



QUESTIONS THAT LEAD TO ACTION

EQUITY AUDITS MOTIVATE TEACHERS TO FOCUS ON ENGLISH LEARNERS' NEEDS

By Luis R. Soria and Margery B. Ginsberg

Marcella and Michael have near-perfect 4th-grade attendance records at a pre-K-8 public school in Chicago, Illinois.

Marcella and her family are recent immigrants. With the highest national level of immigrants in 105 years (Zeigler & Camarota, 2015), recent immigrants comprise 13.3% of the U.S. population. Given both the rise in students who speak a language other than English at home and dwindling resources for professional learning in urban public schools, the need for schools to develop in-house systems for teachers to continuously learn from one another has never been stronger.

Like Michael, Marcella is eager to learn. Yet student learning data reveal significant disparities in their performance. This baffles their teachers, who participate in professional learning and regularly meet with grade-level colleagues to learn from one another.

Marcella's teachers wonder: How do we know students are being educated in a manner that best supports their needs as learners? How do we extend and deepen our conversations about equity? How do we know that we are asking the right questions?

OPPORTUNITIES TO EXCEL

Last year, as chief of schools for Network 8 in Chicago Public Schools, Luis R. Soria was responsible for supporting, leading, and assessing the teaching and learning of nearly 30,000 students at 34 schools. Like Michael's and Marcella's teachers, Soria worked hard to

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ensure they have every possible opportunity to excel.

Every five weeks, the district team generated an on-track report for the 27 elementary and middle schools in Network 8. This comprehensive report provided a routine way to follow each student's progress in reading and mathematics for grades 3 through 8.

The team also documented students' attendance rates and designed and facilitated a series of four full-day learning sessions to assist instructional leadership teams from each school as they reviewed, analyzed, interpreted, and responded to data.

As the instructional leadership teams examined their own teaching, they also developed their capacity to work with grade-level teams at their schools through a similar process for continuous instructional improvement.

Data revealed that, across schools, a high percentage of English learners were off-track for 15 consecutive weeks. Like Marcella, these students were earning a D or F in reading or mathematics.

When Soria filtered the data for students with low attendance to see if that might be the culprit, he saw that English learners with high attendance, from 95% to 100%, were earning a D or F at nearly double the percentage of non-English learners.

In addition to examining data for student learning trends, the school needed a way to surface some of the less-transparent causes of educational inequity.

In a leadership class taught by Margery B. Ginsberg at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Soria learned about the equity audit — an approach to inquiry that examines one or more aspects of a learning environment (community, district, school, classroom) related to opportunity gaps in public education.

According to Groenke (2010), equity audits became popular during the Civil Rights era, when activists sought to make nondiscrimination a condition to receive federal funding. Although there is limited consensus on how best to structure and implement an equity audit, its potential has attracted the attention of theorists, schools, and organizations that serve schools (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004, p.141).

Soria decided to introduce the idea of an equity audit to one school before introducing it to others. To do this, he drew on two resources: the motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching (Ginsberg, 2011) and the unpublished draft of an equity audit developed by the University of Illinois at Chicago Center for Urban Education Leadership.

Using the motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching (Ginsberg, 2015) as a guide, Soria asked, “How

can I work with the school team — prioritizing goals and related questions to investigate — and field-testing its implementation. The motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching was a helpful scaffold for facilitation.

MOTIVATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

The motivational framework serves as a meta-language for facilitators of adult learning (and teachers of younger learners) to share knowledge and develop learning experiences that are motivationally coherent (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Ginsberg, 2011, 2015).

Everyday wisdom, research, and personal experience support the idea that when four primary motivational conditions are present in a learning environment, greater learner initiative and growth will result (Elliot & Dweck, 2013; Wlodkowski, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 1991). As shown in the figure at left, these conditions and related questions are:

Establish inclusion. How do we create or affirm a learning environment in which educators feel respected by and connected to one another and to the facilitator (e.g. large-group and small-group norms for respectful interactions, teaching and learning that includes adults’ lives, languages, and cultures)?

Develop a positive attitude. How do we create or affirm a favorable disposition toward learning through personal relevance and choice (e.g. personalized goals based on interests, strengths, and needs; opportunities for different perspectives)?

Enhance meaning. How do we create engaging and challenging learning experiences that include educators’ perspectives and values (e.g. problem posing, inquiry, and experimentation)?

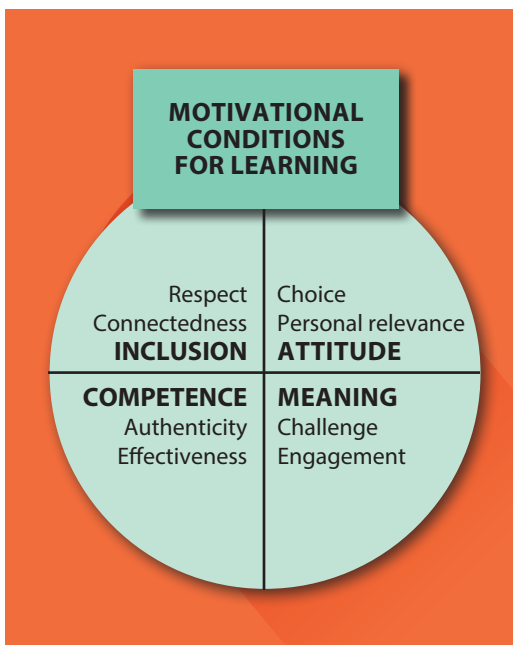
Engender competence. How do we create an understanding that educators have effectively learned something they value and perceive as valuable to their school (e.g. multiple ways to reach goals, clear criteria, and formative feedback for success)?

Soria kept these four conditions in mind as he thought through how to introduce an approach to an equity audit focused on improving instruction for English learners.

For background, Soria reviewed the Center for Urban Education Leadership’s five equity audit categories: parent, community, school connections; leadership to dismantle racism and bias; safe and equitable classrooms for deep learning; student leadership and voice; and professional capacity.

Next, he thought through six questions as he prepared his approach, with a strong focus on question 3:

1. What do you want to learn from experimenting with this process?
2. Why this particular focus?
3. How and to whom will you introduce and explain the opportunity?
4. How will you initially prioritize items and/or work with others to prioritize items?
5. Who will assist with the audit?
6. What is your timeline for introducing the audit, prioritizing



can I work with the school team so that they want to explore the correlation between high attendance and consistently low grades for English learners?” The Center for Urban Education Leadership equity audit provided categories and items from which educators could draw to customize an approach.

To Soria, it seemed intuitive that effective facilitators build relationships and present new challenges in an environment for learning where educators feel safe to raise questions.

Yet, from examining the motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching, Soria could see that there are four primary considerations, and these are mutually interdependent. While safety is essential, so are choice, relevance, challenge, and authentic and valued evidence of success.

To introduce the idea of an equity audit, Soria sought a research-based approach to support adult motivation to learn each step of the way, from introducing the idea of an equity

items, and so forth?

Soria understood that the nature of his role as a network chief of schools could interfere with teacher initiative to uncover educational inequities related to English learners. The school team could simply ask, “What does the chief want us to do now?”

Soria knew he had to think carefully about how to build a willing environment for this work. He also wanted to resist telling the school team how to respond to data findings related to English learners at their school.

CREATING A TEAM APPROACH

Returning to the five Center for Urban Education Leadership equity audit categories, Soria prioritized the category of safe and equitable classrooms for deep learning. The 22 items in this section focus on teacher actions and decisions for English learners, and this is what he wanted to learn from experimenting with this process.

Soria developed six questions based on this section and organized them from teaching strategies to student identity and finally to planning for student motivation. He planned to introduce these to the school team by saying, “This is my best thinking for six important questions. But we need your best thinking. Would you like less? More? Different?”

Soria wanted the school team to make its own decisions while eliminating the time-consuming work of asking them to start from scratch. The initial questions were:

1. To what extent do teachers use teaching strategies that are inclusive, relevant, challenging, engaging, and focused on the academic success of all students?
2. To what extent do teachers make meaningful connections to students’ cultural identities, interests, and personal goals?
3. To what extent do teachers use collaborative inquiry and authentic projects to support inclusive, relevant, and high levels of student engagement in learning?
4. To what extent do teachers use specific teaching strategies to support the strengths and needs of English learners?
5. To what extent is authentic evidence of student learning a central feature of assessment practices?

6. To what extent is instructional planning also motivational planning where supporting student motivation is proactive rather than a matter of default?

After Soria selected and ordered these questions, he worked with the principal and assistant principal to create a team approach. To begin his conversation with administrative leaders, he said, “I need a school team to serve as a collaborative thought partner. I’m hoping that this learning team can help me resolve an issue that I have discovered from the on-track reports. I know your instructional leadership team dives into these reports with thoughtful diligence, and I believe I can learn from your expertise. What do you think?”

They agreed, and together the school leaders decided that a small but significant team, representative of the instructional leadership team, was the best way to plan its work. They set the date and time.

WORKING WITH THE SCHOOL TEAM

The school is in a significantly underresourced neighborhood in Chicago. Its 480 students include 95% current or former English learners and 97% low income.

Teacher mobility is low, and the current school administrators have co-led the school for more than six years. The instructional leadership team has evolved over the last two years, moving from compliance tasks such as monitoring grades and planning field trips to designing and implementing cycles of continuous improvement with specific district-endorsed powerful practices.

The eight-member instructional leadership team includes representatives from pre-K-2, 3-5, and 6-8, and teachers of fine arts, diverse learners, English learners, and the two administrators.

A subset of the instructional leadership team worked with school leaders and Soria on a first phase of the equity audit. This included the fine arts teacher, a middle school science teacher, and a diverse learner teacher. The district counts as diverse learners students who have an individual instructional plan, commonly referred to as an IEP.

Soria invited a member from the network team, an instruc-

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SAFE AND EQUITABLE CLASSROOMS FOR DEEP LEARNING

The unpublished draft of the equity audit developed by the Center for Urban Education Leadership at the University of Illinois at Chicago includes a section on safe and equitable classrooms for deep learning. The items in this section focus on teacher actions and decisions for historically underserved students, including English learners.

Items are scored on a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 = almost always, 3 = sometimes, 2 = rarely, 1 = not yet.



		4 Almost always	3 Sometimes	2 Rarely	1 Not yet
1	Teachers have the self-knowledge and interpersonal skill to work with students who are from backgrounds that are different than their own.				
2	Teachers understand how extrinsic rewards and sanctions to motivate learning can undermine deep and creative learning.				
3	Teachers understand how extrinsic rewards and sanctions can exacerbate problematic power relations.				
4	Teachers understand the significance of intrinsic motivation as the foundation for teaching and learning in culturally diverse classrooms.				
5	Teachers understand how to create a learning environment that is respectful, relevant, challenging, engaging, and focused on the academic success of all students.				
6	Teachers use teaching strategies that are inclusive, relevant, challenging, engaging, and focused on the academic success of all students.				
7	Teachers use specific teaching strategies to support the strengths and needs of English language learners.				
8	Teachers make meaningful connections to students' cultural identities, interests, and personal goals.				
9	Teachers are aware of and use pedagogical approaches to facilitate learning related to controversial issues.				

		4 Almost always	3 Sometimes	2 Rarely	1 Not yet
10	Teachers know and use strategies to promote equitable and mutually supportive teamwork among students.				
11	Teachers use heterogeneous grouping for teamwork most of the time.				
12	Posters, literature, textbooks, and all learning materials, including handouts, reflect students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.				
13	The literature selections in the curriculum include relevant social issues and cultural perspectives.				
14	Teachers encourage and help students probe personal assumptions and perspectives.				
15	Teachers use collaborative inquiry and authentic projects to support inclusive, relevant, and high levels of student engagement in learning.				
16	Authentic evidence of student learning is a central feature of assessment practices.				
17	Formative assessment is an everyday practice.				
18	Grading practices are grounded in current research and respect that students learn at different rates and in different ways.				
19	Instructional planning is also motivational planning. (Motivation is not a matter of default.)				
20	Teachers differentiate instruction to build on students' strengths.				
21	Across the curriculum, teachers create substantive learning experiences that teach about social justice and encourage active community engagement.				
22	Teachers work with students to develop inquiry projects that contribute to their communities.				

GIVEN YOUR RESPONSES TO THIS SECTION, PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING PROMPTS:

Effective current practices that support safe and equitable classrooms for deep learning currently include:

Evidence that supports your response to the previous prompt includes:

Based on your response to the first two prompts, priorities to improve safe and equitable classrooms for deep learning are:

Source: Center for Urban Education Leadership, College of Education, University of Illinois at Chicago.

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tional support leader, to help capture and archive the collaboration and initial exploration of the equity audit.

After a few minutes of informal conversation, Soria began, “I’ve been exploring the on-track data reports, and I’m trying to be more precise about how schools connect their analysis and interpretation of data to instructional practice.

“To achieve this, I’d like to suggest six questions for us to explore as a team. I want to ensure they are the best questions to pose. Would you please silently read through them and consider their potential significance to the school?”

Team members read the questions and, after a wide-ranging discussion about school values, teaching challenges, and how to proceed, began working as a team to answer the questions.

On large chart paper, Soria drew an x- and y-axis chart with the six questions and a four-point scale. He asked team members to score each question independently, then asked them to place a dot on the chart for each question to reveal their scores. Once all the dots were placed, he asked, “What do you see?”

The principal said, “We are all over the place, and there’s only five of us! What will happen when we try this with the whole staff?” Everyone laughed, and it united the group as a team.

To make sense of the team’s findings, Soria asked for observational (factual rather than interpretive) comments based on where team members placed their dots. For example, an observation could be: For question 4, every one of us placed our dot in a different place along the x-axis.

As group members moved from factual observation to interpretation and next steps, they arrived at a shared understanding. As one teacher said,

“We don’t really know the English learners. We don’t understand what they really need. I’m listening and reflecting as I sit here, and I wonder if others will feel the same way. I look at this report, and I get frustrated. But I get frustrated at them (the students), and I’m learning today that I might not really know enough strategies for the English learners.”

Around the table, a silence prevailed. After a minute, another teacher suggested, “Let’s make plan. How do we start?”

LESSONS LEARNED


From this experience, Soria realized he needed to move away from a top-down approach to create a context where teachers are motivated to challenge themselves and their colleagues in new ways, using four primary motivational conditions:

- **Establish inclusion:** “From start to finish, I sought to communicate that we are a team, individual perspectives matter, and your input is invaluable,” Soria said. He created safe conditions for this to happen by inviting team members to express their opinions, listening carefully, building on individual statements, and sharing humor.
- **Develop a positive attitude:** “I wanted this to matter to every team member,” Soria said. The team shared an understanding that students learn more than data necessarily reveal, and they reviewed data through team-generated questions and observations. Soria’s message to the team was: Are these the right questions? Let’s make decisions together.
- **Enhance meaning:** Soria constructed an experiential process using authentic data and inquiry for the team to practice and further develop a process for professional learning with the rest of the staff.
- **Engender competence:** “Working with data and then generating data of our own through dot graphing on the axis chart allowed us to move to an essential next step — putting together a staff workshop as a fully committed team,” Soria said.

Soria says he also learned another valuable lesson. “As an educational leader, a primary responsibility is to enhance and support adult motivation so that the will and the means to teach Marcella and Michael will prevail, no matter what. While the influence of educators who encourage motivation through thought and deed may not always be quantifiable, it is difficult to dispute.”

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Soria’s message to the team was: Are these the right questions? Let’s make decisions together.

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How do I teach English learners?

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dent become proficient at using higher-level vocabulary, knowing that eventually his writing would be graded using the AP rubric that required a high level of diction. Getting her English learner students to that level was the instructional challenge.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Content teachers responsible for the instruction of English learner students will perceive myriad challenges when it comes to English learner students in the mainstream. School leaders can play a pivotal role in supporting and mitigating some of these challenges by recognizing what some of the pitfalls and issues might be for content teachers working with English learner students.

Schools that are successful in meeting English learner students' needs have a coherent vision for instruction and professional development (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; Hakuta, 2011). Awareness of potential areas of resistance or tension can help school leaders as they create and support a vision for their schools and provide opportunities for professional learning related to the inclusion and instruction of English learner students.

School leaders can be more effective in how they lead and engage their staff by recognizing that content teachers will be meeting disparate needs of individual English learner students, were not necessarily prepared for working with English learner students in their teacher preparation programs, do not always have necessary background knowledge of English learner students, and are teaching in an era of accountability where assessments often do not align with English learner students' language proficiency levels.

School leaders can support the varied needs of English learner students, as well as their teaching staff, when they focus their instructional leadership efforts on setting a vision of

inclusion and support for English learner students across the school and developing cultural norms, structures, and activities to engage content teachers in meeting the instructional needs of English learner students.

These targeted efforts include schoolwide supports for English learner students (e.g. common instructional practices across content areas, targeted academic supports) as well as alignment of program design for English learner students with supports for teachers responsible for the instruction of these students. Considering the dual needs of supporting both English learner students and their teachers will enable both parties the opportunity for success in their respective academic and professional realms.

In realizing the vision and means for such an inclusive school and supportive professional context, school leaders can begin to take steps to mitigate the gulf between developing academic English language proficiency and the demands of content learning in high schools.

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