How Can Teacher Inquiry Help Achieve Equitable Outcomes for Students?

BY LINDA FRIEDRICH

The 2002 National Writing Project Teacher Research Collaborative Summer Institute kicked off on a cool San Francisco Bay Area morning this past August. That day, 27 teachers, teacher-educators, school coaches, and Teacher Research Collaborative staff from across the country gathered at the University of California, Berkeley, to begin a two-year exploration of how to reframe teacher inquiry so that it focuses explicitly on equity. The meeting room heated up as participants shared their beliefs, definitions, and questions about equity. The conversation surfaced differences in view and approach, touched on deeply personal issues, and reminded those involved of the challenges embedded in discussing ideas that are close to the heart. In her final institute reflection, Pirette McKinney, a Bay Area Writing Project teacher-consultant, put the gathering in perspective with this question:

How do you build a community of educators/researchers who want to challenge themselves to keep equity at the center of every stage of research? ... How do you build a community of research educators who fearlessly, rigorously, and in good faith, challenge themselves to investigate how race plays out in the classroom and then do something about it?

Investigating how teacher inquiry can address the challenges of insuring that all children achieve at high levels forms the core work of the Teacher Research Collaborative (TRC). TRC is an ongoing partnership between the National Writing Project, the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the Bay Area Writing Project (BWP), and the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES). Its work started several years ago with an effort to raise the visibility of teacher research and now focuses on the intersection between inquiry and equity. With funding from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation and the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, TRC participants are:

- expanding leadership within their networks for teacher inquiry with an equity focus
- creating a set of resources to support teacher-researchers and facilitators of teacher research who want to focus on equity
- learning from each other about different individual and organizational approaches to teacher inquiry and teacher research.

The gathering in August focused on three core strands: examining equity, investigating teacher research methodology, and developing leadership capacity. Participants began by working toward a shared definition and set of assumptions about equity (See figure 1—Notes on Leadership). Facilitators pushed the group to share particular experiences of inequities that they encountered in their classrooms, schools, and districts. By looking closely at real life examples, the group began to get underneath the jargon and to build a sense of community. They are continuing this work in school-year gatherings and conversations.

Since most TRC participants are experienced teacher-researchers, the institute’s overview of teacher research methodology focused on how to make explicit connections to equity at each stage of the research process. The group examined leadership issues as several participants shared their experiences with leading teacher inquiry work in their schools and sites. In addition, they looked at a range of approaches to facilitating conversations about equity and encouraged participants to reflect on how different structures worked for them.

Building on their experiences at the TRC Summer Institute and their prior knowledge, TRC participants are currently leading equity-focused inquiry in their individual schools and writing project sites. For example, Jim Ford, a Maryland Writing Project teacher-consultant, is bringing an increased emphasis on equity issues to his site’s graduate level course on teacher research. This year’s cohort immediately began investigating issues of equity in their classrooms and are looking closely at differences in their own and their students’ social positions. A cofacilitator of the course, Ford works to keep the group’s collective focus on equity.

Similarly, Gwen Williams, director of the Peachtreen Urban Writing Project in Georgia, and Michelle Hayes, a teacher-consultant there, work with a teacher research group of eight teachers at Inman Middle School in Atlanta, where Hayes teaches. Group members share their progress on investigating questions such as, “Why is it mainly African-American children who are referred for discipline issues?” and, “What effects do school reform models have on teachers and a school system?” The Georgia group regularly touches base about the question, “Are we still focusing on equity?”

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Some TRC participants sustain inquiry groups with a core focus on equity issues started in previous years. For example, the Bay Area Writing Project group at Thurgood Marshall High School in San Francisco, cofacilitated by Pirette McKamey and Robert Roth, continues to focus its inquiry on the achievement gap between African-American students and other student populations for a second year. Questions regarding race and equity are also at the heart of the research conducted by the BAWP group at Fremont High School in Oakland, California, facilitated by Deborah Juarez, as members of one of the school’s small learning communities look at achievement across content areas.

As TRC participants lead these equity-focused inquiry groups, they are documenting their work with an eye toward sharing what they have learned. In particular, they record successes and challenges and identify tools that help them as they launch and sustain inquiry in urban schools. TRC is working closely with another NWP group, the Teacher Inquiry Communities (TIC) Network to identify how to best disseminate the ideas, resources, and materials created through this project. Seven TRC participants already shared their preliminary work at a TIC Network-sponsored session at the 2002 NWP Annual Meeting in Atlanta, entitled “Teacher Inquiry for Equity and Leadership.” While TRC participants are excited about their work so far, they look forward to continuing to learn from their experiences with leading equity-focused teacher inquiry.

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