

# To lead for equity, learn from teachers

BY JILL HARRISON BERG



**S**chools committed to equity are experimenting with creative and powerful ways for teachers to ensure all students receive what they need to learn in the classroom. Many of these efforts focus professional learning on strengthening the instructional core — teachers’ knowledge of and relationships with students, teachers’ deep and critical knowledge of the content, and the ways teachers make that content relevant to students.

These classroom-based efforts are necessary, yet insufficient, for advancing equity. A systems approach

that addresses the contextual conditions required for instructional equity is also needed.

The consistency with which our schools produce inequitable results leads to one conclusion: Our schools are inequitable by design. Within these constraints, shifts in instruction can have only limited impact. Yet it isn’t always clear what educational leaders — including principals and assistant principals, coaches and mentors, teacher leaders, and others whose roles are designed to influence the quality of instruction — need to learn or change to uproot inequity at the systems level.

The inequitable systems that cause us to underserve our students have been there so long that they have become part of the wallpaper. As products of schools that were not designed to educate all students ourselves, we can easily fall into the trap of blindly reproducing the systems we’ve experienced unless we are confronted with evidence that helps us to see what changes are needed.

In fact, in the same way that effective teachers examine evidence of students’ learning to help them identify what it is their students need them to learn, effective leaders might examine

evidence of *teachers'* learning to help them identify what it is their teachers need *them* to learn and do — to create stronger contextual conditions for instructional equity.

When teachers' learning takes the form of collaborative inquiry, it produces a wealth of evidence and insight that not only helps teachers transform their teaching practice, but is also invaluable for identifying the school conditions needed to support that transformation. School leaders have much they can learn from teachers' collaborative inquiry if they are prepared to do so.

## TEACHERS' COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Many forms of collaborative inquiry are underway in schools, though they are not always known by that name. Teachers engage in inquiry cycles when they:

- Work together to set and work toward shared professional goals as part of their evaluation cycle or their pursuit of National Board Certification;
- Hone their skill with a particular aspect of practice through instructional rounds or lesson study;
- Tune their teaching to be more responsive to students' specific needs via data inquiry cycles or sessions for looking at student work; or
- Critically compare their assessment of student work products to shared expectations for quality using conversation protocols.

Each of these efforts digs at the roots of an important and common threat to

instructional equity (Berg, in press).

These are powerful learning experiences for the individuals involved. Unfortunately, the enduring impact that these efforts could have on students' learning is too often inadvertently stifled by unaligned conditions within the context.

For example, as teachers work together in professional learning to embed social and emotional learning components in their classrooms that help students feel safe and ready to learn, they may discover that students don't feel physically, emotionally, or intellectually safe beyond the classroom.

Teachers spend collaborative planning time examining their instructional materials for bias or considering how to better align their instruction with the science of learning so that students receive responsive and rigorous content and pedagogy, and, along the way, they recognize ways their efforts are set back by school- or district-mandated curricular materials or confined by bell schedules.

Teachers work to redesign curricular units in vertical teams to ensure students recognize the relevance of content to their lives, practice critical thinking, and share ownership of learning, yet doing so heightens their attention to ways district assessments and school grading policies communicate conflicting ideas to students and their families about what is valued.

In collaborative inquiry cycles such as these, teachers "commit their time and attention to helping one another **assess** the gap between the results their current practice produces and the results they wish to see. They lend their diverse perspectives to understanding

this practice gap from every angle, tap their varied experiences or relevant research to propose a plan to close it, and **attempt** to put this plan into action while helping one another see both intended and unintended effects.

"Members then **analyze** results together, such that the process leads not only to closing the targeted gap but also to a deeper understanding of the changes and the conditions under which they are effective" (Berg, in press).

It's important not to stop there, but to extend the inquiry to consider organizational implications of these same results. In this way, collaborative inquiry can inform efforts to **adjust** the system so that it evolves in concert with and in support of classroom changes.

Given the time and energy invested in forms of collaborative inquiry, it should be recognized as more than an opportunity for teachers to deepen their own individual or collective practice. It should also be viewed as an opportunity to learn about organizational adjustments and leadership learning needed to support and sustain changes in instructional practice.

## ARE LEADERS READY TO LEARN?

Since instructional transformation in the classroom cannot gain traction without parallel development of the school and district policies and structures that currently constrain them, it behooves equity-minded instructional leaders to take these three proactive steps to ensure teachers' inquiry-based professional learning experiences are maximized as catalysts for leaders' own and their schools' transformation.

1. **Develop a learning culture, starting with oneself.**

When teachers run up against roadblocks or speed bumps in their efforts to reach students, they tend to work around them, rather than act on sharing them as critical data needed to improve the school. Most schools do not have a culture that makes it easy or possible for teachers to share the insights they have about obstacles beyond their classrooms.

In some contexts, when teachers do suggest system changes, teachers fear they will be viewed as complainers passing the buck or looking for a way to avoid making necessary changes in their own classrooms. In others, there is no ready venue for such conversations. Teachers would have to find the time, space, and gumption for a difficult conversation. Since it's much easier not to do so, valuable information that leaders could use to advance equity is withheld.

Where leaders conduct themselves in ways that show they have a growth mindset — such as by talking about their own professional goals, sharing what they're learning, recognizing and tapping the expertise of others, and talking openly about their mistakes — and make this learning stance visible and contagious among the faculty, teachers will be more willing to speak up about the challenges they face, share their honest reflections about changes they feel are needed, and even help leaders identify what it is they need to learn.

**2. Offer a leadership lens.**

Teachers' own work in schools does not automatically build their familiarity with the key domains of leadership practice that are important for strong

EQUITY IN CONTEXT	
How might dimensions of the school context support or limit educators' classroom-based efforts for instructional equity? Results from teachers' inquiry cycles can help leaders identify which dimensions need a closer look and inform the focus of leaders' own reflection and action.	
	Dimensions
<b>Domain 1:</b> Culture and climate supports	1A: Schoolwide expectations and agreements
	1B: Ownership, engagement, and collegiality
	1C: Physical, emotional, and intellectual safety
<b>Domain 2:</b> Teaching supports	2A: Curriculum
	2B: Instruction
	2C: Assessment, grading, and feedback
<b>Domain 3:</b> Learning supports	3A: Student supports and interventions
	3B: Extended learning opportunities
	3C: Student-teacher relationships
<b>Domain 4:</b> Structural supports	4A: Facilities
	4B: School schedule and programming
	4C: School partnerships
<b>Domain 5:</b> Professional capacity	5A: Professional learning resources
	5B: Hiring/personnel processes
	5C: Teacher collaboration
<b>Domain 6:</b> Leadership supports	6A: Principal leadership
	6B: Governance/school-level decision-making structure
	6C: Influence of family and community voice
<b>Source:</b> Berg, J.H. (in press). <i>Uprooting instructional inequity: The power of inquiry-based professional learning</i> . ASCD. Copyright by ASCD. Reprinted with permission.	

teaching and learning. As such, as they wind down their cycles and approach the “adjust” phase, they may benefit from support as they look for clues about ways our systems are inequitable by design.

Research and practice throughout the past decade have produced several

frameworks that identify the contextual conditions needed in schools to support student learning (University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, n.d.; Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment, 2018; Quintero, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2012; Blankstein et al., 2016). These frameworks have commonalities that can be described as 18 dimensions in six domains. (See table at left.)

The list represents a wide array of structures and policies that stand to support or limit teachers' work. As teachers reflect on their efforts to improve their practice through collaborative inquiry, this list can help them recognize ways the system may be working against their efforts and focus their attention on proposing adjustments informed by their cycles.

On their own, school leaders might be overwhelmed to look at this list and consider the challenge of deciding where to begin reforming their systems. Fortunately, they don't have to. Teachers' inquiry cycles will draw their attention to dimensions of the system that pose a present threat to desired instructional changes and help them identify what they need to learn and do to create more equitable systems.

**3. Strengthen vertical communication routines.**

Inquiry cycles do (or can) take many forms and occur in various venues in schools — from looking at data or student work in professional learning communities, to lesson study within content teams, to coaching or supervision cycles conducted during teachers' own planning periods. Without a deliberate

design to do so, lessons from these cycles won't necessarily be accessed as source material for leaders' learning.

Currently, most schools are not organized for the challenges teachers experience in their practice to be harnessed as intel about what leaders need to learn. School- and district-level decision-making often goes on without them and overlooks the potential of teachers as assets with invaluable inquiry-informed experience that is essential for informing improvement. A vertical communication routine that brings classroom teachers and instructional leaders together with enough frequency for candid conversation is needed.

Where schools have an instructional leadership team — for example, composed of representatives from each of the school's instructional teams, the principal, and any other instructional leaders — there is a ready-built platform for individuals and teams to share what they're learning from cycles of inquiry and to take action together.

A vertical team such as this represents a wide variety of experiences and perspectives in the school and will be well-suited for the work of innovating to design new structures and policies aligned with the ideals of equity. Since this work has implications for leaders' learning, a district leader might be included in these school-based vertical teams too.

Where an instructional leadership team does not exist or cannot easily be established, school leaders might prioritize time to check in with those engaged in inquiry to explore how their equity-focused efforts are unearthing clues that point to ways the system is working against them.

Instructional coaches might, for example, convene a reflection meeting after each cycle of peer observations; principals might invite teachers working on similar professional goals to a quarterly conversation about contextual conditions that support or limit them; and new teacher mentors might hold a monthly breakfast to glean novice

## TOOLS TO UPROOT INSTRUCTIONAL INEQUITY

**J**ill Harrison Berg's book *Uprooting Instructional Inequity: The Power of Inquiry-Based Professional Learning*, which will be released by ASCD in early 2022, guides readers in designing or retooling plans for inquiry-based professional learning so that they effectively interrogate the roots of inequities and engage in transformative learning for educators and students.

teachers' perceptions of systems changes needed to help them do their work well: What school conditions facilitated your learning and changes in practice? What has gotten in the way?

## LEARNING TOGETHER

Spurred on by the deep inequities witnessed and experienced during the events of the past two years, today's teachers are going to great lengths to strive for instructional equity in their own classrooms. They are redesigning curricula, broadening their instructional repertoires, assessing students in more authentic ways, and taking new approaches to know their students as people and as learners.

These changes, fueled by an equity-focused drive to ensure all students get what they need to learn, lie in direct conflict with systemic structures and policies created in the past with a narrower audience and a lower bar in mind. It's no wonder today's teachers are so exhausted — they are swimming upstream within a system that works against their efforts at instructional equity.

When teachers engage in action and reflection together through inquiry-based professional learning, they often learn as much about teaching and learning in their classrooms as they do about how contextual conditions get in the way of the changes they're seeking.

Instructional leaders can strategically capitalize on teachers' inquiry-based professional learning as an opportunity to help identify what they need to learn or change to uproot inequity at the systems level. By coordinating their learning in this way, teachers and leaders' complementary efforts to advance instructional equity can turn the tide.

## REFERENCES

- Berg, J.H. (in press).** *Uprooting instructional inequity: The power of inquiry-based professional learning*. ASCD.
- Blankstein, A.M., Noguera, P., & Kelly, L. (2016).** *Excellence through equity: Five principles of courageous leadership to guide achievement for every student*. ASCD.
- Johnson, S.M., Kraft, M.A., & Papay, J.P. (2012).** How context matters in high-need schools: The effects of teachers' working conditions on their professional satisfaction and their students' achievement. *Teachers College Record*, 114(10), 1-39.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2019).** Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(4), 1-18.
- Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment. (2018).** *School quality measures framework*. [www.mciea.org/uploads/1/2/0/7/120788330/mcieasqm-framework-short-2018.pdf](http://www.mciea.org/uploads/1/2/0/7/120788330/mcieasqm-framework-short-2018.pdf)
- Quintero, E. (2017).** *Teaching in context: The social side of education reform*. Harvard Education Press.
- University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. (n.d.).** *The 5Essentials framework*. [Uchicagoimpact.org/sites/default/files/5eframework\\_outreach%26marketing%20%281%29.pdf](http://Uchicagoimpact.org/sites/default/files/5eframework_outreach%26marketing%20%281%29.pdf)

•  
**Jill Harrison Berg (jhberg@gmail.com) is a leadership coach, researcher, and consultant on teacher leadership and systemic improvement. ■**