Inquiry for Equity: What Does It Mean for Teacher Research?

Tom Malarkey draws from his experience as an inquiry coach for the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools to suggest a framework for teacher-researchers and leaders conducting inquiry for equity. Noting that “inquiry does not necessarily lead to equity-oriented learning and results for students,” Malarkey first proposes some meanings and characteristics of equity and then explains some of the ways inquiry can contribute to equity. He then offers several specific suggestions for inquiry leaders working to support an equity focus in their school or professional development context. This essay introduces some of the key concepts that inform the work presented in this guide.

By Tom Malarkey

Data-gathering sometimes tells us stories we don’t want to hear.

—Kathryn Herr (1999)

In the Teacher Research Collaborative (TRC), we have focused on learning how to foster more-effective teaching and more-equitable results for students. As educators who are concerned about the inequities in our schools, we see inquiry—defined loosely as a process through which teachers study their own practice in order to change and strengthen their teaching—as a valuable tool that can support teachers in becoming more equitable educators and thus can contribute to more equitable achievement for students. Why have we in the TRC come to see inquiry as particularly well suited to address these challenges? Because inquiry can help teachers to spiral 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. Inquiry can interrupt the ways in which our beliefs and practices may unwittingly contribute to the “patterned” failure of many of our students—that is, failure that correlates with racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background. Ultimately, inquiry can build a sense of efficacy, helping teachers believe, I can help move this child forward; I can learn how to succeed with the students I’ve found it most difficult to reach.

Inquiry has become an empowering form of professional development in many schools and organizations nationwide. However, inquiry does not necessarily lead to equity-oriented
learning and results for students. A teacher can ask interesting questions—say, about group learning processes in math—without necessarily learning more about how to increase the math success of her low-achieving students in particular. So the critical question becomes, What factors make it more likely that an inquiry process will generate equity-oriented learning for teachers and, ultimately, more equitable results for students?

This essay suggests a general framework for conducting inquiry for equity and for leading groups concerned with the issue. The ideas here emerge from several sources: the work of the TRC, the essays in this guide, and my own experience as a coach at the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) leading, supporting, and learning from teacher inquiry in schools. In this essay I first sketch out some of the meanings and characteristics of equity that influenced and emerged from our work in the TRC. Next, I describe some of the specific ways that inquiry can contribute to equity in schools. And finally, I suggest some approaches to help inquiry leaders support inquiry for equity in their own school and professional-development contexts.

What Do We Mean by Equity?

Participants in the TRC came from different contexts, backgrounds, organizational affiliations, and interests in equity and inquiry. It would have been convenient if all the TRC participants had agreed, summit-style, on a definition of equity—but we haven’t and probably never will. From our own experience, we know that educators will come to inquiry work with diverse assumptions and understandings of equity. For instance, some see equity as being about equal access or opportunities, while others focus on equity of outcomes. These differences often do not surface directly; hence we have learned from our work at the TRC the importance of being explicit about what we mean by equity. Equity, according to our definition, includes the following significant characteristics:

- Equitable outcomes for all students in our classrooms, our schools, and the system as a whole, as measured by multiple forms of assessment. This means that student learning and achievement (and success or failure) are not predictable by race, class, language, gender, or other relevant social factors.
- School and classroom environments where students’ differences and backgrounds are celebrated and respected and their unique gifts are cultivated.
- Teaching practices and organizational policies that promote these results; that create inclusive, multicultural classrooms and school environments for children and adults; and that interrupt inequitable patterns.
- Individual awareness and responsibility; educators who acknowledge the realities of oppression and how it has affected their own and others’ lives;

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2 While this framing essay draws on the work of the TRC, it does not necessarily reflect all the various orientations and approaches of the TRC educators in this collection. Some essays are more explicit about the equity dimensions of their work; others are less so. As leaders of this collaborative we felt it was important to include an essay that specifically laid out our (emerging) thinking about equity and inquiry—meanings, practices, and challenges.
– understand how their own background and experience—and that of their students—matters in the educational process;
– work to understand and reduce their own assumptions and biases about those who do not share their race, class, culture, linguistic background, gender, and so on;
– believe that all students are capable of achieving at high levels, and take responsibility for their students’ learning, despite the circumstances in students’ lives and our society that can make achievement difficult.

Our definitions of equity point to concerns both with equity of results, particularly for students, and with the capacities, understandings, and dispositions that enable a teacher to foster more equitable results. Viewing equity in these ways raises a question: What, then, “counts” as inquiry for equity? Is it inquiry that results in awareness and learning for the teacher, or in tangible results for students? Ultimately, what matters are changes in student learning, experience, and outcomes. On the other hand, through our work in the TRC, we have come to understand that equity involves an educator’s journey, an ongoing process of deepening learning and finding ways for bolder and more effective action. Each of us is on our own journey relative to equity, rooted in our particular background and experiences, strengths and weaknesses. We never arrive at some mythical destination called equity. Many equity-oriented inquiry processes do not necessarily bring about measurable changes for students in the short run, but are still significant if they move the teacher closer to equity-centered practice.

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. Too often, teachers’ professional growth is impeded by the conditions of schooling, the shortcomings of schools as workplaces, and the realities of racism and other forms of oppression. As a result of these circumstances, some teachers unfortunately come to accept patterns of student failure as normal and inevitable, beyond their control. The role of inquiry is to help us face these challenges and push us to keep checking our results. This resource guide is filled with examples of educators on this journey who are seeking, and often finding, ways to get more equitable results.

How Can Inquiry Contribute to Equity?

As educators in the TRC, we believe that equity in education is possible. How can inquiry help build this conviction? In the TRC we defined inquiry as systematically investigating one’s practice to produce new knowledge, which leads to positive changes that ultimately benefit students. We have seen that this process of asking questions, collecting data, closely examining evidence, and acting on findings has given teachers an opportunity to reflect on and develop their teaching practice in a way that supports all students’ learning. Put simply, inquiry has the potential to propel educators to see and act differently with respect to their students and their practice.
To begin with, inquiry can help us to see patterns of inequity in our classrooms and schools. As James Baldwin wrote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” In order to work toward equity, as a starting point educators should first name and understand the specific inequities present in their own classroom and school contexts. Examining data gives us a better picture of student learning, achievement, and experience, as well as revealing larger patterns of success and failure that we might not have fully recognized. It helps us clarify and state problems. Pirette McKamey’s research, for instance, clarified teacher assumptions that were contributing to the persistent failure of many African American students in her high school; Sarah Capitelli’s investigations highlighted the inequities in her school’s bilingual program and her own role in fostering them.

Second, through inquiry we can turn the lens back on ourselves and recognize what we don’t know. Because inquiry opens us to deeper learning, it can be a precursor to fundamental shifts in our beliefs and approaches. “Inquiry is basically a challenge to what we think we know,” writes spiritual teacher A.H. Almaas (2002). “Through inquiry, you learn how to navigate through your not-knowing.” Facing and embracing our own uncertainty as teachers is just as important as developing increased certainty about what does work for us as teachers, and for our students. As Sarah Capitelli writes, “I know that the most important part of my inquiry, and inquiry in general, is the messy part, the ‘mucking around,’ the parts where I feel uneasy about what I am learning and unsure of how I am going to make sense of it. The most important part is when I do not have any answers, just lots of questions and nothing makes sense.”

Third, inquiry can help us see our own role as educators in the reproduction of inequitable schooling; we learn to take responsibility for our students’ learning, rather than simply see their failure as their fault, or that of their families, the rest of the school, or “the system”—even though these may be contributing factors. Inquiry helps us hold ourselves accountable for student learning. In turn, inquiry helps us engage intellectually in our work and develop theory about how schools and classrooms often fail children, about what does work and why, and about how to make change happen in our classrooms and schools. Developing theory, in turn, helps us develop practice, as we examine and make changes in our teaching based on our questions and findings.

Fourth, regular inquiry practice can help build an equity-centered professional learning community where educators can collectively investigate their greatest challenges, bridge their most divisive differences, deal with the strong emotions that inevitably arise in this work, and develop collaborative solutions. The acrimony and silence that characterize many faculty discussions involving race and other equity issues can seriously constrain collective learning and action, whereas dialogue grounded in questions and data tends to produce more honest and generative faculty discussions.

Fifth, inquiry can foster a sense of efficacy and the will to address (and keep addressing) equity challenges in the classroom and school. As one teacher in a BayCES inquiry network wrote, “Inquiry gives me a way to be struggling—and to feel it’s possible to make progress with my lowest-achieving students. This used to feel so daunting. Inquiry gives me a set of steps, a structure, and a focus.”
Finally, inquiry can help teachers become advocates and leaders for equity in their schools. Since equity is not the norm in most settings, the cause of equity requires advocates and leadership. By creating space for critical reflection and questioning, honest discourse, and focused action, inquiry helps teachers develop the clarity, courage, and humility they need to become leaders for equity in their school community.

**How Can Inquiry Leaders Best Support an Equity Focus?**

Although inquiry can make it more possible to address equity challenges, some of which are discussed above, inquiry does not necessarily lead teachers to address equity issues, nor does it automatically produce more equitable and deeper learning for students. Sometimes an intriguing inquiry question may have little connection with the inequities in the teacher’s classroom or school. Other times, deeply held but unrecognized assumptions interfere with understanding the real causes of underachievement and seeing how we as educators could change the situation. Thus for inquiry leaders concerned about equity, it is important to approach the process conscious both of how inquiry can open up possibilities to pursue equity and of how—and why—equity can often get overlooked in our investigations. In my work with teachers and schools at BayCES, I have seen that certain approaches to inquiry can make it more likely that the process will lead to equity-oriented learning for educators. The following suggestions may be useful to inquiry leaders—including those who are not “equity experts”—who are working to support an equity focus in their school or professional development context.

*Ask questions that encourage teacher-researchers to look through an equity lens.*

A key role of the inquiry leader is supporting teachers in identifying a research focus that both seems central to their practice and helps them examine and address inequities in their schools and classrooms. In order for inquiry to be sustained, it must be based on some real passion or curiosity of the teacher-researcher; and in order for inquiry to be a force for equity, it must ultimately address some real inequity in a classroom or school. At BayCES, we have found the metaphor of using an “equity lens” helpful. When looking at any given focus or situation, this means asking questions such as: What are the patterns of achievement here—and which students or groups of students are not achieving well? Which students am I having a harder time reaching? How will pursuing this focus help my lower-achieving students? An assumption here is that by focusing on an equity challenge in one’s practice, a teacher will learn to serve all students more effectively. By continually asking these questions, leaders encourage teacher-researchers to ask these questions of themselves and of each other.

It is important for inquiry leaders to keep in mind that equity-oriented inquiries do not always announce themselves as such. Take, for example, Elena Aguilar’s central inquiry question: “How can my students become motivated readers?” On its surface, this question doesn’t indicate an equity concern. However, Aguilar’s inquiry was actually driven both by her own passion for reading and by a deep conviction that literacy—and reading in
particular—is a fundamental gatekeeper to success for poor urban students in her classroom. Her inquiry leader constantly encouraged her to view her question through an equity lens, by asking questions such as: Which students in my class are struggling to read well? Which students are more challenging for me to motivate to read? Why does reading matter—or not matter—to these students in particular? How will this inquiry question help me better address the needs of my lower-achieving students? As Aguilar articulated her answers, she increasingly appreciated how her inquiry fit into a broader quest for equity at her school.

Some researchers are explicit about their equity concerns from the beginning. Pirette McKamey began with a broad but explicit equity question about the achievement of African American students in her school. Her essay illustrates one way of narrowing a question and applying an equity lens by examining practices that are successful with African American students, and questioning why they are successful. On the other hand, in some cases an inquiry does not start with an explicit equity concern (e.g., How can cooperative groups support student learning in algebra?). However, through the inquiry process, and gently prodded by the leader’s ongoing equity-focused questions, many teachers come to recognize an equity issue embedded in their question. Or they may discover a new inquiry question altogether as they learn to view their school and classroom through an equity lens.

Often a department, a grade-level team, or the whole school has identified one or more focus areas for their collective change efforts—such as writing skills for English language learners. This collaborative inquiry can lead to individual classroom research that generates significant equity-oriented learning. Working with collaborative groups, inquiry leaders need to ask the same questions they ask when working with individuals, adding questions that highlight links between individual research questions and broader equity issues.

**Develop both the “technical” and the “human” dimensions of the inquiry process.**

If inquiry is going to consistently serve the purpose of promoting equity, what does it need to look like? For inquiry leaders, it may be helpful to consider what BayCES coaches often refer to as the “technical” and the “human” dimensions of inquiry. We think of these technical and human dimensions as the yang and yin of inquiry: each is involved in the other; each requires the other. The technical dimension comprises the particular steps in an inquiry process and the forms of data that one can use. The human dimension comprises the emotions that inevitably accompany any investigation of one’s own practice, particularly when the focus is on inequities and the charged issues of oppression and privilege, failure and success.\(^3\) (For an illustration of the human dimension of inquiry, see Tanya Friedman’s essay in this guide.) And when inquiry involves collaboration, which it frequently does, the investigation of equity issues often evokes tension, disagreement, and culturally charged conflicts. Because of the emotional nature of this work, inquiry for equity works best when we acknowledge, anticipate, and make space for both the human and the technical dimensions of the process.

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\(^3\) Appendix B offers a set of perspectives from the National Coalition for Equity in Education intended to help schools and communities increase their understanding of the human dimension of inquiry. This list may provide the opportunity to dialogue and build shared meanings about beliefs, values, and assumptions that typically are not discussed in schools or other public spaces.
On the technical side, the kind of data one gathers can greatly affect how inquiry contributes to equity. Leaders can help teacher-researchers generate equity-oriented data by asking questions like these:

- To what extent do the data allow you to see how various subgroups of students are doing? Data that are disaggregated by factors like race, language, gender, and socioeconomic status can reveal a great deal about patterns of student achievement and experience.
- To what extent do the data include perspectives and voices other than your own? Our data must stretch us beyond our normal way of seeing things. Therefore, getting data especially from people whose backgrounds, experiences, or positions differ from yours (e.g., students, parents, and so on) is important in inquiry for equity. (For an example of the importance of different perspectives, see Sarah Capitelli’s essay.)

On the human side, it’s critical to pay attention to how our inquiry processes allow us to surface emotions and address conflict. Inquiry leaders might consider these questions when designing inquiry work:

- Are there aspects of the inquiry process that make space for the various emotions that come up when we are engaged in this work? (These might include journaling, narrative writing, forums that support teachers to speak honestly from their hearts and be listened to without judgment, and those that provide emotional release, such as constructivist listening.)
- If you are working in a group, are there norms or agreements that support equity-oriented dialogue and participation by all, whatever their discourse style? (Pirette McKamey’s discussion of a facultywide equity conversation illustrates the importance of this question. See the “Sample Meeting Norms and Procedural Norms” in the “Tools” section for an example of equity-minded norms.)

Consider the importance of each teacher-researcher’s identity.

In practitioner inquiry for equity, the identity of the researcher matters as much as that of the research subject. Deep change in a teacher’s beliefs and practices generally requires some degree of self-examination as part of an inquiry process. Inquiry for equity involves turning the lens back on oneself to reflect on

- who I am (e.g., racial or cultural background, gender, experience as a teacher)
- what I believe (e.g., values and beliefs about how students learn, what role their background plays in their learning, what is possible, what’s important in teaching)
- what I do (e.g., teaching practices, assessment practices, communication with families)
- how each of these interacts with and influences the others.

Inquiry leaders will find that the issue of one’s personal identity in relation to equity is often emotionally charged. They can support teachers to consider these questions through journaling and other forms of writing, watching and discussing a video of their practice, talking about their own experience in pairs or small groups (listening protocols can be useful), and collecting feedback and data from their students and from others such as parents or colleagues.
It is important to remember that teachers’ personal backgrounds do not necessarily determine whether they are more equity-oriented or less so. White teachers and teachers of color alike can carry oppressive beliefs and unintentionally contribute to inequity in their classrooms. And both can become transformative educators who help English language learners, students from low-income families, and students of color to achieve at high levels. However, teachers of color generally have had a lifetime of experiences living with the effects of institutionalized racism and carry different types of awareness of inequities than most white teachers. The inquiry leader’s role is to help teachers explore and understand how their particular background and experiences shape their teaching and their relationships with students.

Similarly, it is important to take into account the extent of a teacher’s experience when thinking about the role inquiry can play in his or her practice. Inquiry can help new teachers focus their learning amidst the overwhelming multitude of things they need to learn. And it can help more veteran teachers examine practices or beliefs that have become routine in their teaching.

Most inquiry groups, then, will comprise teacher-researchers with diverse professional experiences, social backgrounds, and personalities, and hence various orientations toward equity. In planning inquiry work with a group of educators, the inquiry leader needs to take into account who is in the group.

Some participants may come to the inquiry process with real concerns about the challenges facing their lowest-achieving students; an awareness of the systematic role of race, class, and language in the patterned educational disenfranchisement of many groups of students; and perhaps even an awareness of their own role in perpetuating some of these patterns of success and failure. For other teachers, equity may be a peripheral concern. In this case, an early task of the inquiry leader is to help these teachers identify possible links between their potential inquiry questions and inequities in their school context.

And for some teachers and leaders, equity issues are not really on their radar screen at all. They may be in denial about the role schools play in perpetuating inequity (“our school—or my classroom—provides many opportunities to succeed; kids just aren’t taking advantage of them”). They may attribute student failure to family background or poverty more generally (“well, there’s not much I can do as a teacher”). Or they may just not have learned to recognize the pervasiveness of inequity. A good entry point in working with these teachers can be to use data to identify and acknowledge inequities in their school or classroom context—and demonstrate that such inequities have been ameliorated elsewhere—that is, equity is possible. Colleagues tend to have a pivotal effect on one’s inquiry process; when they bring perspectives and experiences different from ours, we may have insights we never would have had on our own. It is the role of the inquiry leader to help “create space” for dialogue around the teachers’ diverse perspectives in a way that does not usually occur in routine interactions at school. (See Pirette McKamey’s and Tanya Friedman’s essays for examples of how such space can be intentionally created.)
Finally, it is also important for the inquiry leader to look at who does—and doesn’t—practice inquiry in a particular school or organization, and why. Do they tend to be new teachers? Veteran teachers? White teachers? Teachers of color? K–8 teachers? High school teachers? Teachers who can’t meet after school or at night? The practice of teacher inquiry will contribute the most to equity when it reaches elementary and high school teachers, teachers of color and white teachers, new and veteran teachers alike.

**Remember that results matter in inquiry.**

Inquiry leaders must ask themselves, Should we gauge the effectiveness of an inquiry process by its effects on teacher learning and practice—or ultimately by its impact on student learning and achievement? Must an inquiry lead to more equitable results for students in order to be considered a successful equity-oriented inquiry? These are critical and complex questions. In this era of heightened accountability and pressure for measurable gains in student achievement, inquiry advocates are often wary of the press for accountability because it can obscure the complexities of teacher learning and undercut the importance of teachers driving their own learning.4

On the one hand, teacher inquiry is ideally about teacher-driven professional development, and valuable learning for teachers is not always accompanied by measurable gains for students. As in science, a failed inquiry—one that doesn’t produce the results hoped for—is still successful if the inquirer learns from it and valuable knowledge is produced. Thus an inquiry can have a transformative effect on a teacher’s practice even though the inquiry itself did not immediately lead to measurably improved results for students. That said, if the aim of inquiry is to serve the purposes of equity, inquiry must ultimately be concerned with results. Teacher learning and satisfaction with the inquiry process are not adequate criteria for the success of an inquiry whose purpose is to make a difference for equity.

Through our work in the TRC, we’ve come to believe there is a middle road between these positions that takes into account the intimate link between teacher learning and student learning. Inquiry for equity involves a kind of “authentic” accountability: it helps teachers reflect upon themselves as educators and as individuals living in a cultural context. This process will ultimately lead them to greater accountability for the learning of their students.

**Asking Hard Questions About Our Own Inquiry Work**

A central reason that participants in TRC come together to look at and study the intersections of inquiry and equity is our belief that these are critical times for practitioners and advocates of inquiry. In today’s climate, there are both opportunities and dangers for the

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4 Inquiry processes can sometimes focus on student outcomes to the exclusion of deep learning for teachers. Increasingly, in districts that deploy a mandated literacy or math curriculum, inquiry is replacing traditional district inservices as the required form of professional development for program implementation. Often these approaches are tightly structured, focus narrowly on using assessment data from the mandated curriculum package, and teach an approach to inquiry that is more “technical” than “human” in its focus.
practice of inquiry. On the one hand, accountability pressures and the emphasis on data can help bring student results and inequities to the forefront of discussions—making inquiry an increasingly relevant practice. On the other hand, accountability policies often work in ways that narrow what counts as results—and how to achieve them. This can mean that “bottom-up” forms of professional development, like inquiry, can be pushed to the side in favor of more “top-down” training on the most recent mandated curriculum packages. The complex knowledge and understandings required to bring about more equitable student learning go beyond narrow accountability measures and more prescribed forms of teacher learning. Good teaching is adaptive—and any approach must be thoughtfully adapted to the particular contexts of a community, school, classroom, and student. Inquiry as a form of teacher learning is very well suited to this complexity. And at the same time, advocates of inquiry—especially in the current policy context—must hold themselves accountable and demonstrate that their work is relevant and is capable of helping effect significant changes both in practice and in results for students.

Inquiry leaders and teacher-researchers work in contexts fraught with challenges and needs: schools that are under-resourced; students who are falling through the cracks; teachers who are often underprepared to face the challenges of urban schools; increasing numbers of students who are poor, of color, and English language learners. If inquiry is going to effectively serve the purposes of equity, we as practitioners and leaders of inquiry must habitually ask questions about our work. Practiced uncritically, any form of professional development has the potential to wind up contributing to the status quo more than transforming it. Teacher-researchers and inquiry leaders alike must regularly ask ourselves: Is my/our inquiry actually helping lead to more equitable outcomes for students? If so, how? If not, why not? These are hard questions because—as Kathryn Herr (1999) points out—for teacher-researchers, data-gathering does not always reveal stories that are easy for us to hear. Inquiring into our practice and holding ourselves accountable for our results requires courage and commitment. Inquiry can be a powerful tool in transforming our schools and classrooms into equitable spaces that foster the success of all children. But for inquiry to fulfill this promise, we must pay attention to how and for what purposes it is practiced, and provide support, both technical and emotional, for teacher-researchers to ask the hard questions. This is the spirit in which the essays in this guide were written.

References
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