increased their own sense of efficacy and possibility. Their deep personal commitments to serving African American students combined with the structures that they put into place fostered a sense of mutual accountability towards each other and their students' learning.

Facilitative Structures for Keeping Equity on the Table

Direct, public conversations about inequities faced by students of color and those who cope with economic challenge are rare in education; so, too, are discussions about the forms of oppression that lead to inequitable outcomes for students. Such dialogue, especially when it prompts examination of our own assumptions, can be difficult and feel precarious, even contentious (Pruitt & Jones, 2006). In order to address inequities and make real improvement in the learning of underserved students, it is critical for such dialogue to occur in a constructive way. Once equity is on the table, it is important to keep it there. The educators involved in TRC developed a variety of approaches to sustaining their work and keeping it productively focused on equity.

Using Protocols

Many teachers involved with TRC found that using simple, straightforward structures and protocols (e.g., McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003) helped keep discussion focused, insured that all members of the group had opportunities to contribute and share their inquiries, and helped sustain inquiry efforts. In using protocols, teacher inquiry groups seek to create a climate of trust and respect that allows teachers to challenge themselves and their colleagues to face the hard parts of their practice. By creating a sense of safety, group members are encouraged to take professional risks.

Some teachers involved in TRC used such procedures to address the emotional dimensions of

Classroom Inquiry Meeting Protocol

1. One member volunteers to go first to explain, describe, and analyze her teaching issue. The focus here is on:
 - the ways in which the teacher is not satisfied with the achievement of a particular student or group of students (the story)
 - the evidence the teacher has that the student or students are not achieving (grades/participation)
 - what the teacher has been doing (practice)
 - what the teacher thinks might be happening in terms of her practice and student achievement (critique of practice).
2. While the member is speaking, the other two members take notes, but only one of them will report back his/her notes.
3. The recorder reports back notes to the group and the speaker has the opportunity to clarify, add to, and/or change any part of her narrative/analysis: *What I really meant was . . . I want to add that . . . Now I realize that . . .*
4. The other members take notes while the speaker is amending.
5. The other members engage in question-asking and conversation in which they seek to discover what the core issue is. *What I really think you're saying is . . . Does your question here have to do with the students' preparedness for tests or the weight tests have in the course?* The speaker takes notes while engaging in the conversation.
6. One member takes notes and types them up for the next meeting. This documentation becomes important later when the group members begin the process of deciding which of their issues they want to use for their action research.

From McKamey, Pirette. (2006). "Building on Success: Changing Our Practice to Better Serve African American Students: Appendix—Classroom Inquiry Meeting Protocol." In *Working toward Equity: Resources and Writings from the Teacher Research Collaborative*, edited by Linda Friedrich, Carol Tateishi, Tom Malarkey, Elizabeth Radin Simons, and Marty Williams, p. 57. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project. Copyright © 2006. Reprinted with permission from the National Writing Project. Read additional articles online at www.nwp.org.

discussing change and equity. For example, Tanya Friedman (2006), in collaboration with coaches from BayCES, incorporated a structured dialogic process—Weissglass’s (1990) Constructivist Listening—into the ongoing inquiry work of the school. Through this structure, individuals and groups confront their own biases and experiences with race and other forms of diversity as well as accompanying feelings. The teachers entered into an implicit contract that says, “I agree to listen and think about you for a fixed period of time in exchange for you doing the same for me. I keep in my mind that my listening is for your benefit, so I do not ask questions for my information” (Weissglass, 1990, cited in Friedman, 2006, p. 142). The Constructivist Listening dyad process allowed Tanya and her colleagues to talk confidentially with an individual colleague without response or dialogue. Tanya credits the implementation of Constructivist Listening with pushing the whole faculty forward in this form of self-reflection and with upping the ante on the types of challenges that she and her colleagues were willing to address in their teaching:

[A]n overwhelming majority of our staff has embraced the opportunity to reflect on how our beliefs and prior experiences affect our interactions with students and with each other. Instead of blaming students or giving up, teachers try to understand the role their own beliefs and behaviors play in students’ lack of success. Once a teacher acknowledges her part, she can start a meaningful inquiry. (p. 132)

Potential Drawbacks of Protocols

Ideally, when using these processes, whether homegrown (e.g., the protocol developed by McKamey and her colleagues) or adopted and adapted from others (e.g., Constructivist Listening), a climate of trust and respect develops that allows colleagues to challenge ideas and assumptions—their own as well as those of others—and thus to grow and change. However, at times, norms and protocols that establish an egalitarian ethos can be counterproductive. At a whole-faculty retreat focused on raising African American students’ academic achievement, McKamey (2006) and her colleagues created a norm that everyone had the right to speak without judgment. There, the group

discussed Claude Steele’s (1992) *Race and the Schooling of Black Americans*. When McKamey challenged one relatively inexperienced, white male teacher about his assumptions regarding African American students, another teacher pointed out that the norms permitted his colleague to speak without judgment. In this situation, the norms worked against providing insight into successful approaches to teaching students of color. McKamey’s experience mirrored that of the other African American teacher facilitators, who also encountered and attempted to address resistance. McKamey reflected,

“The question remained, however, whom were those guidelines written to protect?” (p. 51). McKamey analyzed why the work at the whole-school level had experienced more mixed results than earlier work with her English department or her later work with a group of three carefully chosen colleagues:

[T]he process of challenging teachers’ assumptions was hindered by the planning team’s lack of strategizing about what sort of discussion among the teachers would be considered “derailing” and therefore should be discouraged. (p. 50)

This example highlights how easily efforts to systematically discuss race and other issues of oppression can get sidetracked and co-opted. McKamey’s comments point to the importance of anticipating and preparing to address challenges that arise when others are new to equity work.

These examples uncover a tension between safety and risk. On the one hand, establishing appropriate levels of respect, honesty, and commitment to equity within a group supports teachers as they rise to the challenge of examining why students fail and how their own beliefs, assumptions, and practices may contribute to patterns of inequity. On the other hand, norms may dampen frank and difficult discussions that need to occur in order to change practice and improve student learning. As inquiry for equity groups form and work together over time, they need to critically examine how they work together to ensure an appropriate balance of safety and risk taking. Simply following a protocol does not guarantee that inequities will be addressed; for protocols to facilitate rather than hinder productive action,

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both facilitators and participants need to commit to the hard work of change.

Leaders' Roles in Keeping and Sustaining a Focus on Equity

Given the challenges that emerge during conversations focused on inquiry for equity, leaders play a crucial role. TRC teachers' experiences as facilitators point to important (and potentially daunting) roles, such as: identifying, developing, and sharing inquiry tools and processes with group members; incorporating a range of cultural practices and understandings into group leadership; and facilitating straightforward, flexible meetings focused on teaching and student learning (Friedrich, Simons, & Tateishi, 2006, p. 126). The inquiry group facilitators modeled a personal commitment to inquiry for equity and constantly sought to share leadership.

Modeling Commitment

Tanya Friedman's experience illustrates that one form of leading inquiry for equity is to walk the talk by making changes in one's core practices. She explained:

[A] lot of what [leadership] means for me right now is . . . doing an inquiry that leads me to see things and make change in my class, in my instruction, or in the school . . . that hopefully have a real impact on kids in closing the gap of achievement and school experience. (Interview, 2004)

After six years of conducting and facilitating teacher inquiry, Tanya realized that she had not always pushed her own learning as much as she could. In an interview, she described how her school's engagement in Constructivist Listening nudged her into considering the question, "What am I willing to learn?"

I'm . . . trying to understand myself in new ways, in terms of my practice, that are going to lead me to do things differently. . . . I feel if we're really going to be doing inquiry for equity, then we need to not be asking questions that are tweaking our practices in small ways, because the inequities are really big, right? (Interview, 2003)

Tanya took up this challenge in an inquiry about Iris, "a second-grade English language learner who had repeated kindergarten and was still about a year below level in literacy" (p. 133). She began asking questions such as: "Am I just seeing what I expect to see? Am I really willing to hear Iris's answers? Which practices am I willing to change or to give up altogether?" (p. 133). Once Tanya confronted these hard questions, and . . .

Focusing on students . . . is part of the rhetoric of school reform. Teacher inquiry provides a process and the tools that allow the rhetoric to have a greater likelihood of becoming reality.

open[ed] myself up to see the unexpected in Iris's data, . . . I observed that Iris's comprehension improved dramatically when she read with a partner. To my surprise, it didn't matter whom she read with . . . , she engaged the text more meaningfully and comprehended more. This challenged my assumptions about how best to partner students. (p. 133)

As a result, Tanya reduced independent reading time, a cherished practice grounded in her belief system. A long-time faculty member, she used her own experience to encourage her colleagues to challenge their prized practices.

Creating Collaborative Leadership

While modeling willingness to change is crucial, relying on a single leader jeopardizes sustainability. At Mandela, a small high school in Oakland, California, with a social justice mission, Deborah Juarez (2006) worked explicitly to develop leadership capacity among the teachers. Their group supported teachers' individual inquiries, as well as collective analysis of disaggregated test scores in order to enhance their practice and students' success. For example, at first, the faculty noticed that students' scores were lowest in math. However, in examining the data, it was clear that grades in other subjects reflected more than objective assessments; they also reflected teachers' differing ways of giving credit for effort and/or improvement. Further questioning and discussion led the staff to realize that, in reality, similar low scores occurred in all disciplines and that it was the responsibility of the school staff to provide extra support for students through after-school peer tutoring.

Deborah established a simple protocol that ensured weekly inquiry group meetings kept their

sharing focused on making changes in teaching practice to improve student learning. To help build teachers' facilitation capacity, she taught her peers to lead this protocol. After the first year of their inquiry process, Deborah reflected on how she involved others in leadership:

[F]or a lead facilitator with a teacher's schedule, a "less is more" approach is practical. Hence, my design plan for next year's meetings proposes following a simple protocol, incorporating tools and information and relying on the process of group questioning and feedback to support a participant's research presentation. The need for a lead facilitator may continue, so rotation into this role is a fair expectation. If this is the case, not only should the job look easy, it should be easy. (p. 153)

Deborah commented on why shared leadership was crucial, "So many times I have seen a program leave when the teacher in charge leaves. For teacher research to become a permanent feature at Mandela, its facilitation 'had to belong to all'" (p. 150). Perhaps one of TRC's most important lessons is that of collaborative leadership; few groups relied on a single facilitator, and those that were successful in sustaining inquiry over time purposefully built shared leadership.

DISCUSSION

Focusing on students—by acknowledging their strengths, scaffolding instruction to meet their needs, listening to their voices—is part of the rhetoric of school reform. Teacher inquiry provides a process and the tools that allow the rhetoric to have a greater likelihood of becoming reality. As teachers use data to help them focus in productive ways, they make changes in practice. When such changes are followed by student success, teachers' beliefs in student capacity are strengthened, and they build a sense of efficacy (Juarez, p. 21). Likewise, students come to believe in their own capacity for learning.

However, as the teachers involved in TRC have demonstrated, it is the collaboration with other adults that can help to ensure that findings do not reinforce stereotypes or ineffective teaching practices. Understanding the value of listening to students' voices and other teachers' perspectives helps to take this work to a deeper level by

building mutual responsibility and accountability. Collaborative structures are essential if inquiry work is to be focused on equity and reach students who are traditionally underserved by the system. Confronting our own assumptions, challenging cherished teaching practices, and learning skills and tools that will make a difference in students' learning and lives takes courage and supportive structures. The teachers highlighted here, along with many others, have taken on this challenge. Their successes and their commitment to sustaining inquiry for equity work over time illustrate what can happen when professional development and efforts toward school reform respect the voices and knowledge of teachers and the students they serve.

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