Making Equity Explicit in Inquiry
Inquiry can help educators describe and address inequities in education. However, inquiry processes do not automatically focus on equity issues. While all the essays in this guide focus in some way on the issue of equity, this first section illustrates some ways that issues of equity can be made explicit in teachers’ inquiry processes—and some of the opportunities and challenges this focus can create. Each author describes her own inquiry work or leadership and identifies specific inequalities in her context. Two authors (Capitelli and McKamey) focus their inquiries on their school contexts; one (G. Williams) draws on her inquiry leadership work with teachers from various schools. Their questions are pertinent both for teacher-researchers and for leaders who support and facilitate inquiry groups:

- What aspects of equity can be made explicit in inquiry?
- Why make equity an explicit focus in inquiry?
- What is the process of making equity explicit in inquiry?
- What happens when equity becomes explicit in inquiry?

**What Aspects of Equity Can Be Made Explicit in Inquiry?**

Equity has many dimensions and takes on different meanings in different contexts. These essays suggest various types of equity challenges, and several ways of viewing equity. Two authors (McKamey and G. Williams) address equity through the lens of race; one (Capitelli) focuses on equity in the context of language and culture. All three address equity primarily as an issue of student achievement—and hence teacher practice. Two authors (McKamey and G. Williams) also address adult dimensions of equity—that is, what it means for teachers from different backgrounds to address these issues in their practice. One theme that comes through in these essays is the importance of clarifying what equity means to each of us, given our particular context and particular background and experiences.

**Why Make Equity an Explicit Focus in Inquiry?**

Teacher-researchers have often addressed issues related to equity—such as detracking, personalization, and culturally relevant pedagogy—without clearly describing these as equity issues. Making equity explicit can signal to others the nature and strength of one’s commitment. The authors in this section illustrate how naming an equity issue helps them to squarely face and address some of the most difficult challenges in their practice. Focusing explicitly on equity can surface conflicts and tensions. McKamey’s essay, for instance, addresses the challenges of making equity issues public in her school and of expanding the equity conversation to include a larger group of teachers. Together the essays in this section highlight reasons that inquiry can be more effective when it has an explicit connection to equity.
What Is the Process of Making Equity Explicit in Inquiry?

While the authors in this section each articulate a particular equity challenge in the form of an inquiry question, in one inquiry described here (McKamey), a school names a broad equity challenge, and then inquiry provides a forum for teachers to ask what changes they can make in their practice to address that issue in their own classrooms. In another instance (Capitelli), a teacher begins an inquiry by asking a question that’s more closely tied to her practice and her identity: “How can I, as a native English speaker, find more effective ways to reach my English language learners?” There are other cases where both happen simultaneously, and the equity dimension of inquiry emerges out of both a larger school issue and personal factors.

What Happens When Equity Becomes Explicit in Inquiry?

When educators choose to name an equity issue explicitly in their inquiry work, they are usually taking a risk. Equity issues are sensitive issues in schools and other organizations. Talking about the realities of race, class, culture, or language in relation to student achievement or teacher practices can provoke strong reactions from colleagues: discomfort, defensiveness, pain, or anger (McKamey). Furthermore, paying close attention to where we’re not being successful with students can be painful; seeing how we may be reproducing inequality in our own classroom simply does not feel good. The authors in this section describe how challenging it can be to investigate one’s own practice through focusing on issues of equity (Capitelli).

Despite the challenges of making equity issues explicit, the results of this focus can be productive. All three essays provide evidence that this approach can enable new and deeper dialogue among colleagues and can increase the courage and commitment to address inequities. And because of its purposeful nature, inquiry with an equity focus can lead to whole-school changes (Capitelli) in addition to significant changes in teaching practice (Capitelli and McKamey).

Equity issues are complex, persistent, and difficult to change, but as the essays in this section illustrate, making equity explicit in inquiry increases the likelihood of one’s inquiry process actually making a difference in this area.
Finding Myself in My Inquiry: A Teacher’s Story

Elementary school teacher and researcher Sarah Capitelli learned the importance of involving others in the interpretation of her teaching practice and research data. In her classroom inquiry, she explored her own and her school’s support for Spanish-speaking students to learn English. After she had gathered multiple forms of data on students’ participation patterns in her English class, a student survey revealed that her perceptions of class participation were quite different from those of her students and of the teaching assistant who shared the students’ Spanish-language culture. Where Capitelli saw resistance and nonparticipation, they saw participation. From her inquiry, Capitelli changed her assumptions and her practice. Here, she identifies writing narratives, gathering multiple forms of data, and interpreting data with colleagues as important aspects of her inquiry practice.

By Sarah Capitelli

I am a first/second grade Spanish bilingual teacher at Melrose Elementary School in Oakland, California. At my school this means that I teach in Spanish for five hours a day and in English, during English language development (ELD), for an hour a day. For the past six years I have been investigating my own ELD practice and the English learning of the students in my classroom. Although my primary focus has been my own classroom, the work I have done has been directly connected to the greater context of the ELD program at my school. Doing this work, I have grown increasingly concerned about a particular group of students in the bilingual program, and I have shared this concern with other teachers. These students have been at Melrose since kindergarten or first grade, yet despite our efforts they are not learning English or Spanish well, and therefore are not successfully making the transition into English instruction in the fourth grade. This situation has been particularly difficult for me. I was drawn to Melrose because of its strong commitment to bilingual education. Both my professional training and my personal values motivated me to work in a bilingual classroom. 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.

In seeking to understand why some students are successful and others are not, I have been looking at and documenting my own ELD practice and the classroom environment that I create for English learning to occur. I have also been collecting various kinds of data (achievement data, teacher interviews, video data, and my own journal) on students who have been struggling with their English learning. My data collection has enabled me to take a deeper look at myself, my teaching, and my assumptions about my students and their
learning. The data have also enabled me to create a profile of successful and unsuccessful students in my school’s current ELD program. My analysis of the data has challenged me to question the ways that I teach English and the ways that the schoolwide structure of English instruction supports and does not support English language learners in the bilingual program. This research has resulted in changes to my own practice and to our school structures.

This essay is an attempt to share the beginning of my inquiry story—a story that has not yet ended. My questions have led me to interesting and challenging findings that in turn have led to new questions and a different set of data to analyze and act upon. And since my colleagues at Melrose all engage in inquiry as well, these insights are multiplied. This paper is a window into my inquiry during the 2000–2001 school year: musings about choosing a question, narratives I wrote about my students and myself, and thoughts on my learning. I also reflect on the methods I have used to do my classroom research and how my work has been shaped by—and helped to shape—the context in which I found myself doing this inquiry. In particular, this text highlights the value of inviting different perspectives into my classroom, and describes the ways in which these perspectives challenge my assumptions about my students and myself. My purpose in writing this paper is to provide a window into my life as a teacher-researcher and to share both the complexity of teaching and the complexity of thinking critically about one’s teaching.

The Power of Questions—Large and Small

I always start with such large questions that if a single piece of classroom research could answer them, schools would not look the way they do. Big issues in schools and in my classroom are the most compelling to me. For instance, I want to know why I can feel so good about the rest of my teaching, while my ELD class is so difficult for me to teach. I want to know why I always have a group of girls in my class who are so quiet and reluctant to participate. I want to know why so many students at my school aren’t learning English.

I began my 2000–2001 inquiry with a question that was even larger than these. What would our ELD program need to look like in order to ensure that all students were ready to make the transition to English instruction in fourth grade? I started with this question because, even in my first year teaching, I could see that not enough students were making this transition successfully. As compelling as this question was to me, I did not even know where to begin. I knew so little about my own ELD class, let alone the school’s entire ELD program. I quickly realized that if I wanted to get smarter about my school’s program, I first needed to get smarter about my own ELD teaching.

Initially, I felt as if it would be giving up to investigate only my own classroom. However, I quickly realized that the questions that I had about my own teaching and students would inform my larger question about the entire school. My classroom inquiry would also help me figure out what I was and was not doing in my classroom that might or might not be supporting students’ learning of English.

So I began my research by examining how my students were grouped in their ELD classes—low, medium, and high—and what could help me challenge these groupings. My first
research activity involved a close examination of my interactions with one student, Lilia. Based on notes and artifacts I keep as part of my regular teaching day, I wrote the first narrative shortly after the incident occurred and reworked it while writing this essay. This set me on a path to understanding my approach to English language instruction and my school’s bilingual program.

**Narrative I: Lilia and Me**

Students, all first-graders, hand me their papers as they race toward the door for recess.

The papers were a response to these instructions: “Juan, Danny, Gerardo, Nica, Monica—I want you all to draw a picture of how to make a flower. All of the rest of you need to start with the words. Use your own words and ideas. I don’t want you just writing what we all wrote. I want you all to try and write on your own.”

As Lila is leaving the room, I reach for her hand, signaling her to stay. I look at the paper and read box number one. It sounds familiar. I read box number two. I find myself getting hot. Frustrated, I look at the board. She has copied word for word what we wrote as a class. I recall the instructions that I gave to the class.

“Did you copy this from the board?” Silence. She looks down at her shoes. High-heeled sandals that sparkle. *Why does her mom let her wear these to school?*

“Did you copy this from the board?” Silence. She bites her lower lip.

“What were the instructions?” Silence.

“Were the instructions to copy the work from the board?” Silence. “Ahora estoy enojada. ¿Copiaste de la pared?”

“Sí.” *Finally she is talking.*

“¿Porqué?” Silence. A tear rolls down her cheek.

*My God. I know that she can do this. Why won’t she try? She never tries. She never takes risks. She is always on the outside.*

“Mira. Estoy enojada. No siguieste las instrucciones. Please tell me in your own words what we did first.” Silence. Tears are rolling down her cheeks, but she isn't making a sound.

“I'm going to cover up my words, and I want you to look at the picture. Tell me what we did first.” *I walk to the board. I am big in the room. She looks so small. Do I always take up this much space?*

I put my hand over the words in the first box. “What did we do first?” Silence. Tears. “Use the pictures, Lilia. You can do it. I know that you know.”

Tears. “We got paper,” she says.

“Yes.” I say trying to find some encouragement in my voice.
“We got some tissue paper.”

“Yes. Then what?”

“We folded it.”

“And then?”

“We cut the paper.”

“You did it! We got some tissue paper. We folded it. We cut the paper. I knew you could do it, and I know that you know how to write some of those ideas and words on your own.”

She is still crying. I am walking around the room. She follows me. I can feel her eyes on my back. “You know Lilia, it is really important that you give your best effort during English class. What language do you speak at home?” The tears have stopped. Her cheeks are wet and stained. A small smile creeps across her face.

“When you go home after school and are talking with your mom and Jovany, what language do you use?” She smiles and looks down at her sides.

“Do you speak English or Spanish?”

“Spanish,” she says and smiles.

It is the first time I have heard her voice that day that it wasn’t full of tears. Now her voice is steady, confident. I say, “It is really important that you practice your English during English class. This is your opportunity to learn English. I want you to leave Melrose speaking and reading and writing in English. I want this for you Lilia.”

She looks down. I take her hand. “Let’s go outside.” Her hand is warm in my hand. When I squeeze her hand, she doesn’t squeeze back.

“I know you can do it. The next time we do writing in English class I want you to really try and write on your own. All right Lilia? Can you do that?”

“Yes,” she answers.

As I collected additional data and analyzed it with the help of my colleagues, the meaning of this exchange would become much clearer to me.

**Narrative II: A Turn in My Inquiry**

It is the middle of the school year and I am immersed in my inquiry trying to better understand the tracked ELD class that I teach. The other five hours of the day, homeroom, go so well. But the ELD hour with the lowest-achieving first and second grade students has become a mystery. Frustration, anger, pressure, urgency, and fear are familiar feelings that I am experiencing teaching this class. I suspect that the students feel it, but I am more inclined to blame the structure of the school and the program than to question my own classroom behavior.
I am routinely collecting data on my homeroom students, whom I have labeled “high,” “medium,” and “low” in their level of English. I write narratives about these students, doing running reading assessments in Spanish and English, and looking at student work. The low students are also in my ELD class, so I observe these students during ELD as well.

The data don’t really give me anything new to think about. No matter how I look at it, I still end up seeing groups of high, medium, and low students. Although I worry about the low students, I am also very frustrated with them and their effort. They all have to be pushed so much to participate during class, in both English and Spanish. I often feel that if they just tried harder and participated more, I would see a change in their progress. I express this thought to them often, believing that telling them is a way of supporting them in finding their voice in my classroom.

In the spirit of continuing my inquiry, I decide to collect one more piece of data. So much of my frustration lies in the low students’ lack of oral participation in the class. Perhaps if I asked my students to reflect on their own talk in and outside of class, in both Spanish and English, I would be able to show them how their lack of participation affects their achievement. So I design a survey that asks the students to rate how often they talk (a lot, sometimes, once in a while, never) in Spanish and English in various situations—in class on the rug, outside at recess, at their tables (see appendix A). I also ask my instructional assistant Mrs. Lopez, whose cultural and linguistic background is similar to the students’, to fill out the surveys based on her observations. Finally, I complete the survey about the students myself.

I expect that the survey responses will provide lots of data to show the students where they need to exert more effort. But I am surprised. I never anticipated that the ways in which I see the students would be different from the ways they see themselves, or that the ways I see these students could be so different from the ways Mrs. Lopez sees them. I read and reread the surveys, turning the circles on the papers around in my mind. I can’t get my head around the idea that someone—anyone—could be seeing something different from what I see in the classroom. But over and over again, Mrs. Lopez and the students whom I have labeled as low have rated their participation differently than I have. And more often than not, they gave higher ratings than I did. 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.

It is difficult for me to believe that these discrepancies really exist. Perhaps Mrs. Lopez didn’t understand the survey. This is also the first time I have asked the students to do a survey. Maybe they just didn’t get what they were supposed to do. I decide to ask one of our support providers at school, Karina, for help. Karina has been assisting me with my inquiry and has a good sense of the ways I am trying to better understand my ELD class. And Karina, like Mrs. Lopez, comes from a cultural and linguistic background similar to the students’. I ask her to talk with the students about their surveys and ask them what they believe I might be thinking of their participation. I think she will be able to get the students to understand what I am experiencing with them in the classroom: that they are not participating and talking enough in class to learn English.

Karina begins to interview the students labeled low. She asks about their survey responses and their ideas about my opinions of their oral participation. One by one the students make it clear that they have indeed understood the survey and that in fact they do think they are talking and participating throughout the day. They see themselves talking with one another on the rug, talking with one another at their tables, and talking when they answer my questions.

“I never anticipated that the ways in which I see the students would be different from the ways they see themselves.”
And then Karina talks with Lilia. “Sarah, you should listen to my conversation with Lilia.”

“Oh yeah? Did she change her responses on her survey?”

“No,” Karina answers quietly, looking down at the floor. “Just listen to it.” Lilia, as my earlier narrative suggests, is struggling with both her English and Spanish literacy. If she hardly speaks during Spanish instruction, she speaks even less during English class. I feel as if I am always trying to get Lilia to talk more, to share her ideas, and to take risks during class. On good days, you might hear me tell her, “Lilia you have a beautiful voice and wonderful ideas. I just want to hear them.” More likely, though, you would hear me demanding that Lilia say something or participate in some way that she wasn’t. She is a student whom I worry about and who frustrates me. I often think about her and what she needs to do to be a better student. I hardly ever think about how she is being a good student or what I need to do to be a better teacher.

“I talk in class,” I hear 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 sees herself as a student who does participate and does try hard. She is also seeing things about herself as a student that I am not seeing. 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. What does this mean for my teaching? What does this mean for my students? What does this mean about me?

Methods: What Is Most Useful for Me

Inquiry has worked for me because it has become part of my classroom practice. I don’t think of it as an extra thing that I do, but as part of my teaching, an extension of my practice. I attend to my plan book, to student work, to the school’s routine student achievement data, to my report card comments, to my own observations (jotted down on Post-it notes and saved to inspire my written narratives), to student work, and to video that I use as both a teaching and inquiry tool.

The surveys and interviews I collect come after my initial analysis. Writing narratives, sharing my data with others, and reflecting on my research purposes have become critical strategies in analyzing all the data I collect. These “extras” help me push, clarify, and deepen my thinking, often helping me to arrive at unanticipated insights about my students, myself, and my teaching.

I usually write narratives about something that is bothering me in my classroom; so inevitably many of my emotions, perceptions, and even judgments come through in my writing. When I first started analyzing my data in this way, I was preoccupied with conveying what I believed really happened in my classroom. I found myself explaining to my audience (and myself) why, for instance, I thought my ELD students were not doing well. Although I was attempting to present an objective account of my teaching, my accounts were filled with opinion. Then I was lucky enough to work with Peter Zachariou, a writing teacher who taught me the difference between telling people about my classroom through writing and showing people my
classroom through my writing1 (see appendix B for a handout similar to one used in the workshop I attended). I learned that before I or anyone else could understand why things were happening in my classroom, they first had to see what was happening. My shift from telling to showing helped me to see that my narratives were not objective, but I also realized that these narratives would never be objective, that my “showing” always involved some selection of what I showed and of the language in which I reported my observation. And this selection had a lot to do with my feelings. I began to understand that the more I let go of trying to be objective in my narratives, the more revealing my writing actually became. My writing became more honest, more real, and inevitably more useful as a tool for looking at my practice. The narratives about Lilia and me that I include here depend on a lot of showing. (“She is still crying. I am walking around the room.”) But there are also feelings (“I couldn’t get my head around the idea that someone—anyone—could see anything different from what I saw in my classroom”) and interpretation (“Lilia knows things about me that I don’t even know about myself”). By combining showing and telling in this way, I have been able to reflect on my own teaching and learning, and my own beliefs and assumptions, and to better understand the context in which I work.

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. Since my experience with Lilia and my instructional assistant, I always include as part of my analysis the sharing of data, whether it is with my colleagues at school, my teacher research groups, or my students. My experiences with inquiry have shown me that I tend to organize data based on my viewpoint as a white, well-educated, middle-class woman. When the data are organized this way, which tends to be the way we traditionally organize data in schools, the results often reinforce what I already think I know about my students. In my early research, using preset categories of high, medium, and low obscured what was happening with my students and my teaching. It was only through working with Karina, and then paying attention to what Lilia had to say, that I began to see where I needed to change my assumptions and my practice. Unfortunately, using traditional approaches to data analysis often places sole responsibility for achievement on the students and fails to illuminate what parts the school, the program, or I play in the students’ achievement. Accepting this way of thinking, I find myself saying, for instance, “If this group of girls would only participate more in class, their English would improve,” rather than, “If this ELD class better met the needs of this group of girls, their English would improve.” I can’t make changes in my practice, in my program, or at my school until I question this paradigm. I have found that what other people see in my data is invariably more challenging and compelling than what I see, as the observation of others surfaces the assumptions I may be holding about my students, their learning, and my teaching. These observations also impel me to think differently about my students and myself and, eventually, to take action to change my practice.

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1 “Showing, not telling” as a writing technique was developed by Rebekah Caplan, a teacher-consultant with Bay Area Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project. See her book Writers in Training (1984), for more information.
Finally, I always ask myself whom the data and analysis serve. In the end, I want my inquiry to be about student achievement and about creating classroom and school environments where all students, regardless of race, class, gender, and language background can experience success. If my data and my data analysis aren’t helping me to create these conditions, I have to go back and rethink my question, reorganize my data, and reconceptualize my analysis. My data must help me to address issues of equity in my classroom and my school. If they do not, my research has not served its purpose.

**Finding Myself in My Inquiry**

I have been lucky to receive lots of support for my classroom inquiry. Teacher inquiry is a regular part of my school’s professional development, and I have participated in a number of teacher inquiry groups outside of my school. These venues have supported me in pursuing my questions about my teaching, and challenged me to dig deeper into my practice and myself.

I have located myself in my inquiry. Inquiry helps me to solve problems that I identify in my classroom, and by pushing me to recognize my assumptions, allows me to consider the role I play in those problems. I was fixated on the idea that my students, particularly girls, did not talk enough during English class. I was convinced that if I could get them to talk in English, they would learn English. It was not until I looked at the achievement data in conjunction with my narratives and survey results that I was able to recognize that I was operating under assumptions about language use and class participation. I had been assuming that in order to learn English, students had to speak only English during the ELD class. I had also assumed that if they were not speaking in English, they were not talking about the content that we were covering. The truth is I never listened to their conversations in English class. I was so focused on particular types of participation (primarily on the rug and during teacher-directed speaking exercises) that I actually did not know what they were and were not saying. Lilia believed that she was participating and talking. What might I have found out if I had actually listened to her? I was so familiar with the “rules” of school because I was good at them and they reflected my cultural experience. I often assumed that if I merely told the students to talk more, they too would learn the rules. The truth was that Lilia did have a set of rules for school—they were just different from mine. This realization ultimately led me to change my classroom rules about the use of Spanish during the ELD hour. Previously, I had not allowed children to speak Spanish during English class. As a result, the children didn’t do a lot of talking. The following year, I decided not to make any rules about my students’ talking. I spoke only English during English class, but I let students speak whichever language they chose. As a result, I saw a change during ELD. Students did use Spanish but they used it to talk about the content we were covering in English. And they slowly became more comfortable using their English voice. I have become convinced that it is easier for students to take risks with their English voice if their Spanish voice is close by.

However, at the same time that all the support I received enabled me to look deeply at my practice, it also allowed me to hide certain parts of my inquiry. For instance, I was very public at school about the assessment data I was collecting on my high, medium, and low students, but I was very private about the results of my survey. At the same time, the survey
results were a tool I shared in an inquiry group with my colleagues, but I did not share them in conjunction with my narratives and the assessment data. The difficult work for me is looking at all of my data together. A single type of data sometimes tells me things I already know, sometimes confirms things I suspect, and sometimes shows me something new. Usually, an isolated type of data gives me permission to extricate myself from the student achievement problems. It enables me to point out the equity issues in the school, but it does not encourage me to locate myself in those equity issues. I recognize a problem, but not my role in it. It was not until I began to look at multiple forms of data together that I was able to recognize the issues of inequity that were playing out daily in my practice and may in fact have been affecting students’ English language learning.

This is a small piece of a much larger story. Even in writing this short piece it is difficult for me not to jump ahead and tell people where I am right now, where Lilia is, and how different my teaching looks and feels. My inquiry and my inquiry results, which I shared as part of our facultywide presentations, led me to propose and pilot a heterogeneous ELD class the following year. This pilot allowed me to keep my homeroom students all day for both homeroom and ELD. During the year I continued to investigate my ELD practice and the effects that keeping my students in a heterogeneous class for ELD had on my practice and on their learning. Sharing the results of that experiment and working with others who were inquiring about ELD led us to detrack the rest of our ELD program the next year. As I write this now, my school is preparing to reflect on this first year of untracked ELD classes.

I have learned a great deal from doing inquiry into my practice, my classroom, and myself, and I truly believe it can transform the way schools function for our students. Yet I still gravitate toward sharing the results and the successes, while I shy away from sharing my more personal struggles. It is more comfortable to share the successes, to have others say, “You are doing such a great job!” We don’t very often hear such praise as teachers. But, despite how uncomfortable it may make me feel, I know that the most important part of inquiry is the messy part, the “mucking around,” the part where I feel uneasy about what I’m learning and unsure of how I’m going to make sense of it. The most important part is when nothing makes sense and I do not have any answers, just lots of questions.

**Reference**


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**Sarah Capitelli** teaches at Melrose Elementary School in Oakland, California, where the entire staff participates in collaborative inquiry. She has taught for six years and has been involved with teacher inquiry for the past five years. A Carnegie Scholar, she has also participated in the Bay Region IV teacher research project and BayCES’ Teacher Inquiry Project. Her research questions have emerged out of her concern for the lowest-achieving students at her school and have centered around her English language development (ELD) classroom and her own assumptions about language use. Capitelli is currently in a doctoral program in educational linguistics.
Appendix A: Student Participation Survey

Name: ___________________________

When I’m in class and we’re working in Spanish, I talk…

a lot  sometimes  not very often

When I’m in English class, I talk…

a lot  sometimes  not very often

When I’m speaking in Spanish I feel like I know

a lot of things  some things  not very many things

When I’m speaking in English I feel like I know…

a lot of things  some things  not very many things

When I’m playing with my friends outside we speak in Spanish…

a lot  sometimes  not very often  never

When I’m playing with my friends outside we speak in English…

a lot  sometimes  not very often  never

When we’re sitting on the rug and working in Spanish, I raise my hand…

a lot  sometimes  not very often  never

When we’re sitting on the rug and working in English, I raise my hand…

a lot  sometimes  not very often  never

(Sarah Capitelli, Melrose Elementary School. First/Second Grade Bilingual Teacher.)
Appendix B: How to Show

Exploring Your Creative Writing Potential
Instructor: Peter Zachariou, UC Berkeley Extension

How to Show
(revised June 2005)

“Showing” reveals mood, emotions, and/or character by writing what happened, what was said, what the place looked like, what the characters looked like, what they were thinking at the time it happened, what the characters felt physically inside. “Showing” is richer than “Telling” because good writing, like real life, implies so much more than a relatively simple telling statement. “Showing” how a character behaves is more engaging than saying, “She was angry.”

“Telling” means explaining, commenting on the action—what the action or the dialogue or the place meant, why the characters looked the way they did, what they were feeling emotionally, explaining their background, what the story meant. Avoid “Telling.”

The Six Basic Ways to Show

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>What is Shown</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action (anything that the characters do, i.e., how they behave outwardly)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Actions</td>
<td>Mood, emotion, and/or character</td>
<td>As he spoke, she did not look at him, but watched instead the blue stream of smoke from her cigarette rising in a straight line toward the ceiling. She started tapping her foot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Actions (Dramatic!)</td>
<td>Mood, emotion, and/or character</td>
<td>With a broad sweep of her arm, she pushed all the dinner dishes into the sink, shattering his finest crystal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue (anything said out loud, including monologue; with quotation marks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect (implicit)</td>
<td>Mood, emotion, and/or character</td>
<td>“I think we need to talk about our relationship.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct (explicit)</td>
<td>Mood, emotion, and/or character</td>
<td>“Why don’t you just get out of my life!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description of Setting (a particular location at a certain time, season, year)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcing Details</td>
<td>Context, mood, emotion, character</td>
<td>Outside her bay window, clouds swept over Twin Peaks, darker than the usual fog, blotting out the sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrasting Details</td>
<td>Context, mood, emotion, character</td>
<td>She could hear children laughing and shouting from the playground nearby.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Physical Description of Characters (what the characters look like)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Data</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>His stocky body suggested an athlete, but his once taut muscles had slackened.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Trait</td>
<td>Character, mood, and/or emotion</td>
<td>She flashed her Montana blue eyes at him, as if to say, <em>Could these eyes lie?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mannerism</td>
<td>Character, mood, and/or emotion</td>
<td>With both hands, she lifted loose strands of her hair away from her face and tucked them behind her ears.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status Details</td>
<td>Character</td>
<td>When she first had seen him, he was stepping out of his old Volvo, his long legs in faded Levi’s, his strong back and arms in a plaid flannel shirt, its colors washed out into a blur.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Internal Thinking (what the character is thinking; usually without quotation marks)

| Direct | Character, mood, and/or emotion | What’s he up to? |
|        |                                 | [always in present tense] |
| Indirect | Character, mood, and/or emotion | She wondered why he was bringing it up again. |

## Internal Physical Sensations (physical sensations that suggest emotional feelings or character reactions)

| Direct | Mood, emotion, and/or character | The muscles in her neck stiffened. |
| Simile or Metaphor | Mood, emotion, and/or character | Her throat felt dry as [or like] paper. Her chest tightened into an iron shield. [Try to avoid clichés like *heart in my throat*.] |
In my sixteen years of teaching, I have spent much time and energy working with and thinking about African American students. In particular, I think about their writing and how I as a teacher can make writing more of a vehicle for their success. This essay describes and reflects on several ways that I and other teachers at Thurgood Marshall Academic High School in San Francisco addressed these issues in our own practice and collaboratively with colleagues. I describe three different contexts in which I have worked to focus teacher professional development on the achievement of African American students: the school’s English department; whole-school professional development; and a small, equity-focused inquiry group. In each case, I describe the challenges and successes; I focus on how building on successes (both our own successes as teachers, and the successes of our students) can support changes in teaching practice that result in higher achievement for African American students.

Background
Thurgood Marshall High School is located in the Bayview-Hunters Point district of San Francisco, where in 2000, 47.73 percent of the 33,355 residents were African American. During the 2002–2003 school year, 25.7 percent of the 1,005 students at Thurgood Marshall
Academic High School were African American.¹ The school was opened in 1993 with this mandate:

Thurgood Marshall Academic High School's mission is to provide a high-quality, college preparatory and academically rigorous program for inner-city youth. One of our primary charges is to increase the academic achievement of historically underrepresented minorities in the fields of science and mathematics. Committed to equity, we will do everything we can to make top-quality education accessible to all students regardless of their prior school experiences.

Shortly after the school had opened and the first students had arrived, it became apparent that hard work, good intentions, careful planning, and a thoughtfully crafted problem-solving approach to meeting the needs of all students were not enough to ensure the success of African American students in particular. Classroom data collected from teachers and schoolwide data collected by administrators revealed what many teachers had already observed: although a visible number of African American students were doing well—getting good grades, graduating, and matriculating into four-year colleges and universities—too many were not doing well enough, not doing well at all, or leaving school because they believed they could not meet the graduation requirement of 280 units (a high standard in a district where most high schools graduated students with 230 units).

During the school’s first ten years, the staff responded to the persistent achievement gap between African American and other students in various ways: whole-staff meetings were devoted to the issue; committees were formed; grade-level teams of teachers held meetings to discuss the needs of African American students; departments gathered student data and reviewed teaching strategies; at informal lunchtime meetings, staff discussed the 280-unit requirement, and some suggested modifying the requirement, providing additional student support, or allowing students to leave school if they could not meet the requirement. In short, many teachers and administrators worked long hours on the problem of under-achieving and failing African American students, yet many of these students continued to under-achieve and fail. This dilemma raised a critical question for me: If hard work, good intentions, subject-matter preparedness, dynamism, and administrative support are not adequate tools for increasing teachers’ effectiveness in educating African American students, what are?

The English Department Begins to Share Practice and Results—and Issues of Equity Surface

Traditionally, the weekly, one-hour English department meetings at Thurgood Marshall were spent discussing business with a few minutes set aside at the end, right before the start-of-the-school-day bell rang, to discuss teaching concerns. For a few years, we kept a running list of these concerns, which we hoped to address later. Eventually we realized that “later” would never come, so we changed the focus of our meetings from information dissemina-

¹ In addition, 39.6 percent were Chinese, 14.3 percent were Latino, 7.2 percent were Filipino, and 10.5 percent were “other non-white.”
tion (which could easily be done through email) to an inquiry-oriented form of curriculum sharing. Once a month at our meetings, one of our thirteen English teachers would share a lesson that had worked well or with which he or she was struggling. After the presenting teacher gave a very short introduction, we would look at student work generated from the lesson. Our goal was to understand the connection between teacher practice and student achievement. For example, after looking closely at a writing prompt and student samples one eleventh grade teacher had brought in, our discussion centered around how to make the expectations for that essay more explicit and how to integrate more scaffolding for concluding paragraphs into the lesson.

After a few sessions, it became clear that while most teachers were following the state and district standards, the efficacy of their instruction varied noticeably. Some teachers had identified components of good academic writing and had been developing lessons that explicitly taught those elements, while others were less skilled and/or experienced in providing students with the tools necessary to write an effective essay.

In order to make our instruction of writing more uniform, and—we hoped—more effective, we spent months of department-meeting time articulating the components of academic writing. Our lists included introduction, thesis statement, topic sentence, supporting detail, textual evidence, generalization, transition sentence, and concluding paragraph. Sublists further explained these points; for example, Introduction—an opening statement which connects the content of the essay to a “truth,” or philosophy, or real-life concern; some explanation of why the topic or point of view is important or relevant or timeless; a thesis statement or question. We created charts delineating which skills would be introduced, practiced, and more deeply explored at each grade level. The process of putting all this information down on paper kept us thinking critically about our teaching of writing. This was important work; however, it was not all we needed to do. In order to begin to understand the reasons for the achievement gap between African American students and other students, we needed to look more closely at our students’ grades and at our grading policies.

During the second semester of 2002, we began the process of disaggregating information about the grades we had given our students. With our grade books in hand, we each highlighted all students who had received a D or F in our English classes for the first quarter. We saw what we had seen when we had done this exercise a few times before in whole-school meetings: our African American students had received a disproportionate number of the lowest grades. When we reflected on what accounted for poor grades in our classes, we saw a correlation between assignments not being turned in (homework, or class work that extends to homework, such as essays), absences and tardies, and low grades. Because teacher conversations about grades can be very “pat” (“The student did not hand in any work.”), or quite threatening (“He completed all his essays in my class.”), we decided to limit our focus to identifying “the teacher part” in student grades. We wanted to start a process that would challenge us all to pay attention to the interactions we had with our African American students. What could we notice about what we were doing or not doing?

As a starting point and foundation for the work ahead, we were able to agree that as teachers we do make a difference in the achievement of our African American students. Most of
us agreed that, given hard and focused work, we could articulate and put into practice teaching philosophies and strategies that would increase the achievement of African American students in our English classes. Based on previous conversations we had had about race, we knew that some of us might find ourselves in deep disagreement with each other, but we considered the work important enough to pursue.

Creating Professional Development Focused on African American Students

We wanted to design a workshop for ourselves in which we would 1) try to understand the ways in which our teaching practices were obstacles to the learning of African American students and 2) determine how to change our practice in order to increase the achievement of African American students in our English classes. Three of us volunteered to collaborate on this project: Alison, a European American English teacher with two years of teaching experience; Cheryl, a European American English teacher and English department head with three years of teaching experience; and myself, an African American English teacher with thirteen years of teaching experience. We knew we would have to plan carefully, and realized that we might need to consult others who had more experience in working effectively with teachers on these issues. We began designing two three-hour workshops that could have an immediate impact on the efficacy of our teaching practices for African American students.

This was not easy work. From our initial planning meeting, it was clear that in order to work together we first had to come to some common understandings about African American students at our school. It took us three two-hour planning meetings to agree on these four premises:

1. Middle-achieving African American students, as opposed to the lowest-achieving African American students, should be at the center of our paradigm for observing and drawing conclusions about our classroom practice.
2. By identifying what high-achieving African American students do in our classrooms, we can learn something about the ways in which we need to change our practice to increase the achievement of all African American students.
3. Our practice should be informed by current African American student-centered pedagogical theory.
4. A ‘safe’ environment is necessary for effective teachers of African American students to say what they feel needs to be said.

The rest of this section considers each of these premises in turn; the next section explains how we implemented these premises in our professional-development workshops.

Middle-achieving African American students, as opposed to the lowest-achieving African American students, should be at the center of our paradigm for observing and drawing con-

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2 We thought that it was important to get administrative support for our equity work, so we asked for and received stipends for all the teachers who would attend a workshop to move forward on these ideas.
clusions about our classroom practice. When considering primarily the lowest-achieving students, it is easy to fall into the trap of talking about their lack of skills, motivation, and at-home support instead of the ways in which our teaching practice must change. In contrast, when considering middle-achieving students—students who are receiving C’s in class but who could, with some effort on the part of the student and teacher, earn B’s or A’s—it is much easier to identify their academic strengths and thus develop more effective teaching strategies to build upon those strengths. Considering middle-achieving students would give us the opportunity to change our practice and see improvement in a shorter period of time. This, we reasoned, would go a long way toward dispelling teachers’ long-held and unrecognized stereotypes about African American students, as students demonstrated what they could do with teaching practices that met their needs. Thus, we hoped to shift the teacher paradigm from “If I can change the students, they can improve,” to “The students can improve and therefore I must change.”

By identifying what high-achieving African American students do in our classrooms, we can learn something about the ways in which we need to change our practice to increase the achievement of all African American students. By identifying some of the strengths of high-achieving African American students, teachers will discover strengths that also exist in lower-achieving African American students. They can then build upon these strengths, which may include engagement (as measured by classroom participation), discipline (getting the work done), a point of view and voice in their writing, an analytical/critical perspective, a willingness to work cooperatively with other students, leadership roles in academic discussion, and a strong focus on content.

Our practice should be informed by current African American student–centered pedagogical theory. Such theory can be found in articles such as Claude Steele’s “Race and the Schooling of Black Americans,” and “Thin Ice: ‘Stereotype Threat’ and Black College Students,” as well as Arnetha Ball’s “Expository Writing Patterns of African American Students,” and “Cultural Preference and the Expository Writing of African American Adolescents.” Accessible works like these can provide relevant information to support a change in teaching practices.

At the center of these authors’ work is the belief that African American students come to school with academic strengths, both in terms of skills and content. When teachers know more about African American students’ knowledge base and preferred learning styles, and understand the students’ sociological positioning within schools, they have the potential to develop teaching practices that support African American students.

A “safe” environment is necessary for effective teachers of African American students to say what they feel needs to be said. In order to do this, teachers who already had a certain amount of success with African American students would be empowered to define the agenda for our discussions. For those teachers who still believed that their African American students’ lack of success resulted from pathology on the part of the students and their families,
the discussions and workshops would focus on ways in which their curriculum and instruction could (and must) be modified.

**Implementing Inquiry-Based, Equity-Focused Professional Development**

We began the series of two three-hour workshops by introducing, and getting agreement for, the working premise that we could improve our efficacy and therefore the achievement of African American students by looking critically at and modifying our teaching practice and that we could learn from each other and the current research. Our first activity was to brainstorm a list of what we expected our students to be able to do in our classes. The list we created was long and varied and included tasks such as write cogent paragraphs; respond to quotes from the text; use effective vocabulary; articulate the author’s purpose; write a multiparagraph, multidraft essay; complete homework; participate in class discussion. We then brainstormed what students in our classes needed to know in order to successfully complete those tasks. Again, the list was long and varied and included skills such as read grade-level appropriate texts, write complex sentences, draw conclusions from text. Finally, we brainstormed a list of the ways we taught and supported students as they learned what they needed to know in order to successfully complete assignments. This list included direct instruction; practice in class; individual writing conferences in class, through email, or over the phone; creating structures for helping students organize information and ideas; vocabulary-development with an oral language component; and phone calls home with “good” reports. Although we as a department had done this sort of information-gathering numerous times, we thought it necessary to start the meeting this way in order to ground our discussions in our own curriculum and instruction, in what we were actually doing or not doing.

From group list-making we moved to individual writing. Teachers were prompted to think of one or two successful African American students in their class (i.e., students who had consistently received a grade of A or B, or students whose achievement had steadily increased), and then to write a profile of the student: How was the student’s engagement in the content of the class made evident? What were the student’s work habits as gauged by completed assignments? What else do you notice about the student in your class? After sharing what they had written with a partner, teachers were asked to write what they did to support that student’s success: What kinds of instruction for, and feedback on, written work were given? What sorts of comments did you verbally make to the student? What kinds of connections have you made with the student’s parents? From the writing and the conversation, we hoped that teachers would begin to see a connection between what they were doing in their classroom and the achievement of individual students; we wanted teachers to begin to identify what they were doing that worked. We asked teachers to report back to the group some of their own strategies and teaching methods that they considered effective.

Thus, we began a draft list of effective strategies and methods of teaching that included clear written directions, clear expectations, models of “good” writing, instruction in the components of academic writing, personal attention to the student, acknowledgement—private and pub-

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3 The first workshop was attended by twelve of the thirteen department members.
lic—of the student's strengths in writing and thinking. During these processes, most teachers stayed focused on their own practice; notably, only one teacher needed a reminder not to answer a question about teaching practice with information about what a particular student or groups of students were not doing. Also, most of the teachers willingly made a connection between their practice and the achievement of the highlighted African American student in their class; only a couple of teachers believed that these students came to them already high-achieving and would leave high-achieving regardless of their teaching practices.

In addition to talking about strategies we felt were effective, we heard from the students themselves—in roundtable discussions at the English-department workshop—about what they considered sound teaching and what sorts of strategies had not worked with them. A lot of what they told us we already knew: they wanted clear instruction; interesting, engaging writing assignments; support in successfully completing writing assignments. But some of it we needed to hear again: they wanted to be respected for the work they did do, and they wanted the grading to be fair; that is, they wanted to be given credit for what they did do successfully.

After hearing from the students, we generated a list of the causes for failing or low grades in our classes: failure to hand in homework, failure to complete class work, incomplete assignments, turned-in assignments that did not meet expectations, poor scores on tests and quizzes, and absences. We then wrote in response to a prompt asking us to consider a middle- to low-achieving African American student in our class who we believed could achieve more. The prompt included multiple questions:

- What kinds of assignments was the student turning in?
- What kinds of assignments was the student not turning in?
- If the student’s work often did not meet expectations, in what ways did the work not meet expectations?
- What kinds of assignments that the student turned in did meet expectations?
- If the student was scoring poorly on tests and/or quizzes, on what kinds of tests and/or quizzes was the student scoring poorly?
- On what kinds of test and/or quizzes did the student meet expectations?
- What are some of the responses the student has had to his/her grades and/or comments on his/her papers?

After we wrote, we shared our writing with a partner who listened and asked critical questions: Was there a pattern to the kinds of assignments the student was successfully or unsuccess-fully completing? What information was the student imparting with his/her response to his/her grades? From our writing and discussion, we attempted to generalize about the

4 When a student expresses disagreement or raises a question about a grade, this often means that the student and the teacher are seeing what the student knows in different ways. These disagreements offer an opportunity for the teacher to look more closely at—and to get better at seeing—what students know.
kinds of assignments that many of our low- and middle-achieving African American students were not successfully completing in our classes and, much more difficult, what criteria we were using to grade.

In addition to talking about grades, we talked about homework: what kinds of homework most students did turn in and what kinds of homework too many students did not turn in, how much weight homework carried in our classes, and, as a corollary, how much weight class work carried. We talked about expectations for essays, about the writing process (including rewriting), and about envisioning writing instruction as a yearlong process giving students the opportunity—with instruction, practice, and feedback—to learn how to write an effective essay over the course of the academic year. We came to no decisions about our homework or grading policies, but we did leave each other with a lot to consider. We acknowledged that changing teaching philosophies and practices takes time, and we planned to continue to address these issues in department meetings.

After our discussion, each department member chose an article to read, either Claude Steele’s “Race and the Schooling of Black Americans” or an article about the structure of academic writing. We read our selected articles during the workshop and then discussed them with other members who had read the same one. For our final task, we each wrote about ways in which our own curriculum needed to be modified, what we had needed to learn more about, and the immediate changes we could make in our teaching practice to increase the achievement of African American students. When teachers reported back at the end of the second workshop, many expressed a sense of urgency and excitement; we wanted to get back to our classrooms and implement some of the changes we had been thinking about, and we had ideas about how to proceed.

**Taking the Work Schoolwide Brings New Challenges**

Based on the positive reports we received back from the twelve English teachers at the English department workshops, the teacher/administrator leadership team at Thurgood Marshall decided to design a two-day whole-staff retreat using our English department workshop as a model.

The results of this retreat, as evidenced by teacher feedback throughout the process, were much more mixed. Some teachers, for example, expressed skepticism about the value of the information in articles such as Claude Steele’s “Race and the Schooling of Black Americans.” In addition, the 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.

During the retreat leadership team’s debrief, the three African American teachers who had helped to facilitate the retreat expressed concerns and frustrations differently from the non-African American facilitators. We characterized our experiences in our groups as very hard, frustrating, discouraging, and, at times, “unbelievable.” In the group I had worked with during the retreat, one of the European American teachers—a young man with two years’ teaching experience—said that he did not believe that things were “that bad” for African American
students any more. When I challenged his assumptions, one of the other European American teachers, also a young man with two years of teaching experience, pointed out that our guidelines stated that everyone would have the opportunity to say what they needed to say. The question remained, however, Whom were those guidelines written to protect?

A few of the non–African American facilitators mentioned that there had been some resistance within their groups to the idea of a retreat dedicated to increasing the achievement of African American students. However, they said that they had not addressed the resistance, but had ignored it. Some said that they did not notice the resistance. One African American facilitator, not a member of the English department, expressed how personally difficult it had been for her to lead a group of non–African American educators. She further explained how much she had learned from the retreat: from reading Claude Steele’s article she had understood her own college experience differently. After listening to the facilitators’ debrief, a European American veteran teacher with more than twenty years of teaching experience said that she had learned a lot, and that she would not have guessed that the experience of the African American and non–African American facilitators would be so different. She mused that there was something to learn from that, although she did not yet know what it was.

Getting Back to Practice: Creating an Action-Research Group for Equity

During the 2000–2001 school year, I started participating in a teacher research collaborative (TRC) sponsored by the Bay Area Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project. One of the TRC’s goals for the second year was to identify and support other educators who might be interested in doing their own classroom inquiry. I was eager to build on the preliminary successes of the English department’s equity work. Because of what I had learned from codesigning and cofacilitating whole-school workshops to help increase the achievement of African American students at Thurgood Marshall, I wanted to invite teachers into my research team who possessed certain qualities:

• They had demonstrated some success with African American students, as measured by student opinion.
• They had demonstrated a passion for learning more about effective strategies for teaching African American students, as measured by their involvement with professional development and leadership activities directed at the increased achievement of African American students.
• They had demonstrated a willingness to enter into discussions about pedagogy that made race explicit, as measured by their input and response to staff, department, leadership team, and personal discussions where connections between race and the schooling of African Americans were made explicit.

In addition to these basic criteria, I wanted members who in previous professional interchanges had demonstrated an ability to challenge and change each other. I believed the group should include more than one African American teacher in order to change the traditional dynamic of one African American teacher educating non–African American teach-
ers—a dynamic of which I had been a part during the Thurgood Marshall workshop. And I wanted to keep the group small so that we could do in-depth work.

I invited two teachers from my school who I believed met the criteria: Cheryl, a third-year English teacher and department head; and Daneen, an African American math teacher with two years of teaching experience. Both teachers accepted the invitation and were excited about the work.

The Overall Structure of Our Work

All three of us had previous experience with education groups that had failed because of lack of seriousness as evidenced by absent members, inadequate meeting time, and interruptions if meetings were held at the school site. We decided to meet every other week after school, off campus, for two to three hours. We all pledged to attend the meetings no matter what else was going on in our professional or personal lives.

We agreed to focus our work on improving our practice as teachers of African American students. We would collect anecdotal or quantitative data about our African American students, and focus on their achievement as measured by their skills, concept-mastery, and grades in our classes. After we had gathered what we considered to be adequate information, we would experiment with changes in our practice, and report back to each other. Action was to be at the center of our inquiry; we did not want to wait to act, as too many of our African American students continued to under-achieve and fail. We believed that seeing the improved achievement of African American students in our classes would be the impetus for our continued hard work in the group.

Structuring Inquiry Meetings

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. We agreed that at every meeting, in order to enhance our sense of personal responsibility to and excitement about the discussion, each of us would address a teaching issue from our own classroom, using a step-by-step protocol. (The appendix provides the full protocol that we used to structure our inquiry conversations.) The teacher would describe how a student or group of students was not achieving well, what she had been doing in her practice, and what she thought was going on—i.e., where she thought her practice might be falling short. The others would take notes and report back, and the presenting teacher would add to or amend her account. Then the other members would discuss what they thought the core issue might be and possible implications, while the presenting teacher listened, took notes, and engaged in the conversation. At the end of each meeting, we suggested next steps to each other, and each committed to making a simple change in our practice, on which we would report back at the following meeting. We took turns taking notes; typed up for the next meeting, these notes provided material for us to make further decisions about how to focus our research.
For example, after explaining how some African American students did just the minimum on a project that the teacher considered to be “easy enough” and “fun,” the teacher described what had happened when she asked her students why they had not done better. To her surprise, the students had detailed answers: even though the teacher had prepared well, had provided clear oral and written instructions, and made explicit her expectations, some of the students felt that they had not been given enough guidance or in-class time. In response, for her next project the teacher more thoroughly explained the model, gave students time to digest the information, offered students more individual attention, and allowed for more in-class work time. Many of the African American students who had underachieved on the last project did much better on this subsequent one, as measured by their perceived effort and higher grades.

After three or four months of using this protocol at our meetings, we paused to review what we had done. We each wanted to develop a clear focus for an action-research project. Referring to the binder of all the meeting notes, we spent several meetings talking through some of issues we had encountered, in order to help each other choose a specific target area. For example, one member had presented several times about aligning her teaching of writing (scaffolding) with her expectations for student writing (rubrics). For her final inquiry she decided to consider what she truly valued as “good writing”—the kind of writing which was, in fact, often done by some of her underachieving and failing African American students—and why she did not give it the credit (grade) she thought it really deserved. Her inquiry focused on redefining “good” academic writing, and creating rubrics that evaluated those qualities. Thus, her inquiry allowed her to recognize and build on the strengths of her African American students.

Once each of us had identified a target issue, we spent a few meetings hammering out ways to frame the issue, plans for changing our teaching practice to raise the achievement of our African American students, and ways to collect data on those practices and their results. We used subsequent meetings to discuss the changes we were making in our teaching practice, and the outcomes for students. We also began writing about our inquiries, and we read and discussed anything that a group member brought. Midway through the spring, we each had first drafts5 in which we did four things:

1. described the issue/situation and why we were compelled to look at it
2. explained the changes we made to this practice
3. shared the data and/or results
4. drew conclusions and articulated our learning about this specific teaching practice and outcome, as well as about our teaching practice in general.

In the course of the year we all made changes in our practice, and saw results with our students. Being able to critically question other’s teaching practice allowed us to make deep-

5 These drafts were published by the Bay Area Writing Project, in an anthology that was shared with other teacher-researchers.
er changes more quickly than we ever could have on our own. Focusing on the strengths and successes of our African American students strengthened our belief in their capacity. And working with a small group of colleagues who shared a commitment to supporting improvements in the achievement of African American students increased our own sense of efficacy and possibility.

Conclusion: The Power of Teacher Communities

The experience of our TRC inquiry group confirms that teacher communities created to increase the achievement of African American students can be sustained by successes and positive results. Working together and guided by questions like, What can I do now? What happened when I did it? What did I learn about my practice and my theories? What can I do next?, teachers can develop curriculum and teaching strategies that better meet the needs of African American students, as measured by increased skills and content attainment as well as grades and test scores. Because the role of the group and the collaboration is critical, it is important to identify and invite teachers who are passionate about their students’ learning, open to learning themselves, and willing to make issues about race explicit in their inquiry. As we found, such communities can create a dialogue quite different from the mainstream discourse in our schools, a dialogue that encourages teachers to develop teaching practices that support all students, including African American students.

When a collaborative teacher community focuses on increasing the achievement of African American students, the dialogue can build on questions such as: Do I have enough information in terms of subject matter, teaching strategies and methodologies to develop teaching practices that will include African American students in the learning process? Am I familiar enough with current African American student-centered pedagogical theory to create curriculum that gives African American students access to education? If teachers listen and question with the intent to learn, African American students will provide enough information about what they need in order to succeed in class. I continue to change by listening to my African American students and what they say is happening for them in their learning in my classroom. Collaborative inquiry groups—where teachers encourage each other to listen to students, and talk together about the implications of what they hear—have been a powerful part of my learning process.

References


Pirette McKamey now teaches English at Mission High School, a predominately Latino and African American school located in San Francisco. She has been a teacher for the past sixteen years and involved in teacher inquiry groups, sponsored by the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP), for the past four years. The focus of her work has been to work in partnership with other teachers to identify and develop teaching practices that increase the academic achievement of African American and Latino students.
Appendix: 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 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).

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 the 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 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 the 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.
Leading from Personal Experience: Autobiography as a Foundation for Developing African American Teacher Leadership

In her work as director of the Peachtree Urban Writing Project in Atlanta, Gwendolyn Williams discovered that autobiography can be used to empower teachers as leaders. In this essay, she examines her role in developing teacher leadership, particularly the leadership of African American teachers. She describes how she explored the use of autobiography in helping teachers identify themes in their own life histories to draw on as they take leadership for equity and student learning. She shares aspects of her own life history, explaining some ways that she, as a leader, draws on these experiences. And she points to the importance of a learning community to support teachers in their research and journey as teacher-leaders.

By Gwendolyn Williams

Introduction

In 2002, the Peachtree Urban Writing Project of Atlanta (PUWP), a site of the National Writing Project, was invited to participate in the Teacher Research Collaborative (TRC). We joined, looking forward to the opportunity to think about equity and leadership for equity. When Michelle Hayes, a PUWP teacher-consultant, and I returned from the TRC Summer Institute in Berkeley, we were motivated to add another dimension to PUWP’s teacher research investigations—an explicit focus on equity. We spearheaded a local group of ten PUWP teacher-consultants, most of whom were African American, to participate in weekly teacher research meetings centered on equity.

As we met and learned about each other’s histories, we determined that the PUWP teachers had long experienced discrimination and marginalization and had been required to follow mandates that affected their ability to make decisions about their own teaching. Each of the teachers in our research group had experienced suppression of their knowledge about what good teaching should look like in classrooms. This was due in part to districts attempting to address the needs of students by mandating packaged models for all students. Consequently, as the teachers sought to implement the models, they found themselves suppressing their natural inclination to draw on their own fund of teaching experience.
Through our work with the research group during the next two years, we probed multiple meanings of equity and explored what it meant to bring African American teachers together to move forward in this work toward addressing inequities. Most important for me as an African American director, this work was about building the leadership of African American teachers and gaining greater insight into my own practice as a leader. For my own inquiry, I asked myself, How do African American teachers grow as leaders within the context of equity-focused work? I explored the intersection of autobiography and directed readings, and helped to create a model for nurturing teachers as equity leaders.

The Significance of Autobiography in Developing Teacher-Leaders

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (1998) boldly asserts, “We teach who we are.” His words are a call to acknowledge the role and place of autobiography in the construction of the teaching life. In reflecting on my own life, on my experience as a teacher, and on the teacher research community we built at the Peachtree Urban Writing Project, I’ve come to recognize that it is our personal, situated, life histories that shape our dedication and commitment. In particular, our autobiographies shape our commitment and approach to creating classrooms where all children learn in empowering and affirming ways.

Not too many years ago, my dissertation work focused on four African American PUWP teachers and my mentoring of them into leadership roles in the writing project and their local schools. I looked at the role of autobiography in their developing leadership, and came to understand more fully how my own autobiography had shaped my work as a teacher and as an African American leader of fellow African American teachers. I recognized many of my experiences as common among African American teachers, and I have been able to draw on these in building teacher leadership for equity in my TRC work at PUWP. I share parts of my own autobiography and these common experiences here.

I was the first in my family to go to college. I knew that I was continuing schooling not only for myself, but also for my parents, grandparents, and other members in the community who had identified me as having the potential to succeed. When I left my hometown for Spelman College, my community made sure that I was prepared for college. They gave me sweaters, skirts, underwear, cosmetics, care packages with food, and a set of almost new, white, Lady Baltimore luggage. I was very proud of my nearly new luggage with all the matching pieces that Mrs. Pendleton had bequeathed to me. Never for one minute did I feel that I was not equal to the challenge that was before me. With the support of my family and my community, I arrived at college with all the necessary accoutrements and prepared for the excitement that lay before me.

I had been very active in my church community. Mrs. Pendleton, my Sunday school teacher and the pianist for the church, recognized that I had talent. She had a quiet, discerning demeanor and loved working with the youth. She never raised her voice; was always well-turned-out in her dress and hair style; and always epitomized success, gracefulness, and a genuine desire to develop the best in each child. She challenged me to excel. She coached me in learning “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson and several poems by Langston Hughes to dramatize in church. I learned to play the piano, sang in the choir, and later
became the pianist for the youth choir. For me, church was the central place to discover, practice, and hone my talents under the gaze of caring elders. I felt nurtured and encouraged by my elders and also my peers and friends.

My elementary teachers were kind and supportive. Mrs. Beyers, my second grade teacher played the piano, showed me an appreciation for music, and taught me to sing. Mrs. Mosley taught me about drama and instilled in me an appreciation of dance. In fourth grade Mrs. Carroll taught me about caring for students: she allowed me more time on a test because I had just returned to school from having the mumps and wasn’t feeling well. Mrs. Jackson, my fifth grade teacher, had a real love for places in the world and incited my interest in social studies. Each of these teachers made an impact on my life as they pushed me to do my very best and ignited in me a love for learning. They were also respected members of the community. At that time, teaching was one of the most respected professions in the African American community.

Aspects of my story are echoed in that of my colleague Liz Bland, which I learned about during an interview I did for my dissertation research. Liz is a PUWP teacher-consultant and became a member of our TRC research group. She, like me and others in the group, experienced community support, personal desire to be successful, and a spiritual history of being “raised in the black church.” Liz’s strong roots helped shape her, and they contributed to her trajectory as a leader and to her commitment as a professional. An excerpt from Liz’s autobiographical narrative reflects the essential characteristics of many African American women whose stories I bear witness to:

My grandmother was a strong force in my life. I enjoyed spending time with her. Because of the relationship that we developed, my grandmother would buy those extra items that I craved as a little girl. She also paid for my piano lessons. Other children in my community could not afford these opportunities, and consequently resented me. I made very good grades in school and was the first and only one in my family to graduate from college. In fact, I graduated salutatorian in my high school class and magna cum laude from my undergraduate college.

Too often, when educational policymakers and administrators consider the qualities of a leader or how they support leadership development, they look mainly at conventional areas such as course work, test results, and professional development experiences. Realizing this, I began to theorize that a missing piece for African American teachers is the memory piece—how we draw on personal history and knowledge of our heritage in our evolution as leaders. These memories help create power from within and bring to the surface a spiritual connection that can propel people forward and motivate them to strive for success. My research helped document this important role of personal history in leadership.

Later, in my work with the TRC group, I drew on my research findings about the important link between autobiography and equity. We used our weekly meetings as a time to explore the place of autobiography in the development of teacher-leaders for equity. An important first part in our work was sharing our stories to make sense of inequities we had experienced. In these discussions, teachers looked at their own identities and examined their own personal ways of dealing with the baggage that they brought with them. They asked one another probing questions and tried to “unpack their baggage.” Through our work in auto-
biography, we came to understand how personal experience plays an important role in the lives of many who seek to achieve success, in ourselves, and in our students. From that point, we moved toward trying to establish equitable outcomes for students. We shared a deeply pervasive desire to achieve and a connection in the way we viewed the need for equitable outcomes for our students. This common ground allowed us to view the individual needs of our students in a more dynamic way.

We came to a consensus around five questions that would focus our research:

- 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?

Teachers Learning in Community

Committed to investigating what it meant to examine issues of equity in classroom teaching, we started by defining equity for ourselves. In doing so, we identified the inequities that teachers actually saw in their classrooms, in their buildings, and in their school systems. In one of those early meetings, we listened intently as Lisa Harton spoke passionately about her perception of what equity means:

I believe everyone has an innate sense of what is right. It is what we choose to do when we are presented with situations that test our character that determines the equity in our classrooms. I am always amazed at the rhetoric of my colleagues. “I just don’t see color; I treat all of my students the same.” But when the going gets rough, our expectations sometimes rise and fall with the roll of the tongue. “Well, you know he’s from those apartments,” “He’s gifted,” or “No one in the home speaks English.” There are enough labels and preconceived notions to make your head spin.

Lisa said that she was not naïve. She knew there were factors beyond her control that influenced student achievement. However, she chose to focus on factors that she was able to control. She believed that the first and only principle to ensure equity is that the teacher must remain a student. She spoke of her understanding that teacher expertise affects students’ learning, and talked about the ways she constantly pushed herself to learn as much as she could to teach effectively. Then, drawing on her autobiography, she shared with us what it was like to be a student when she was growing up. She could vividly recall memories of favorite teachers, boring teachers, even racist teachers, and she used those memories to mold her own practice in the classroom.

As others contributed their stories and perspectives, we began developing a set of framing questions for our research in order to make a bridge between our autobiographical focus and our interest in examining student outcomes. Our focus was to look carefully at how we, as a set of committed African American teachers, worked to achieve equity in our classrooms. We came to consensus around five questions that would focus our research: What is equity? What does an equitable outcome mean when working with students in your classroom? How can 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?
As we were developing these questions and exploring ideas for individual classroom research questions, we were reading *Living the Questions: A Guide for Teacher-Researchers* (Hubbard and Power 1999) and beginning to think about data. For a number of sessions, as teachers reported on their classrooms and their emerging research questions, they brought in samples of student work and notes of conversations from their students so that the group could see evidence of what was happening in their classrooms. Gradually, people gained knowledge of each member of the group, her teaching situation, her strengths and struggles. The group was transforming itself into a community of learners.

**Using a Common Text to Further Develop Our Learning Community**

Whenever I attend conferences, I look for resources to support PUWP teacher-consultants. In April 2003, Liz Bland and I attended the National Writing Project’s Urban Sites Conference in Santa Barbara and searched for resources to support our growth as teacher-researchers on a mission to promote equitable outcomes for students. The keynote speaker was Carole Edelsky. Liz and I were sitting next to each other and started elbowing each other as Edelsky’s comments began to resonate with us. Edelsky said,

> We all have theories about literacy and learning. Whether near the mountains or the sea, in poor communities or rich ones (though as with everything else, it’s worse in the poor ones), we are being held hostage by theories about literacy and learning and teaching in general, embedded in No Child Left Behind and woven into Open Court and other scripted programs. Theories matter. They are used to justify political agendas. They shape our visions and our actions.

Edelsky’s comments directly spoke to Liz’s tension with being required to implement a scripted program in her classroom rather than what she knew was best for her specific students. She was held hostage to a timed, lock-step program where she was not able to provide the extra time and emphasis she felt the children needed, based on her own wisdom and teacher way of knowing.

I was so motivated by Edelsky’s speech that I purchased the book she had edited, *Making Justice Our Project* (1999), to help inform our teacher research group’s thinking and keep equity on the front burner of our conversations. At the first research group meeting after the conference, I introduced the book and explained my belief that the range of topics on equity in the book would meet our needs. Instead of allowing the teachers to self-select a chapter, I divided the text among the ten teacher-consultants, assigning the chapters to be read based on all I knew about participants’ needs and interests. At each succeeding meeting, we discussed one of the chapters and talked about how the reading informed our thinking about equity. It seemed every chapter related strongly to someone’s issues and concerns. These conversations were always rich, allowing us to see how equity issues played out in one another’s classrooms and helping clarify those that faced us.

My interest in the readings was not only about the content. Participants were working toward writing up their own research, so as we discussed each chapter, we also talked about how it was written. We looked at how the author wrote it, outlined the organization of the chapter, identified powerful quotes, and discussed the chapter’s strong features. We always talked about purpose and what the author was trying to communicate.
Throughout, I also modeled connecting the interests of one teacher to the content of another’s chapter. Soon, participants were doing this for each other. The connections they were making through the readings were striking. For example, Liz found information in her chapter that related to Deborah Mills’ challenges in her classroom, telling Deborah, “This is what you are searching for. The particular author is struggling with the same kind of problem and this is something you can read and find ways to help.”

At one of these meetings, Daaiyah Saleem served as discussant for the chapter “¡Sí Se Puede! Teaching for Transformation” (1999), written by NWP teacher-consultants Rebecca Garcia-Gonzalez, Pilar Mejia, and Winnie J. Porter. At the time, Daaiyah was teaching at a local college where she, like the authors, was confronted with the impact of inequity on the lives of students. Her college had a noble mission—to serve the underserved—so it had an open-door policy. But it was, in her words, a challenge to “teach college-level students, sitting in teacher education programs, whose reading comprehension was poor, writing skills seriously underdeveloped, and orality rooted in disenfranchised language cultures.”

Daaiyah asked our teacher research group, “What could they teach? Who would they teach?” Gonzalez’s description of seeing “the oppression in the faces of [her] students; she felt their hopelessness” resonated with Daaiyah. After reading this passage Daaiyah shared, “The African American students who survive educational neglect and mis-education, such as described by Gonzalez, end up at colleges like mine.” She wondered what could be done to empower them. Gonzalez wrote, “If I didn’t help challenge the status quo, I wouldn’t be teaching them what they needed.” Like Gonzalez, who knew that “teaching them to read and write was not enough,” Daaiyah had that gnawing sense that she needed to do more.

Reading this article and others helped give Daaiyah another language to wrap around the ideas and thoughts with which she’d been wrestling. Daaiyah explained, “There were multiple layers of equity issues inherent in working at this college that I can now name and therefore explore intellectually and practically.” From these meetings Daaiyah felt she was able to share crucial questions and critically analyze the texts that she used with her students. As a result of these meetings she also began to involve students in critical literacy, questioning and critically assessing their textbooks in all their classes. They started asking: Whose viewpoint is presented? From what position is the view presented? What other viewpoints are there? What other positions are there? What is my own viewpoint? What are / have been the viewpoints of people who are like me?

Daaiyah’s confidence as a leader grew as she developed an understanding of how she might work with her students to address the inequities in their lives. Her increased confidence and the encouragement of our group led her to take on new leadership roles in PUWP, including conducting thoughtful workshop presentations, something she previously didn’t see herself as articulate and confident enough to do.
Reflecting on My Inquiry

Revisiting my initial research question, “How do teachers grow as leaders within the context of equity-focused work?” confirmed for me the importance of teachers as leaders and of building supportive communities that help cultivate teachers’ talents as leaders. Effective teacher-leaders demonstrate their stake in critical issues in their schools and classrooms by working publicly to address them. In doing so, they seek to make connections with colleagues in their schools, and they rely on being part of a community that supports them and helps them strategize about how best to move forward. In this process, trust is essential. Without it teacher-leaders would not share their concerns or be open to the recommendations of their peers. Through trust and collaboration, effective teacher-leaders create strong connections with colleagues, reveal their own strengths, and grow personally and professionally.

Leadership support, in combination with the teacher-leaders’ autobiographies, drive for success, and desire to learn, enabled the ten teachers in our teacher research group to become leaders for others in their buildings. They orchestrated workshops, assisted with school plans, and provided professional development for administrators and other teachers in their districts. The teachers in our research group had commonalities from their African American heritage that they drew on in their transformation as leaders:

- a thirst for knowledge
- a belief that education was a premium to spring them from impoverished situations (an education for freedom)
- strong spiritual roots
- a desire to share and give back support in various situations
- an intrinsic need to trust, care, and lean on each other
- a commitment to expand the learning beyond themselves
- an extension of family support from the community
- a recognition that culture is a predictive variable in their mobility in society.

However, I believe that the greatest influence on their development as leaders was their own recognition that they needed to gain more skills and knowledge to provide highly educative and equitable experiences for the children in their classrooms.

My inquiry has also helped me to learn about my own practice as a leader. I share the language, culture, and concerns of African American teacher-leaders and use this connection to support their leadership. In spite of their issues at school, I continuously encourage them to meet in their small learning communities and study groups to resolve their concerns about equity. I help them to recognize “that the educational system, more than family, church, or business has become the institution most responsible for the transmission of social inequality” (Swartz 1998, 190).

When asked whether I perform leadership strategies consciously or unconsciously, I say “both.” I am both teacher and African American, both leader and learner, and I bring who
I am to all situations. The sum of my spirituality, my experiences, and my learning is inex- tricably interwoven into the fabric of my leadership decisions. Although I have reasons for what I do, I am not necessarily fixated on a deliberate act. What I do is bring my whole self to nurturing and mentoring teacher-leaders.

My leadership actions, conscious and unconscious, emerge from my beliefs and experiences. As a leader, I can’t help but draw on these experiences—those that have empowered me to reach for my full potential as a teacher-leader—and apply these experiences to empower other teachers. For example, I believe that in order to create a country filled with critically thinking adults, we must teach teachers to draw on their strengths. This I do consciously. When I look at teachers, I look for their strengths. I look for what they do well and I try to suggest actions and positions to build on what they do well. There are other actions I take consciously as well. Based on my relationships and knowledge I sometimes assign readings, encourage teachers to assume particular positions of leadership, and support them in their efforts. I also push teachers to analyze the inequities not only in teaching but also in their positions in the school culture. I do this because I strongly believe that we must always be aware that teaching is political.

I take much away from this group and my participation. Being a member of the Peachtree Urban Writing Project played a significant role in developing my ability to foster a culture characterized by support, scaffolding, trust, and honesty. I have grown in my understanding of equity and call attention to it in my day-to-day life. Whatever I do, equity will be threaded into that work.

References

Gwendolyn Williams began her teaching career in the Atlanta public schools as a middle grades language arts and social studies teacher. Her participation as a Foxfire teacher led her to become involved with action research that focused on leading teacher groups and promoting student constructivist learning. She began her involvement with teacher research while serving as director of the Peachtree Urban Writing Project, where she started to explore how teachers developed as leaders in the writing project and at their school sites. Williams has proudly served on the leadership team of the National Writing Project’s Teacher Inquiry Communities Network. She presently serves as an assistant professor of reading and language arts at Spelman College in Atlanta.