

Collaborative Inquiry, Cultural Proficiency, and Racially Diverse Learners

Critical Issues and Promising Practices

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"Our assumptions and beliefs drive our responses to data and culture.... effective collaborative inquirers seek to esteem and understand their own culture with that of others.....they test their assumptions with additional data....they employ cultural proficiency as a framework and tool-set that broadens their cultural lens to become more effective in educating racially diverse learners..."

(NANCY LOVE, 2009. USING DATA TO IMPROVE LEARNING FOR ALL. (4) PP.82, 83, 94)

Disaggregated data illustrate persistent patterns of disproportionality in academic and behavioral achievement among racially and culturally diverse learners (Huffman & Kalnin, 2003; Malarkey, 2007; Fashola, 2005). Overcoming conditions contributing to such gaps in achievement is a shared priority for 21st century educators.

In order to respond to this pattern, practitioners and scholars are beginning to identify and connect with often unrecognized assets that are inherent to their students' natures and integral to their capabilities. Gradually, through use of collaborative inquiry, more attention is being given to discover what it takes to use data as a bridge to educational practice that is better aligned with capacities that today's students bring into the classroom. As a result of using this framework, educator responses to disaggregated data are focusing more frequently on internal exploration and critical analysis that builds capacity for cultural competence and culturally responsive

approaches. Productive collaborative inquiry (Love et al., 2008) is accomplished through constructive use of non-judgmental (Comer, 1999), yet accountability-focused (Fullan, 1993, 2005; Lindsey, Roberts & Campbelljones, 2005), equity-centered (Singleton & Linton, 2006) models of practice. This paradigm presents a unique course of action that leads to overcoming the gaps in educators' capacities in providing equitable learning opportunities that successfully engage racially and culturally diverse learners, contributing to gains in academic performance.

A significant, yet partial response to this challenge can be found in the well established research base that illustrates the link between collaboration, teacher reflective practice and student learning (Little, 1990; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). According to this body of work, when teachers engage in ongoing collaborative inquiry focused on teaching, learning and effective use of data, they improve results for students. Beyond this

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approach, recent work builds on such established practice by using data more strategically to transform teaching and learning practices for racially diverse learners (Love et al., 2008). Guided by this paradigm, collaborative, reflective practice to close racial achievement gaps is implemented by keeping the focus on equity, strengthening the powerful effectiveness of professional learning communities and using data as a catalyst for powerful conversations about race/ethnicity, class, educational status, and teacher-student performance.

Collaborative inquiry holds promise to closing the achievement gap among racially diverse learners. In considering collaborative inquiry and race, Nancy Love, Franklin Campbell Jones and others provide a framework of implementation that establishes a bridge to instructional practice to reduce the achievement gap among racially diverse learners using and linking collaborative inquiry through systematic use of an equity lens.

The work forged by Nancy Love, et al. presents a foundation for collaborative inquiry that lies in four core competencies for high capacity data use. They include (1) data literacy and collaborative inquiry (2) content knowledge and pedagogical skill (3) cultural proficiency, and (4) facilitative leadership skills. This embedded application of cultural proficiency explicitly takes into consideration issues of race and other diversity factors. Cultural proficiency (the ability to interact knowledgeably and respectfully with people of diverse cultural backgrounds) views achievement gaps as solvable challenges, not as inevitable, insurmountable conflict-bearing consequences rooted from student backgrounds. The cultural proficiency mindset generates solutions that reflect an understanding of diverse

student strengths, values, and perspectives, and tap efficacy in culturally competent educators. In turn, a more effective vehicle emerges for mediating cultural conflict while promoting productive teacher-student engagement.

Essentially, the collaborative inquiry process entails synthesized use of five critical elements including (1) distributed leadership and capacity (2) collaborative teams (3) frequent, in-depth data use (4) instructional improvement focus, and (5) collaborative culture committed to equity and trust. In this paradigm, there is ongoing dialogue about race, class, and privilege in relation to education, teaching and learning. Collaborative inquiry offers a medium for responding to the needs of racially diverse learners by shifting away from culturally destructive, inadequate or colorblind tendencies (i.e. counterproductive, fixed barriers). Instead, more emphasis is placed on the belief that all children (and educators), notwithstanding socio-cultural background, are capable of high achievement (and performance). Such educator responses to racially diverse learners are made from transformed mindsets, shifting toward those that are culturally pre-competent, competent or culturally proficient (i.e. on-going, capacity-building bridges).

The examples that follow delineate how diverse groups of educators have shown the impact of using collaborative inquiry and equity-centered practice to improve the performance of racially diverse learners.

CANTON CITY, OH

In Canton City, Ohio, four middle schools, serving 66 to 82 percent poor students and 30 to 45 percent African American students, increased the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Sixth-Grade Ohio Proficiency Test in mathematics between 2002–03 and 2004–05. On the Ohio Seventh- and Eighth-Grade Achievement Tests, all student groups, including all racial groups, students with special needs, and those receiving free-and-reduced lunch made gains (Ohio Department of Education, 2005, 2006).

In addition, the percentage of Canton City high school students earning proficient or above on the Tenth-Grade Ohio Graduation Test in mathematics increased by 25 percentage points from 2004 to 2006. As in grades 7 and 8, all student groups made progress (Ohio Department of Education, 2006). For example, the percentage of African American students passing the Ohio Graduation Test in mathematics increased by 74 percent from 2004 to 2006 (Ohio Department of, 2006).

Teachers created a culture committed to analyzing data to improve instruction, honoring students through culturally responsive teaching, collaborating with each other to create excellence in instruction, and empowering each other to implement a collective vision and mission centered on a commitment to equity, collaborative team-building and trust.

LOS ANGELES, CA

An urban elementary school with a primarily African American population with over 80% on free and reduced lunch, went from needs improvement to receiving a state achievement award by building leadership capacity, engaging in structured collaboration, and developing an equity lens for analyzing data.

Within a four-year period, 54th Street Elementary School in Los Angeles, went from a school in Needs Improvement to becoming the recipient of the California Achievement Award. Grade level teams engaged in collaborative inquiry as a part of the regular day. The teachers were able to sustain this culture and their vision through three principals.

In both of these school districts, educators in a variety of roles, discovered and used tools to analyze data and transform an unhealthy culture into a high-functioning one by increasing awareness of the assumptions and cultural lenses brought to data interpretation. Within the context of their respective processes, they tapped into the power of collaborative inquiry and cultural proficiency to broaden their cultural lens and strengthen their educational practice to become more effective in educating racially diverse learners.

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