## Our Journey with the ATE Inquiry Initiative: Growing into Our Role as Disruptors

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#### Abstract

The Inquiry Initiative, launched by the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) in the summer of 2022, brought together faculty experts from across the nation to collaborate on issues of equity in education. Our group was tasked with considering how we-and others in the field of education-might promote equity in education by disrupting existing social and educational inequities. Each member of our group brought a wealth of experiences, knowledge, and skills to this ambitious and daunting task. In this paper, we use group formation theory as a lens to examine and reflect on the beginning stages of our group's journey and consider what lies ahead for us as we continue on this journey together.

Keywords: Inquiry, teacher education, group formation

In the spring of 2022, members of Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) were invited

to be part of ATE's inaugural "Inquiry Initiative," a three-year research collaborative aimed at

examining opportunity gaps (Milner, 2012) in education. After reviewing applications, the

Inquiry Initiative leadership team created multiple "crews"-groups of 8-10 ATE members who

demonstrated similar interests and perspectives on educational equity. These crews gathered at ATE's summer conference in Nashville, Tennessee for the launch of the inaugural Inquiry Initiative. At the start of this three-day gathering, our crew was tasked with considering how to address opportunity gaps in education by disrupting existing social and educational inequities. This paper captures the process through which our group approached this task and examines our early experiences with the Inquiry Initiative through the lens of group formation theory.

As the group started discussing issues related to educational inequality, which is the unequal distribution of academic resources among the recipients or students (Young & Laible, 2000), the analysis of the inequalities in education were mentioned due to their presence in schools in the form of racism. The tensions within society due to negative attitudes towards people seen as foreigners has caused racist conflicts in schools (Buchanan et al., 2020; Gattinara & Pirro 2019; Hutter & Borbáth, 2019). The presence of racism indicates exclusionary and discriminatory practices due to historical and social contexts (Balibar, 1991; Bethencourt, 2015; Goldberg, 1990). These practices can be external (e.g., systematic school segregation) and/or internal (e.g., racist opinions) challenges (Arneback & Quennerstedt, 2016). Thus, the Inquiry Initiative provided the space for this group of scholars to investigate and reflect upon systemic issues in the educational settings.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The social and psychological aspects of group formation have long been the subject of various theoretical propositions. Group development frameworks can aid in understanding the underlying social and psychological norms that exist at different stages of group development and provide a lens through which processes of group formation can be examined and understood. Paulo Freire (1968) described his innovative theory of group dialogue and communication in *The* 

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He stated that effective learning between people must involve five steps: humility, hope, faith, love, and critical thinking. When team members use these strategies to communicate with each other, deep connections can be established and successful work can be done on the team. This theory has been applied to student-teacher relationships in education in many instances; but was not the best group formation theory for our work because we were expanding our ideas past student-teacher relationships to teacher-teacher, teacher-teacher educator, and beyond in leadership in order to understand and disrupt systemic racism.

Another group formation theory, developed by organizational theorist Dick Beckhard in 1972, is the GRPI model (as seen in Tartell, 2016). GRPI—goals, roles, processes, interpersonal relationships—was created to help teams that experience problems in communication at a specific moment of work. Beckhard advocates focusing on interpersonal relationships to help the team develop agreement about goals and processes. This is a useful model, but for our work we needed a theory that could be applied to the entire duration of work as a team.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Model (as seen in Shell, 2001) is used by groups to determine both the assertiveness and cooperativeness of the team members. This theory has five approaches to the work—competing, accommodating, compromising, avoiding, and collaborating. This theory is generally used to manage team conflict, so it was not the one we used to form our group as we had not encountered conflict yet.

After exploring different theories of forming successful teams, our cohort decided our work would best be served by following Tuckman's model of developmental stages (1965, 1977, 2010). This theory continues to be a prominent model of group formation and useful for examining the experiences of those who participate in collaborative professional development initiatives, such as ATE's Inquiry Initiative. This model delineates five distinct stages of group development: 1) Forming, 2) Storming, 3) Norming, 4) Performing and 5) Adjourning. Each

stage is marked by distinct observable behaviors, emotions, and needs (see Table 1).

# Table 1.

Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

Stage	Description
Forming	In the initial stage, a group is convened with a specific purpose. During this stage, team members may feel ambiguous, and they may avoid conflict due to a need to feel accepted by others. Team members look to a group leader for direction and guidance.
Storming	This stage is the process of organizing the group's tasks and processes. During this stage, interpersonal conflicts tend to emerge. Group members might struggle for power over seeking consensus. Group members might become defensive, demonstrate confusion, lose interest, demonstrate resistance to tasks, or experience fluctuating attitudes toward the group. This stage is marked by uncertainty about the team's mission and purpose.
Norming	In this stage, team members begin to create new ways of doing and being together. As the group develops cohesion, leadership changes from "one" teammate in charge to shared leadership. In this stage, members experience a sense of belonging, the freedom to express their thoughts, and the ability to express criticism constructively. The team gains a new degree of confidence and a general sense of trust among members.
Performing	At this stage, interdependence becomes the norm. Individuals begin to adapt to meet the needs of other team members. This is a highly productive stage, both personally and professionally. Roles of group members become clearer, and the team is able to organize itself. Members now understand each other's strengths, weaknesses, and insights. Members demonstrate empathy for one another and bonds between group members begin to emerge.
Adjourning	Where the teams' goals have been achieved or the team has ended due to conflict. Members then go on to work in other teams and structures.

### Methods

Action research (AR) was used as the methodological approach to examine the practices within the inquiry group. Carr and Kemmis (1986) defined AR as "a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out" (p. 162). Action research is a systematic approach to investigation and problem-solving that is conducted by individuals or groups within a specific context or setting (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). It involves a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in order to improve practices.

In addition to AR, the Nominal Group Technique [NGT] was utilized to leverage participants' prior knowledge, expertise, and judgment to arrive at a decision. This decision was necessary due to the nature of the work, which would have been difficult to accomplish individually (Delbecq et al., 1975; Jones & Hunter, 1995). The NGT is defined as "consensus methods used in research that is directed at problem-solving, idea-generation, or determining priorities" (McMillan et al., 2016, p.1). This technique is a structured method that encourages contributions from all participants through group brainstorming. The NGT should be used when group members need to come together to address a specific problem or when the subject is controversial, and discussion becomes strained to ensure equity of voice (Tague, 2005). The process aims to solve problems by generating ideas around a particular topic, listening to each member's ideas and points of view, collaboratively discussing the different ideas that have been surfaced, and reaching consensus on the final priorities of the group (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018; Delbecq et al., 1975; Jones & Hunter, 1995; McMillan et al., 2016;

Tague, 2005). Although the process initially seems ill-structured, it allows for specific steps to engage all participants in generating ideas, shared understanding, and collective decision making.

#### **Our Journey**

Looking back on our time just before meeting each other, we each, individually and collectively, were a mix of apprehension, enthusiasm, uncertainty, and restlessness. Although we had all signed up to be a part of ATE's Inquiry Initiative, we did not know who we would be working with for the next three years. There were also high expectations for the work we were about to engage in. In the month prior to ATE's summer conference, we were asked to promote ourselves by asking our deans and department chairs and even our universities to issue press releases announcing our acceptance into the Inquiry Initiative. And so, when we all walked toward our assigned table, the one with the sign reading *Promoting Equity by Disrupting Inequalities*, it was like the first day of school times ten. As one crew member recalled, she "was not sure what to expect" and another noted she was "hopeful that we would be able to learn and grow together." Yet another crew member put into words what we were all feeling regarding the responsibilities and challenges of not just being a part of the first-ever Inquiry Initiative, but also of being the change we wanted to see in the field we all chose to work: "I was anticipating joining a group that wanted to make a difference in the inequities of our education system." The strain was palpable and obvious.

Group formation theory helps us understand that the unevenness we have experienced is to be expected–especially in a situation like ours, where strangers from across the country have been brought together for the purpose of addressing educational inequities. While our journey may have started in the summer of 2022 around a table in Nashville, it is an on-going process. During our time together we continue to "form," "storm," and there are even some signs we've begun to "norm." In the subsections that follow, we use Tuckman's model of developmental stages (1965, 1977, 2001, 2010) to examine and reflect on the beginning stages of our group's journey and consider what lies ahead for us. Throughout, we incorporate reflections collected from members of our group using a voluntary and anonymous survey.

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#### **Our Forming Process**

On day one of the Inquiry Initiative gathering, the Inquiry Initiative leadership team facilitated numerous activities aimed at helping the members of our crew get to know one another. To guide our work on the first day, the leadership team suggested a set of norms and some predetermined roles (e.g., discussion director, timekeeper, record keeper). We were given opportunities to introduce ourselves, talk about our current roles within the field of education, and say a little bit about our research interests and our reasons for joining the Initiative. We also participated in an activity aimed at helping us identify our own orientations to group problemsolving (i.e., paying attention to detail, looking at the big picture, making sure all voices are heard, quickly moving to action). Sharing our tendencies toward group work with one another allowed us to see diversity among our group members. Additionally, we were able to reflect on the strengths we were each bringing to the group and become attuned to the ways that we might work differently from each other.

Typical of the forming stage of group development, members of our crew experienced feelings of anticipation and optimism. One member commented, "I was excited to meet the crew members and hopeful that we would be able to learn and grow together—leaning on each other's expertise and experiences to work toward disrupting inequities in education." Also characteristic of the forming stage, some members were apprehensive and even nervous. One crew member recalled, "I was nervous. I didn't know any of the people I was working with [and I] hoped I would fit in and be accepted into the group." Another shared feelings of uncertainty, saying simply, "I was not sure what to expect out of the summer conference." During our initial, in-person meetings, it was important for us to get to know each other and identify the skills and knowledge we were each bringing to the group. The group climate during the forming stage was indeed exhilarating, and our early encounters with others who shared our interest in educational equity allowed us to begin developing trusting relationships with each other.

#### **Our Storming Process**

Near the end of day one in Nashville, we were asked to divide our crew into two separate groups and complete an exercise that involved identifying and ranking key factors that create and maintain opportunity gaps in education (Milner, 2012). Each subgroup found the work of identifying and ranking these key factors to be daunting and, at times, overwhelming. Yet, each subgroup was able to complete the task, and each shared a sense of assuredness in their work.

When our subgroups came back together, we were then tasked with coming to a consensus—as a whole group this time–about these key factors and their role in creating and sustaining opportunity gaps. We began by having each subgroup share the factors they had

identified and the order in which they had ranked them. Despite both subgroups identifying systemic racism as a factor that produces and sustains opportunity gaps in education, we struggled to come to a consensus on other key factors and their importance.

As a result, "storm clouds" began to rumble within our group. In alignment with the second stage of group formation theory (Tuckman et al., 1965, 1977, 2001, 2010), our desires for belonging and acceptance quickly gave way to questioning, resistance, and uncertainty. As we continued with the task, tension within the group was increasingly apparent and seemed to some to impede our progress. At the end of day one, some members reported feeling disconnected and unsettled. Specifically, some group members expressed having felt uncertain about their role within the group, whether or not they should exert influence, and even whether we were approaching the task in a productive manner. One group member commented, "I was confused about the process. I was not sure what was expected after the summer conference would be over. I was not sure about the group members and the type of work to be performed." However, some group members saw the value in the dissonance we experienced on day one. One member shared,

I know that some people were very disconcerted about how we had differing opinions after the first day. They came on the second day feeling like we were at odds and had problems. I was opposed to that idea. I think cognitive dissonance helps a group learn and grow together since we know we are not all going to agree at first.

Consistent with the storming phase, members of our group experienced fluctuating attitudes toward the process and toward each other. One simply remarked, "There were definitely highs and lows." Another said, "There were times that it was hard and frustrating but overall, I had a sense of belonging. That these are my people. They get that this system is broken and I am not crazy or alone."

Looking back on our gathering in Nashville, we have since identified some tensions that may have contributed to our storming—among these a sense of urgency and an inclination toward individualism. Feeling a sense of urgency is common when a group is given a task to do under time constraints. This sense of urgency was indeed palpable at the end of day one. As one member shared, "Time always felt limited, and I remembered feeling rushed. I don't like feeling rushed when working with a group—particularly around social change–because urgency in decision making and process tends to reproduce the status quo." The stress of coming to a consensus under time constraints undoubtedly took a toll on all of us and stood to threaten our newly formed relationships with one another.

Additionally, deep-seated tendencies toward individualism may have contributed to our storming. Academics, often working in silos, are rarely tasked with working collectively to determine and articulate the root causes of a problem and determine collective plans for action (Newhouse & Spring, 2010). Quite the contrary: individualistic behavior within the academy is often rewarded (e.g., expectations for sole authorship, individual recognition for research contributions, etc.). Under time constraints, it is possible that our group's desire to be inclusive and to work collectively quickly gave way to deeply ingrained individualistic behaviors, such as advocating for one's individual perspectives and ideas to be represented in the group's final product. Also, it's possible that the sense of urgency we felt on that first day caused us to shift away from a more democratic participation structure and toward determining a "final answer" at the expense of meaningful discussion and deliberation.

These cultural characteristics—a continued sense of urgency and individualism–have been associated with white supremacy culture and are believed to impede democratic participation in problem solving and limit the possibilities for social change (Jones & Okun, 2001). The pace of our work has continued to be a tension within the group, with some members expressing a preference for quick action and others needing time to process and contemplate. Several members of the group have voiced a desire to focus on action (e.g., supporting in-service teachers, letter writing campaigns) over more traditional "products" (e.g., presentations, papers) for the purpose of being more intentional about how we are working towards disrupting inequities and opportunity gaps. One member stated:

I was surprised how quickly people wanted to present [at conferences] and write about our process when I thought we hadn't done anything yet. I guess that comes from being a person of action. I understand we need to present [at conferences] and write [academic papers], but I want to do something that will make a difference. I guess that's what I hope is in our future as a group.

At times, an overwhelming sense of urgency to address opportunity gaps may have interfered with our crew's ability to collectively determine our group's purpose and direction.

Additionally, some crew members have expressed a desire to establish norms and processes that might allow for more voices to be heard and for shared understandings to be developed. One crew member noted that we "appeared to have different concepts of what disrupting inequities entailed" and that the group should have spent more time early on developing procedures that would allow for "all voices and perspectives" to be heard. Understandably, it is difficult to achieve a consensus—in both thought and action—within a capitalistic culture of busy-ness and alongside institutional pressures to produce scholarship. However, we are coming to recognize that creating social and educational change is contingent upon building relationships with each other and developing humanizing, nonhierarchical spaces of collaboration and trust. Additionally, it remains important for our group to recognize when our work is threatened by individualism and urgency, while also recognizing the need to act quickly and purposefully to disrupt social and educational inequities.

### **Our Norming Process**

On the second day of the Inquiry Initiative gathering, our crew came back together. Several group members voiced how unsettled they had felt at the end of day one and how they hoped that we could start fresh on day two. We began by relocating ourselves to a new space and offering every group member an opportunity to share how they were currently thinking about educational inequities and opportunity gaps in relation to their own roles and current contexts (e.g., preparing preservice teachers, supporting in-service teachers, advocating for policy change, designing educator preparation). Over the next couple of hours, we again came to a consensus that systemic racism shapes opportunity gaps, and this time, we came to a shared understanding that systemic racism manifests in different but equally pernicious ways to impact K-12 schooling, educator preparation, and educational leadership. We discussed many issues related to K-12 schooling, including school discipline policies which marginalize students of color and a teaching force that does not represent the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the U.S. student population. Additionally, we discussed a range of issues pertaining to educator preparation-specifically the need for educator preparation that both prepares white educators for equity and antiracism and is inclusive of educators of color. Lastly, we considered issues of educational leadership, such as the need to prepare school leaders who have the knowledge, skill, and desire to address persistent opportunity gaps, such as disproportionate discipline and dropout rates for students of color and students living in poverty.

In alignment with the norming stage of group formation (Tuckman et al., 1965, 1977, 2001, 2010), on day two we took a small step toward determining our purpose as a group and developing effective communication practices, such as turn taking, active listening, asking for clarification, and giving and receiving feedback. Group members reported feeling heard on day two, and as a result, seemed newly energized to move forward with our task. One group member noted, "I feel that we did a good job at slowing things down and creating space for everyone to share their thoughts and visions for our work…how they saw their own research and professional interests intersecting." Knowing when to go fast and when to slow down will likely remain a challenge for our group as we continue in our process of clarifying our purpose and determining where to focus our energy and our efforts.

At the end of our time in Nashville, our group was well on our way toward developing a shared purpose and a vision for our work together. One group member remarked, "I left feeling energized and looking forward to seeing everyone again on Zoom." We returned to our home states and continued to meet virtually, monthly. Characteristic of the norming phase, we have continued to work toward group cohesion and to develop our interpersonal and intrapersonal goals for the group (Tuckman et al., 1965, 1977, 2001, 2010). For example, during one of our monthly meetings, we shared actions that we are taking to disrupt inequities in our current roles and within our own institutions. As a result of this, our understandings of "disruption" and the possibilities for our work together continue to evolve and grow. There is not one eventual target for our disruption; we know that it is equally important to prepare teachers to disrupt racism in their classrooms as it is to disrupt the silences above us—specifically, the silences of our deans

in response to book bans and the silences of our university presidents in the face of misconceptions about critical race theory. We recognize that speaking out is indeed a risky venture in this political climate. As such, we know that addressing opportunity gaps must be a collective, grass-roots movement that includes parents, teachers, administrators, and faculty working and disrupting together.

Determining our next steps has not been easy, but we have begun to make some headway. Currently, a subgroup of our members is working to develop a framework for "disruption" and considering the many forms of disruption that are necessary to effectively address opportunity gaps and inequities across all aspects of education. Another subgroup is focused on examining our process of group formation and sharing what we are learning from our experience, thus far. We all agree that these are good steps forward; however, we have not yet hit a stride where we are "performing."

#### Implications

We decided as a group that our true goal, based on our group's discussion, was to disrupt inequity caused by systemic racism in education systems. The conversations about this issue are difficult, at best. Thus, contextualizing the historical perspectives of all groups and systems impeding the advance of students were important to start recognizing race and racism and developing a critical consciousness to support all students in the educational setting (Center for Anti Racist Education, n.d.). Experience with disrupting systemic racism was one factor to discuss. Some members had not worked with disrupting systemic racism. They understood it, but felt confused on how to help students by working on this goal. On the other hand, other members have spent their whole careers working on systemic racism in education. Some members had experienced systemic racism firsthand, while others have seen its devastating effects and have devoted themselves to disrupting inequity that is inherent in educational systems. The implication here is that when forming a new group, members will have a variety of experiences and knowledge on the topic that is the main goal of the whole. Members with more experience can help those with less experience learn what systemic racism is and guide them by sharing their experiences and possible readings for understanding and furthering the groups' work.

Working through these issues in the forming, storming, and norming phases (1965, 1977, 2001, 2010) will help all members get to the performing stage. A suggestion for those forming a new group is to allow participants to consider and express their experiences with the topic. This way all members can grow with the group. Although it should not be one member's responsibility to lead all the other members in the knowledge, it can be helpful to acknowledge the varied level of experience and validate that members will have different levels of experience. If some members of the group cannot or will not guide other members, then a group should be formed with members that have similar level of experience in the topic.

#### Conclusion

As one group member noted, "This journey in itself is an alternative pathway." Our group is in its infancy—in reality, we are still "storming" and "norming." But we have committed members who yearn for change and have what it takes to make it happen. Over the last seven months, the magnitude of our task has become clear. Fortunately, for our crew and for the numerous other crews, the Inquiry Initiative leadership team has been with us and supported us as we have "formed," "stormed," and begun to "norm"–at times urging us out of our comfort zones so that we can grow as a collective and begin taking action. We are confident that our shared commitment to educational equity and antiracism–paired with the supportive leadership of the initiative-will eventually usher us into the performing stage of group development, where

we will experience a unity of purpose and action.

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