

## How a cultural lens can help teachers disrupt inequity

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**V**iewing classrooms as apolitical, race-neutral environments isn't working — and never has. In promoting color blindness, educators have denied student racial identities. In using the broad language of multicultural education, schools have maintained a strict adherence to white, middle class, heteronormative definitions of success. As a result, students from minoritized populations have been asked to adopt

the norms of either school or home. Unsurprisingly, school has become a place of dissonance for too many.

It is past time to change that pattern, and education leaders have a clear opportunity for change right now. The confluence of racial justice movements and COVID-19 school shutdowns have forced long-existing inequities into the spotlight. Now there is an opening to shift the structures and culture of schools.

We see teacher learning via inquiry

as a major lever for this change. Working with teachers, we have found that the cultural inquiry process is a valuable tool for critical reflection and equity-oriented action consistent with Learning Forward's (2020) equity position statement and the equity-focused Standards for Professional Learning (Ward, 2021).

### **BENEFITS OF TEACHER INQUIRY**

Teacher inquiry is a learning process driven by teachers themselves

THE CULTURAL INQUIRY PROCESS	
<b>Step 1</b>	What puzzles you?
<b>Step 2</b>	What do you already know? What do you assume?
<b>Step 3</b>	<p>What cultural influences might help you understand your puzzlement?</p> <p><b>3.1.</b> How might your beliefs or values, or those of other educators, be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <p><b>3.2.</b> How might aspects of the school's culture(s) be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.2.1. How might competition be contributing?</li> <li>3.2.2. How might tracking or ability-grouping be contributing?</li> <li>3.2.3. How might instructional programs for multilingual learners be contributing?</li> </ul> <p><b>3.3.</b> How might cultural mismatches be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.3.1. How might mismatches between a student's or group's interaction patterns and those of the school be contributing?</li> <li>3.3.2. How might mismatches between a student's or group's home culture(s) and the school curriculum content be contributing?</li> <li>3.3.3. How might mismatches between a student's or group's preferred learning approaches and classroom processes be contributing?</li> </ul> <p><b>3.4.</b> How might students' experiences and meanings be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.4.1. How might influences on students from outside school be contributing?</li> <li>3.4.2. How might imbalances in power or economic opportunities, and peer group response to those imbalances, be contributing?</li> </ul> <p><b>3.5.</b> How might individual students' cultural "negotiations" be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.5.1. How might individual students' negotiations of home, peer, and school cultures be contributing?</li> <li>3.5.2. How might individual students' negotiations of their cultural identities be contributing?</li> </ul>
<b>Step 4</b>	What information can help you understand your puzzlement and potential direction?
<b>Step 5</b>	What actions for change can you take?
<b>Step 6</b>	How are your actions going? What effects are coming about?
<b>Step 7</b>	What did you learn? With whom can you share?

(Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2019). Teacher inquiry enables research at the hyperlocal level in ways that uplift the undeniable influence of context on teaching and learning (Caro-Bruce et al., 2007). Inquiry structures — which

follow a series of steps such as question, seek literature, plan actions, monitor actions, draw conclusions, and identify new questions — offer space for valuing teacher questioning and opening a door to engaging in inquiry that can

interrogate racist and classist policies and practices.

The cultural inquiry process (Jacob, 1995; Jacob et al., 1996) expands teacher inquiry by ensuring critically reflective space for acknowledging and

examining culture as central to teaching and learning. Within this is an essential exploration of one's own positionality and its influences on instructional decisions and adherence to school policies and expectations.

This enables teachers to engage in intentional and systematic investigation of the relationships among self, students, families, and school, and their equity implications — an important process because no sustainable change for equity can occur without teachers “learning, relearning, and unlearning” the ways their past experiences have shaped their frames of reference (Wink, 2010).

In the cultural inquiry process, teachers engage in a seven-part cycle in which they consider “puzzlements” that they identify in their schools and classrooms. The process focuses on understanding rather than seeking immediate, short-term fixes to problems or reacting in a routine way. The seven steps in the process (see p. 59) are each driven by one or more reflection questions. While the steps are sequential, the process is recursive as teachers gather information, reflect on their learning, and return to previous ideas and research as new insights occur.

## CULTURAL INQUIRY PROCESS

The following questions characterize each step of the cultural inquiry process. They can be used as an individual inquirer or as part of an inquiry collective.

### 1. What puzzles you?

In this step, participants consider the following: What questions keep you up at night? What questions or confusions have recently arisen for you related to your students, teaching, or school? Because culture is influential to all aspects of schooling, educators can start with any question from their practice.

### 2. What do you already know? What do you assume?

In this step, teachers begin to

explore their puzzlement and consider: What do you know? What do you assume? We all have assumptions about students, families, self, and school. Those assumptions must be identified and interrogated early and continually during the cultural inquiry process.

### 3. What cultural influences might help you understand your puzzlement?

Here, teachers select strand(s) of inquiry as potential avenues for exploring the puzzlement with a lens intentionally focused on culture. This is the beginning of the recognition that what puzzles us is deeply embedded both in how students and families engage with teaching and school and in our perceptions of that engagement. The table on p. 59 shows several subquestions that serve as a starting point for this part of the process. To avoid a tendency to locate problems in students or families, we strongly encourage all inquirers to begin with question 3.1.

### 4. What information can help you understand your puzzlement and potential direction?

This information-gathering stage is crucial. It reaffirms examination of assumptions and offers space for learning more before attempting short-term fixes. More specifically, it asks: What additional information can help you to explore your puzzlement through the lens you identified in step 3? Data sources might include reflective journaling, observations, interviews, and assessment data such as student work/writings.

### 5. What actions for change can you take?

After gathering and analyzing the preliminary data of step 4, educators consider specific actions they can take to address the puzzlement (related to instructional moves, curriculum, classroom culture, home/school connections, peer interactions, etc.). Actions should be directly related to

what was learned in step 4, which was influenced by the cultural questions selected in step 3.

### 6. How are your actions going? What effects are emerging from your actions?

In this step, educators enact the actions planned in step 5 and monitor the outcomes with data. One of the main questions to consider is: How do you know how your inquiry is going?

### 7. What did you learn? With whom can you share?

After engaging iteratively in the process, educators reflect on what they learned about themselves and their students, families, or schools. They consider: What were the outcomes for students? How will what you learned influence your future teaching? Sharing that learning is an important part of the process as well, so educators consider the question: How can your learning inform others?

## CULTURAL INQUIRY IN ACTION

In our work with practicing teachers pursuing their master's degrees in the Advanced Studies in Teaching and Learning program at George Mason University, we regularly use the cultural inquiry process. It helps teachers recognize that their practices are not apolitical or neutral — recognition that contributes to disrupting the perpetuation of systemic inequity.

Some examples of powerful outcomes from teachers with whom we have worked include: recognizing and addressing the effects of previously unexamined teacher language; disrupting elective tracking in middle school; interrupting deficit assumptions of student effort and care; expanding notions related to the significance of family trust; and reorienting expectations of participation to accommodate for how teachers' and students' identities affect their assumptions related to class participation. Here are two cases

of teachers' cultural inquiry process engagements.

### ***Middle school math***

A middle school teacher was puzzled by differential participation between her English learners and native English-speaking students in math class (step 1). To begin exploring this puzzlement, she surfaced what she already knew about her students, her teaching, and her assumptions. This included assumptions about participation, language development, and the nature of mathematics as universal (step 2).

Using guiding questions 3.1 and 3.4.1 (step 3), she examined her beliefs about the relationship between mathematics and language and the influences inside and outside of school that were potentially contributing to her puzzlement, such as the school culture and the supporting English programs (step 4).

She used previous knowledge and sought out new knowledge about second language acquisition, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 1995) to more meaningfully engage her English learner students in mathematics. She learned about the students' cultural and educational backgrounds by reaching out to their parents, interviewing former teachers, interviewing the students, and collecting samples of written work (steps 5 and 6).

The process challenged her assumptions regarding the relationship between mathematics, language, and culture, and she committed to sharing her findings that mathematics pedagogy is not culture-neutral, nor language-neutral, with her colleagues (step 7).

### ***Elementary special education***

An elementary special education teacher wondered about her colleagues' beliefs and resistance to inclusive practices for students with disabilities (step 1). After reflecting on situations when she experienced pushback, examining what she knew about her

students and school, and interrogating her own values and assumptions about inclusion (including recognizing her confusion as to how colleagues could still have negative attitudes about inclusion), she selected guiding cultural inquiry process question 3.1 and 3.3 (step 3).

After reviewing literature on inclusion, collecting data related to colleagues' apprehensions, and exploring students' preferences and perspectives on their educational placements (step 4), she learned that her general education colleagues' reticence stemmed from feeling unprepared. Their feelings of inadequacy led them to advocate for more restrictive educational environments for students with disabilities. This finding proved powerful by challenging her assumptions regarding why her colleagues were pushing back on inclusion.

As a result, she developed professional learning within her school to strengthen knowledge regarding disabilities, differentiation, and representation, and to create a greater sense of communication and collaboration between special and general education teachers (steps 5 and 6). She shared her findings with school administrators to encourage the continuation of such professional learning to disrupt the trend of exclusion of students with disabilities (step 7).

## **GUIDING TEACHERS THROUGH THE PROCESS**

When facilitating the cultural inquiry process, learning leaders should consider both the emotional nature of critical inquiry and the importance of creating trusted, accountable space. This deep work requires strong facilitation. Here are several important considerations to both engaging in and guiding teachers through the process.

**Create inquiry groups where members can dialogue regularly.** Success with the cultural inquiry process demands protected time to

debrief, reflect, question, and engage with uncertainty.

**Prioritize the recognition of assumptions and the related uncertainty.** The cultural inquiry process constructively embraces confusion. Rather than relying on certainty through approaches such as color blindness, dilemmas and associated assumptions are treated as important to learning and change. Consistently and regularly focus conversation and resources to enable examination.

**Emphasize self-examination.** Like any learning endeavor, participants must pay attention to the role of self in learning: *What do I think I know? Why do I think that? Why did I make that decision? What are my biases here? Why?* Questioning of self requires a confidence that uncertainty can bring about positive change.

**Be vigilant in noticing deficit perspectives.** The cultural inquiry process demands one's engagement in critical reflection. Without it, the learning gained from the process could act as mis-educative (Dewey, 1938) and promote, rather than reshape, deficit perspectives of students and families. The cultural questions of step 3 guard against this, but they are neither fail-safes nor exhaustive.

**Embrace intersectionality.** We must take care that we do not use the term *culture* as a way of ignoring or essentializing race. Engaging in the cultural inquiry process means applying a nuanced lens to culture and race and recognizing that we are all cultural beings made up of intersecting identities.

**Value multiple and varied types of data.** Data are not only numbers. Various sources and types of both quantitative and qualitative data are important to understanding puzzlements and monitoring actions.

## **A VITAL COMPONENT OF EQUITY**

Multicultural education (Nieto, 2018), culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014), culturally



responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2012) matter to the success of minoritized students. But they cannot be adopted and enacted without critical exploration of self, context, and systems of racism, classism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia that permeate our educational landscape.

The cultural inquiry process is one way to engage educators' learning in ways that prime them to notice the cultural influences on inequities, reflect on their existence and maintenance, and act in ways that can address the conditions of inequity inside their classrooms and beyond. It must be noted that, while powerful, any inquiry process cannot be the only means of systemic change. However, because of teachers' direct connection to students, teacher learning through cultural inquiry is a vital component of equity efforts in education.

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International collaboration powers teachers' STEM learning

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for students before joining the university and encourage students to enter the engineering field as they gain experience in seeking solutions to real-world problems and enhancing their quality of life.

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