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Cycles of Inquiry and Action for Equity: CES's Ongoing Commitment

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Author(s): [Jill Davidson](#)

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The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) is entering its 25th year as an organization and a network of schools dedicated transforming the experience of schools and education for young people, their teachers, and their communities nationwide. The practice of educators to engage in cycles of inquiry and actions that address challenges and improve outcomes evolved directly from the “conversation among friends” that began 25 years ago. The first wave of Essential schools, and early gatherings of CES educators, placed a premium on the collective reflection, data-gathering, and decision-making that has come to be a defining characteristic of the CES network.

Definitions

In *Working toward Equity*, Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) researcher Tom Malarkey describes inquiry as “a process through which teachers study their own practice in order to change and strengthen their teaching.” *Working toward Equity*, published in 2006 by the National Writing Project (NWP), resulted from the Teacher Research Collaborative, a joint project of CES, BayCES, NWP, and the Bay Area Writing Project. Inquiry of this sort is also known as action research, defined by Laura Stokes, research associate at Inverness Research Associates as “a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.” Many longtime participants in the CES network are experienced in inquiry and action research. Indeed, many Essential schools employ scheduling structures that allow adults to convene regularly and relatively unhurriedly so that they can utilize inquiry groups (often in the form of Critical Friends Groups, or other structures such as grade-level or subject-specific gatherings). These inquiry groups provide empowerment and support to in order to comprehend, confront, and address the challenges impeding effective teaching and meaningful learning that often result from the conditions of schooling and society, particularly institutionalized racism and other forms of oppression.

“Inquiry can help teachers to spiral more deeply into the most difficult dilemmas they face—to ask questions, to face the discomfort of not knowing the answers to those questions, and then to find ways to move forward to address them,” writes Malarkey. This confrontational quality of inquiry makes it a particularly powerful tool to surface issues and challenges that a school community faces around creating and sustaining equitable ways of teaching and learning.

Current Emphasis on Inquiry for Equity

During the cycle of 2008-2009 CES year, the CES Small Schools Network (CES SSN) has made the work of establishing inquiry groups for equity its top priority. The CES SSN has focused on establishing an equity lens through which practitioners within and supporters of small, personalized, and academically challenging schools see their students, their families and communities, and the larger systems in which schools are located, CES National staff members built on efforts that included the Teacher Research Collaborative to develop inquiry groups for equity across the CES SSN. Centered around the “democracy and equity” CES Common Principle, which declares “that schools should model democratic practices, honor diversity, and deliberately and explicitly challenge all forms of inequity,” CES's senior director of school development Mara Benitez describes the impetus for adding inquiry to the network's deepening sense of equitable schools and school systems, observing “Inquiry is an important way for teachers to push themselves to do better work, to question their own assumptions and biases, and to check that the work that they're doing is achieving certain ends that they expect.”

Working with educators from CES SSN schools, Benitez and other CES staff members developed a focusing essential question: "How can our professional community of learners collaboratively investigate, implement and share best practices that grow and sustain equitable schools?" At the autumn 2008 CES SSN meeting, 120 network members chose a topic from a long list of possibilities, settling into 18 groups of three to six people, each with an experienced small school educator trained in an equity-based Critical Friends Group approach serving as coach throughout the year-long process. At that meeting, inquiry group members came together around a shared interest in topics relating to educational equity—they were bound together by interest, rather than geography.

Gathering at three SSN meetings and communicating in the interim by telephone and email, group members embarked on the Equity Based Cycle of Inquiry (see illustration above) by generating problem statements, developing essential questions, making an action research plan in consultation with coaches, collecting data through winter, and presenting data to group members and receiving feedback during the CES SSN's spring meeting. CES's July 2009 Summer Institute will allow group members the opportunity to finalize their research, which will be shared with the larger CES network in workshops and poster sessions at November 2009's Fall Forum and in future issues of *Horace* and other publications. In addition, Summer Institute and Fall Forum will feature Inquiry Round Tables for discussion of ongoing inquiry for equity projects. The essential question that each group member selects holds the connection between inquiry and equity, as Benitez notes in her observation that "the question that you are asking should lead to greater access." CES director of research Jay Feldman agrees, noting the accompanying challenge, "How do you get people to create a question that they're passionate about and that is manageable?" Making sure that the question is both equity-driven and of appropriate scope is the coach's role.

CES intends for inquiry groups for equity to flourish at school sites as well as within the larger CES SSN network, and in fact, the regular contact and collegiality that coworkers have will allow more efficient cycles of inquiry and action and the potential for powerful and meaningful interactions. "Not having people in same location is a problem because they aren't there to challenge each other," Benitez says, referring to the ability and obligation for colleagues to push each other to surface and acknowledge their own biases. The necessity for outside perspective is an essential quality of an inquiry group, rather than the alternative of a single practitioner pursuing a line of inquiry. Research that has emerged from the Making Learning Visible initiative of Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero confirms this. Making Learning Visible's website offers this observation: "Learning in groups not only helps us learn about content, it helps us learn about learning in a way that fits with the kind of people we want to become and the world we want to create. Learning in groups develops critical human capacities for participating in a democratic society—the ability to share our views and listen to those of others, to entertain multiple perspectives, to seek connections, to change our ideas, and to negotiate conflict." This comment, geared toward student group inquiry, is equally applicable to and valid for cohorts of adult educators gathered in the pursuit of improving their practice by pursuing answers to essential questions around common themes.

Jay Feldman notes that building the capacity of teachers to be researchers is a key strategy to increase instructional effectiveness. "School communities need to know how to do inquiry," says Feldman. "They need to ask address questions to assess how effectively they are meeting the needs of their students. As an educator, the bottom line is that you and your colleagues need to help your students learn. To do that, you need to develop the habit of checking yourself, and the school's collective work, to see how well you're doing and further refine your practice by creating and perpetuating cycles of collecting data, analyzing results, and changing what you're doing in strategic ways to improve learning."

The four articles that follow illustrate a range of approaches to instituting cycles of inquiry for equity. Stories from Boston Day and Evening Academy and Clover Park High School reflect whole-school efforts to observe problems, ask questions, gather and analyze data, and develop solutions. Cara Furman's account of dealing with the dilemmas of assessment in her classroom mark the struggles and insights of individual classroom teachers who are, even in progressive Essential school environments, often on their own and required to draw from their individual resources for answers. From a network perspective, Ron Newell discusses developing cycles of inquiry and assessment for groups of schools, shedding light on the challenges of identifying which data are worth noting and analyzing. In each of these cases, and for the inquiry for equity

work under way at other CES schools, Tom Malarkey's words from *Working toward Equity* ring true: "The key arbiter of inquiry for equity is *progress*—a movement deeper into our particular challenges and an ongoing transformation of our capacities as educators."

Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and founded in 2003, the CES Small Schools Network (CES SSN) is dedicated to creating and supporting small schools throughout the country that are instructionally powerful and sustainable and that offer challenging curricula to students who have been denied a meaningful education. The CES SSN is committed to effecting broader change within the public education system and meeting the needs of young people and communities who traditionally and systemically have been underserved—students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. The CES SSN is the professional learning community that includes these exemplary CES small schools in various stages of development. Through quarterly meetings (including an intensive week-long Summer Institute) visits to each other's schools, and various forms of ongoing informal contact, the CES SSN brings together the best thinkers, practitioners, and innovators in education today to learn from the lessons, challenges, and best practices of their peers. The CES SSN contains a total of 57 schools and four CES affiliate centers. Twenty-five of the schools are Mentor Schools, experienced at implementing the CES Common Principles, and the rest are the new generation of CES schools, new small schools in various stages of the start-up process.

Working toward Equity, Writings and Resources from the Teacher Research Collaborative, edited by Linda Friedrich, Tom Malarkey, Carol Tateishi, Elizabeth Radin Simons, and Marty Williams is available online at www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/books/workingtoward. The National Writing Project also offers print copies for sale.

Selected problem statements and corresponding essential questions from the CES SSN inquiry groups for equity:

Science Inquiry Group

Problem statement: Interest in particular topics crucial for science, especially mathematics, is underrepresented in most of the students at our school other than our Asian international students and a small clique of white males.

Essential question: How can we better identify the barriers to pursuit and achievement in science, and how can we make topics necessary to the study of science more attractive to students?

Problem statement: There is not a large enough number of our students ready to be successful in science-related fields.

Essential question: How can we prepare more students for rigorous college level science and math courses? How are biology and chemistry giving students the necessary skills and knowledge to identify and work in science related fields?

Project Based Learning Group

Problem statement: There is a gap between the cognitive ability and communicative ability of English language learners; challenges to teachers in inclusive classrooms, and [state test] scores demonstrate drastically higher in critical thinking than in comprehension.

Essential question: How can project based learning increase literacy attainment in a multicultural inclusive setting?

Problem statement: The skills in literacy and communication of African American, Hispanic and students in lower socioeconomic status groups need to be increased considerably in order to produce a higher quality of performance based work.

Essential question: How does project based learning affect literacy in traditionally lower achieving students?

Integrating Technology

Problem statement: While we have a wealth of varied technology, we are not sure how is it being used? How

can we be sure it is more than a prop and that our students are having similar experiences?

Essential question: How can we make sure technology is being used effectively so that all students have the same access, skills, and experiences?

Problem statement: Students value technology for games and social networking, but we have to be sure they see the real-life, real-world value in technology.

Essential question: How can we develop assignments that are relevant to the real world and develop student skills for the 21st century?

For the entire list of inquiry group for equity topics and additional problem statements and questions, visit www.essentialschools.org/horace. The online version of this issue also contains the CES SSN Inquiry Group Work plan template, a downloadable Equity Based Cycle of Inquiry, and additional supporting material.

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