

“We’ve Carried a *Lot*”:
Addressing Equity and Advocating for School Change
as a Collaborative Inquiry Team

April 2007

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association (Chicago, April 2007)
as part of a Division K Symposium,
“Inside Teacher Professional Community: Challenges and Accomplishments.”

It's early March 2002, and the seven teachers from the Sheltered English collaborative inquiry team are in Laurie's room, preparing for their presentation to the rest of the faculty – which begins in an hour. They teach at Belmont Elementary,¹ a school of 500 mostly Latino students in one of the poorest areas of this San Francisco Bay Area urban school district. All teachers at Belmont participate on collaborative inquiry teams, exploring topics generated by the teachers generally in conjunction with the school's reform focus. Each team is expected to share their work publicly with the staff at least once during the year. Diane takes the lead on structuring the agenda for the presentation. Nicky is on the floor with a large sheet of butcher paper transcribing as the group negotiates the agenda. They've decided that each teacher will talk about both their own learnings, and an aspect of what the team has learned collectively since September. The atmosphere is casual; there's much joking and story swapping. However, there's also an edge to their conversation, especially when the group talks about what implications their work might have for the school – and how they want to communicate this to their colleagues.

Although the emphasis of all collaborative inquiry sharing at Belmont is collegial and focused on 'what we're learning,' the work of the Sheltered English team addresses more explicit "political" issues about pedagogy at the school. Specifically, in the year and a half they have been working together as an inquiry team, these teachers have been finding that more "direct" forms of instruction in English Language Development and in the recently-mandated district literacy curriculum – which have not been the norm at this "whole language"-oriented school – may be more effective for their students. These teachers have also investigated a disturbing reality: in this Latino-majority school, the needs of African American and Southeast Asian students have been marginalized, and African American families seem to feel alienated from the school, which they perceive as "being for the bilingual kids."

This case study explores how inquiry practices can drive teacher learning and school change in service of equity. It tells the story of the Belmont Elementary Sheltered English team's collaborative inquiry work over two years, focusing on what they learned about instruction, how they addressed difficult equity challenges in the school as a whole, and how they attempted to make change. It also addresses the tensions and challenges that came up in the process of their inquiry work. On the one hand, the team was actually able to use their inquiry to effectively

¹ The school's name and teachers' names are pseudonyms.

change their practice and bring about wider school change. On the other hand, the time and energy and emotional resources it took to navigate the complexities of school change sometimes came at the expense of their inquiry.

Teacher Learning, Inquiry, and Urban School Change

Many schools are now pursuing organizational change that supports – and is driven by – teacher learning (Little 1993; Guskey and Huberman 1995; McLaughlin and Oberman 1996; Darling-Hammond and Sykes 1999). In this vision, teacher learning (through professional development and building professional community) drives school reform, while organizational change in turn is designed to support teachers' learning. Key to this approach is a "culture of inquiry" in which teachers, teams and the staff as a whole intentionally pursue critical questions of learning, teaching and school policy; share and discuss their work publicly; and construct meaning and knowledge which lead to evidence-based changes that address identified questions and problems – and which in turn generate *new* questions and challenges.

The literature on teacher inquiry has tended to be long on advocacy and short on empirical research. This is beginning to change, as researchers are now looking more closely at actual processes of teacher learning, change, and knowledge production – and the importance of the social and collaborative dimensions of teachers' work and learning. An important challenge in practice are the conflicts and micropolitics that often arise between teachers' interests and organizational interests (Ball 1987). Reform-minded visions of inquiry and school change tend to paint naïve versions of the "learning organization" in which teachers are producing knowledge that is readily taken up at the managerial levels of the school and translated into new policies and school practices. As Lieberman points out, the impact of teacher inquiry on wider school change depends significantly on the presence of certain organizational conditions, such as norms of collegiality and trust, time for teachers to meet, and teacher leadership (Lieberman 1995). Little research, however, accounts for the very real tensions faced by practitioners when they come to advocate for change based on knowledge produced through their own inquiry (for exceptions see Herr 1999, Stokes 2001). What really happens when the knowledge generated by a teacher or team is used to advocate for change within the school as a whole? And what happens when teacher inquiry findings point to patterns of inequity or bias in a school, when those patterns have not been publicly acknowledged or discussed? How and why do teachers – through

collaborative inquiry – begin to challenge assumptions, practices and policies in ways that might lead towards equity?

Organizing and supporting teacher learning at urban schools, in particular, has proved immensely challenging. The conditions of professional community in urban schools can be fragmented, fractious, and rife with cynicism about reform efforts – a “degraded professional culture” (Anyon 1997). The crucial features of relational trust and professional community have often been eroded (Bryk and Schneider 2002). As Charles Payne (1998) describes it, “the basic web of social relationships (in urban schools) is likely to be severely damaged.”

Thus a gap exists between reformers’ visions of teacher learning and school change and the realities of most urban schools. We have relatively few examples of urban schools with an evolved, stable inquiry practice, especially one in which *all* teachers are involved, not just reform-minded volunteers. Most of the examples in the literature are of atypical schools – that is, schools that are new, small, and have special autonomies. Belmont represents a more typical urban school that has nevertheless managed to build a “mature” culture of inquiry, and has sustained its inquiry practice despite increasing external mandates and accountability. Thus Belmont offers an important example of a school that has created an inquiry-driven professional learning community; and the Sheltered English inquiry team provides a case of a teacher community whose inquiry both reflects and winds up challenging how change happens at the school more broadly.

Belmont Elementary

Belmont Elementary is located in a predominantly Latino and African American neighborhood. Its 500 students in grades K-5 reflect a shift in the community’s demographics from predominantly African American to predominantly Latino: Roughly 80% are Latino, 15% African American, and 5% Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander. As the demographics of the community and the school shifted, what had once been a majority African American school became a majority Latino school. The school is one of the few in this urban area – and in the state – that still has a large bilingual Spanish-English education program. Roughly 75% of its students are enrolled in this program, while the remaining 25% – African American, Southeast Asian, and Latino – are enrolled in the Sheltered English program. The school’s principal, Norma Quinones, and teachers leading Belmont’s reform were strong Bilingual advocates; they

had emphasized the development of the school's Bilingual program over the course of eight years.

In a district where few schools have been able to mobilize coherent reform efforts from within, Belmont has sustained and deepened its reform work for almost a decade. The school has emphasized "progressive" pedagogy. For example, students are generally grouped in multi-age classrooms, and teachers implement whole-language approaches to reading, process writing, and literature groups (though not all teachers fully endorse this philosophy). In recent years, Belmont has developed more targeted literacy strategies such as reciprocal teaching, has implemented interventions such as Reading Recovery, and has piloted and adopted school-wide authentic reading assessments. Yet while literacy levels at the school have been improving, many students still perform below grade level and fare poorly on statewide standardized tests.

A strong collaborative culture has developed at the school. Teachers meet regularly in grade-level teams, collaborative inquiry teams, and teacher-led governance committees. Collaborative inquiry has become the backbone of professional development at Belmont. It has played a central role in introducing new curriculum and teaching strategies, building an assessment system, and raising larger issues about student learning and program articulation.

Each year, all teachers at Belmont participate in collaborative inquiry. They are often joined by other certificated staff. Collaborative inquiry topics shift from year to year, allowing teachers to pursue collaborative learning about issues that are relevant at that time – both to themselves and to the school as a whole.

In September, inquiry teams form around common areas of interest, and over the course of the year, these teams meet monthly for two hours to work together on individual and collective inquiry topics. Teachers generate individual questions to start their inquiry process. At their first meeting, teachers share their interests and questions around the topic, and the team decides how it will use its time to support both individual and common work. In some cases, a team engages in jointly piloting and researching a strategy or curriculum, such as reciprocal teaching. In other cases, a team identifies a wider arena of interest, such as non-fiction writing, and the individual teachers pursue their own questions or approaches related to it, bringing their observations, data, and questions back to the team for discussion.

The cycle of inquiry typical of Belmont inquiry groups involves teachers taking conscious action in the classroom, collecting data on those actions, reflecting on the results and

making meaning through dialogue with colleagues – which, in turn, generates learning and new or refined action. In some inquiry processes, teachers begin by gathering data around a question (for example, “Which students are not transitioning into English?”), then reflecting on that data and using it to drive subsequent action in their classrooms. Collaborative inquiry teams at Belmont do not generally employ formal structures, such as protocols, to discuss student or teacher work in their meetings, though some have begun to do this. Meetings typically shift between teachers taking turns sharing their work, and collectively discussing common issues.

The case of Belmont presents important equity issues. Most research on equity focuses on schools in which there is an “achievement gap,” generally between White (and oftentimes Asian) students, on the one hand, and African American and Latino students on the other hand – or between poor and middle-class students. At Belmont, however, little “gap” exists: students are overwhelmingly from poor families, all are of color, and achievement is low across all groups. This presents a very different kind of equity challenge. The more relevant gap is between schools like Belmont and the “hills” schools in the same district which have much higher numbers of middle class and white students.

From the perspective of teachers’ learning, Belmont provides an unusual example of an urban school with a steady history of reform and inquiry practice over the last decade. Teacher inquiry began at the school in 1992, and has evolved through various forms. By 2000, the practice of inquiry was relatively stable, “mature,” and well institutionalized at the school. This is unusual. Teacher inquiry is often a voluntary practice, practiced by a smaller group of reform-oriented teachers, and often taking place off-site through the support of external reform networks. Belmont provides an example of a school where *all* teachers are engaged in inquiry practice that is the foundation of both professional development and school change.

The Sheltered English Inquiry Team

The teachers on the Sheltered English team at Belmont were excited to begin work together on collaborative inquiry in September of 2000. “It was exhilarating. It was new. It was the first time we had met together as Sheltered teachers.” They had much to talk about. These teachers had often felt that the needs of Sheltered students took a backseat to the needs of the students in the Bilingual program. As more Latino students enrolled and as the Bilingual

program expanded, the Sheltered program shrunk, and along with it the number of African American students in the school.

The seven Sheltered teachers spanned all the grade levels at Belmont. In addition, they came from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds and had a wide range of years teaching. They also came from differing pedagogical backgrounds. Doris, who was African American and the veteran of the team, had been a long-time advocate of more “traditional” skill-based direct instruction. The newer teachers, most of who were White and had graduated from teacher education programs that emphasized more “progressive” and student-centered pedagogies, were more aligned with Belmont’s whole language approach to literacy. As it turned out, this range of experience and perspectives became a critical resource for the group.

Belmont Sheltered English collaborative inquiry team

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Yrs teaching²</i>
Diane Kawahatsu	K	Asian	10 yrs
Dawn Taylor	K-1	African American	2 yrs
Laurie Matson	1-2	White	5 yrs
Ben Mathieson	1-2	White	3 yrs
Ann Cole	3-4	White	2 yrs
Nicky Wilcox	3-4	White	3 yrs
Doris Robinson	4-5	African American	32 yrs

This case study follows their first two years of work together, highlighting their considerable accomplishments as a learning community, as well as key challenges they encountered. The chapter is organized around three central tensions in their inquiry. I call these the “double-edges” of their work – i.e. features of their practice that were strengths yet also brought with them certain challenges.

² *In Year 1 of their work, 2000-2001.*

I. Focusing on Instruction vs. the “Bigger Conversations”

The first of these double edges was the Sheltered team’s simultaneous focus on instruction and “bigger conversations” about the Sheltered program and the school as a whole.

The team’s inquiry began with a clear instructional focus, driven by their concern about student achievement in the Sheltered program and their lack of a common instructional approach. In one strand of their initial work, they inquired into the achievement of the Sheltered students at Belmont. In the other strand, they inquired into the language needs of the minority cultural groups in the school – African American and Southeast Asian – and what instructional approaches could better address these needs.

In the first strand, the Sheltered Team explored their concern that students whom they thought were doing ‘well’ (i.e. were performing at grade level or above on the school’s formative reading assessments) scored well below grade level on the state standards-based assessment. This gap troubled them greatly, because they saw it as an equity issue. Prior to No Child Left Behind, the school had traditionally discounted the state tests because they were in English and were perceived as culturally biased. After assembling student achievement data and discussing both patterns and individual students, they developed various theories about why this was so – e.g. test anxiety, low academic self esteem when faced with challenges, too few problem solving strategies. They also suspected that the formative reading assessments were giving an inflated perception of students’ skills and not giving teachers all the information they needed to design effective instruction. As part of her own inquiry, one teacher, Nicky, decided to pilot a new upper-grade reading assessment that was more rigorous and aligned with state standards and, similar to the state test, had more emphasis on expository text. Nicky’s inquiry eventually led to schoolwide changes in Belmont’s upper-grade English reading assessment.

In the second strand of the team’s work, they organized themselves to learn more about the language needs and linguistic backgrounds of their African American and Southeast Asian students. Some of the questions that guided this inquiry were:

- How can I best support my AA and SEA students and their language needs?
- How do my students acquire language? How can I help them understand that their home language is good?

To address these questions, they initially developed a reading-group approach, and decided they needed to meet beyond the monthly collaborative inquiry time for this work. Each teacher brought in relevant articles, which they shared, read, and discussed. Realizing they needed more formal professional development, they helped the school bring two language experts to speak at staff-wide professional development meetings. Through this they learned the importance of understanding linguistic and cultural features of students' home languages and honoring their home languages by incorporating them into the curriculum, even if the official language of instruction was English.

In this first year, their meetings were well-organized and led by several teachers – Diane, Nicky and Laurie – whose experience participating in two different external inquiry networks allowed them to help plan the team's work. The meetings had clear agendas and goals. This, combined with strong teacher leadership, helped give the team much energy and motivation to pursue further learning and action.

At the team's November meeting, however, their process took a difficult turn. Towards the end of the meeting, Laurie, who was the group's timekeeper that day, was trying to bring closure. Diane asked if there was any general issues the team should be talking about right now. Doris, the school's only veteran African American teacher and a frequent critic of the school's leadership, launched into a story about an African American family that had been denied enrollment at the school and was told there wasn't enough space. She was clearly frustrated, and felt that this incident was indicative of a larger problem at Belmont – the unfair treatment of African American children and families. She went on to say that the African American families she knew felt that Belmont had become a "Bilingual school," and not well suited for African American children. Thus these parents felt less inclined to participate in the school.

This was quite a different issue than what the group had been discussing. It was not about the more bounded topics of instruction, achievement or language. Rather, it had to do with cultural politics and a painful history of staff conflict related to changes in the school. As it was towards the end of the meeting, and this was clearly a charged issue, the team ended the meeting unsure of how to proceed.

The incident produced a crisis of sorts: What direction was their inquiry going to go? Would it include these parent/family/community issues? What was the connection of these to their original inquiry questions around language and achievement? There was much tension in

the group. Doris was clearly upset. Some of the younger White teachers felt uncomfortable with the way Doris had raised the issue, and weren't sure the team could address this bigger problem. They agreed to spend their next meeting trying to resolve this dilemma. After much discussion, the team wound up deciding to expand their inquiry to include both the instructional focus and the broader question of whether Belmont was not serving its African American students and families equitably. Having addressed this internal tension in the group, the team re-engaged their inquiry with new purpose and commonality. As Nicky reflected later,

I think what ended up happening that time was that really shifted from "These are the things we're doing" to "This is what's happening *now*, is what this group is about. And we're going to talk in a way that we have never talked before at this school as a group about what's happening with our kids and families, and in a way that can feel really uncomfortable."

Changes in instruction and pedagogical beliefs

The central focus of the team's inquiry work in the Spring of 2001 continued to be instruction, in particular how to meet the English language development needs of the various cultural and linguistic groups in their classes. They were concerned that, unlike the Bilingual program, the Sheltered program had no common framework or curricular approach. Now, after researching several programs and bringing speakers to the school, the team was excited about a program from Los Angeles called the Academic English Mastery Program (AEMP) run by Noma Lemoine. The team requested funds to attend an AEMP conference together in March.

AEMP's approach focused first on educating teachers about the linguistic structure of African American Language (AAL), the historical reasons for this structure, and the importance of seeing AAL as a "home language" for African American students. By valuing students' home language, while then giving explicit instruction around "academic English," AEMP builds students' capacity to code-switch between these two languages. This philosophy extends to other linguistic groups who were represented in the Sheltered program as well – e.g. Vietnamese, Mien, students who use Chicano English, etc. As Nicky (who had first introduced AEMP to the school) put it, "Sometimes at Belmont, we feel we have to reinvent the wheel all the time. Around this issue, I had the feeling that we needed to take advantage of some of the existing knowledge out there."

Over the course of the year and through their second year of work together, the team implemented key AEMP strategies in their classrooms, which they had individually selected. For instance, in her K-1 classroom, Dawn, an African American second-year teacher, worked on creating ways for students to see their own cultures and languages represented in the curriculum (for example, African American and Latina astronauts), and in their classroom discourse: every day began with greetings from each of the seven languages spoken in the homes of children in the class. In their 3rd and 4th grade classrooms, Nicky and Ann, both White teachers, collaborated to create approaches to develop students' skills in contrastive analysis and link these code-switching literacy practices with social studies curricula about African American history and the historical development of African American language as shaped by slavery.

At the team's monthly inquiry group meetings, the teachers shared their progress in these individual inquiries, sometimes presenting curriculum, other times sharing examples of student work. They would have "AEMP check-ins" where teachers took turns sharing what they had been trying and implementing, how it was going, and what they planned to do next. They asked questions of each other, shared advice, and picked up strategies in the process. They also continued their learning about AEMP by collectively reading and discussing materials and deciding what to implement. This work enabled them to begin constructing a theoretical basis for the Sheltered English program, common language, and a framework for culturally relevant instruction. In the spring of their second year, they began more explicit discussions about how to align their AEMP instruction across grade levels. Since the individual inquiries were tied by common questions and concerns, the teachers' dialogue produced shared knowledge and strengthened their sense of professional community.

Most importantly, the teachers on the team began seeing different student results. Students were becoming more meta-cognitive in terms of their own language use, and showed improved scores on reading assessments. The team was especially gratified to see their students more freely sharing their own cultural backgrounds with one another, thus capitalizing on the diversity in the Sheltered classrooms.

Over this time, the team reported that their instruction shifted in three key ways:

1. *Honoring home language while teaching Academic English* (code-switching or "contrastive analysis"). This AEMP practice enabled the white teachers to have a way to work explicitly with African American English. For example, instead of "correcting" students when

they used the “wrong” words or phrasing, the teachers focused on helping students to recognize the differences between academic English and their home languages, to translate between them, and to decide which language to use in which situations. Dawn reflected, “I’d struggled for years with a way to talk about standard English in a respectful way. If you’re really going to talk about it, it’s political. I didn’t fully know how to do that – as a White teacher, as a newer teacher, and with third and fourth graders. Now I feel like my instruction is better because I have a way to talk about it, and they know what I’m talking about.” This work also enabled the two African American teachers to think differently about their own language use, including Academic English. As Nicky shared during the team’s inquiry presentation, “It gave me a language to define what I knew personally. Not only did I hear my students using particular speech patterns and words, I started to understand why. And I started to understand why I have the speech pattern I have. So that was just incredibly freeing.” Doris shared, “There’s been quite a few changes in my classroom. I used to over check my students’ writing – it was bleeding! I’ve put down the red pen and read more for content.”

2. *Explicit teaching of the rules of Academic English.* Through this inquiry, the Sheltered English team came to see the importance of more explicit instruction in language. They came to view the teaching of grammar as an equity issue for their students. This shift was difficult in a school that had such a strong whole-language orientation. As Dawn reflected,

I’m learning to teach explicitly. I didn’t realize how key that was. You know, I was so much about creating an environment where kids could discover the learning on their own. I don’t think there is anything more magical than discovery but they also need to know what a verb is, what it does, and then what a sentence is and what it does, and how to write, that letters have sounds and you put them together to makes words, and they’ve got to know that in order to function later on. So, it’s a shift about learning what has to be explicit and learning what doesn’t.

Ben, one of the newer White teachers on the team and a self-described “whole language baby” was struck by the irony of their team’s inquiry trajectory:

It's just so funny that such a radical and sort of boundary-breaking inquiry would lead us to phonics and academic English. I never cease to amaze myself with my proclamations of how great it all is... It's had a huge impact on my practice. Well, hello – I'm going to

teach phonics for the rest of my life in the classroom. I love pronoun and verb-noun agreement, all of that stuff!

This work also helped them see the potential value in the district's newly mandated literacy curriculum, which had a heavy grammar and phonics emphasis.

3. *Developing culturally relevant curriculum.* The teachers in the group were excited to learn ways to incorporate more explicit cultural themes into their instruction. They developed more confidence in weaving culturally relevant material – e.g. African American and Latino astronauts – into their curriculum. And they found ways to honor students' home languages as part of classroom rituals. As Doris reflected, "It's made me become more aware of my own culture. I even learn new stuff myself about myself. So, it just makes you aware and makes you want to know about different people."

As their practices shifted, so did the Sheltered teachers' notions of themselves as practitioners. Their AEMP inquiry helped to break down the pedagogical divide that had existed at Belmont and allowed these teachers to take on new identities within the school. What it meant to teach Belmont's children well was reconstructed to include more "traditional" notions of direct instruction and Academic Language. For instance, the newer teachers who had graduated from teacher education programs emphasizing student-centered pedagogy, could now practice – and advocate for – approaches that were not part of the school's progressive reform focus. And Doris, who had long been an advocate of phonics-based literacy instruction – which put her in a minority in the school – was able to incorporate a more constructive role for the home language of her African American students, and not simply focus on correcting "wrong" grammar with her red pen. These teachers' sense of "pedagogical identity" expanded and became more integrated.

Their programmatic "equity" focus

At the same time that the Sheltered teachers were discussing their instruction, they also addressed the wider inequities they saw affecting the Sheltered program and African American students in the school. They wondered if these perceptions were grounded in reality. And they questioned their role regarding potential actions. Over the course of their two years working together, this dimension of their inquiry led them to:

- document the dwindling enrollment of African American students at Belmont;
- organize a campaign to recruit African American families into Kindergarten;

- interview African American parents/guardians about their experience of the school;
- advocate for the hiring of African American Parent Outreach staff;
- organize Black History Month;
- build stronger connections to the classified staff, a number of which were African American.

Individually, the Sheltered English teachers had felt isolated, disempowered and less effective. Together, the Sheltered Inquiry Team was able to pose problems of knowledge and practice, and to name — and begin to address — difficult and historical inequities at the school.

For the most part, the team navigated these two dimensions of their inquiry effectively. In their monthly inquiry meetings, they moved back and forth fluidly between the issues of instruction and the wider equity challenges named above. As Ben reflected,

I don't think that we knew we wanted to investigate parent participation. But we came together under auspices of serving the language and literacy needs of a very specific population in the school. And it really is under that umbrella that a whole lot of much bigger conversations have taken place. And the amazing thing is that along the way we have also managed to find a literacy program and start implementing it and still have those conversations go on without it stopping us from actually pursuing some of the original goals of language arts implementation.

Challenges in negotiating their expanded focus

Despite the advantages of considering individual practice and schoolwide inequities in light of each other, this dual focus also had its challenges. It made it harder to maintain a coherent and consistent focus on any one dimension of their inquiry. The work became difficult to plan for. The team would often start a meeting with an agenda focused on their AEMP work, but a “real-time” urgent concern would arise and they would wind up discussing it, until someone brought them back to their original agenda.

Unlike with their instructional work, the broader inquiry about the school presented them with less bounded, more contested and more uncertain territory. Ben characterized this challenge,

I think collaborative inquiry has usually been about bringing in things from outside, and that's a lot of what we were last year. Bringing in AEMP was a big piece of it last year

and that fit that mold of traditional collaborative inquiry. But this year we've been doing a lot more internal inquiry, inquiry into the school. That's harder to do because you don't have a text, necessarily. You're really creating it yourself.

And while their AEMP work generated significant learning and change, the team did not get as far with this work as they had hoped. There simply wasn't time, and they found it difficult to consistently sustain their focus amidst a multi-pronged inquiry.

II. Teacher Learning Driving School Change – At What Expense?

A second “double-edge” in the Sheltered team’s inquiry work had to do with how they used learning in service of school change. On the one hand, they translated their learnings into recommendations and advocacy for school change, navigating difficult school politics and history in the process. On the other hand, these ‘outward-facing’ school change efforts at times came at the expense of their own ‘inward-facing’ inquiry work.

Inquiry presentations

One way they influenced school change was through their inquiry presentations to the rest of the staff. Inquiry sharing had been part of Belmont’s inquiry culture for some years. Some of the staff, though, had come to feel these presentations were more of a performance and didn’t represent the more authentic work their teams had done. Now, however, Sheltered team saw their inquiry sharing as a way to raise some critical issues to the rest of the staff and report on their substantial learning.

Planning for “going public” with their inquiry helped to sharpen their thinking about their work and its potential implications. It forced conversations in their inquiry meetings prior to the May sharing day about what they really had learned, what of this was most important to share, and what implications they felt it had. They wound up meeting for an extra session to clarify their presentation, prepare their materials, and rehearse.

The team’s presentation took 45 minutes. Each member had a role. Laurie shared the data on student achievement patterns, and Nicky talked about the new assessment she had piloted. Doris, Dawn, Ben and shared their AEMP work and changes in their practice and results they were seeing with students.

In perhaps their most risky move, the team raised publicly the equity challenges they had identified. In their planning for this presentation, a big question had been how to share their equity discussions about African American students and parents. Some on the team felt the rest of the school was not ready for this. Others felt it was important, but weren't sure how to do it in a way that wasn't going to be too controversial. Diane landed upon an approach that the team felt was appropriate – and she was subsequently nominated to present this part. She began her part of the presentation by explaining, “One of things that came up through the year were a set of concerns that we tried to loosely group under what we called “Equity Issues.” She shared these on a piece of chart paper and talked about each:

1. Low parent participation in school events from the Sheltered program (African American and Southeast Asian parents);
2. Perceptions of discrimination, especially from some African American parents around unfair treatment in enrollment and students being unfairly targeted in discipline. This results in alienation and a sense amongst some parents that the school was a ‘bilingual school’ and not oriented towards their children.
3. An imbalance in program development: whereas the foundation for the Bilingual program has become quite strong (developing primary language and affirming the culture), the theoretical base for the Sheltered program has not been developed.

Then, instead of presenting the potential implications, Diane had the team share a set of inquiry questions they'd generated that would help guide their – and hopefully the school's – future work. These questions did not cast blame; rather they signaled their intent to learn more about these concerns. The questions included:

- How are parents and students experiencing Belmont? Why do at least some of our African-American parents feel that the school treats them unfairly?
- What are the specific incidents that gave rise to these perceptions? Are there patterns within these specific incidents that give rise to these perceptions?
- What's behind the low participation/sense of distance amongst some African-American families? Do the Southeast Asian, Tongan and Pacific Islander communities feel the perception of exclusion?

These were sensitive issues to raise, given the historical politics of race, language and culture in the school and the community. And in a school that had developed a strong reform identity, had struggled against many odds to maintain its Bilingual program, and had over the years become an unusual professional community in this urban district, it was risky to put forward such a public internal critique. However, their inquiry stance (posing questions, sharing data, focusing on learning) and the school's inquiry culture allowed these issues to be raised in a blameless kind of way that served to open up dialogue, rather than shut it down. Issues that had polarized staff in the past could now be addressed constructively, since they had first been raised in the context of an inquiry group.

This presentation had an immediate impact on the school. The team recommended these issues get taken up at the Staff Retreat in May. The Management Team planned an "equity discussion" on the agenda, where teachers brainstormed equity challenges and ways they could go about addressing them in the future.

The Sheltered team's inquiry work also inspired other teachers at the school. After hearing this end-of-year presentation, one Bilingual teacher decided to take her inquiry to the next level by explicitly naming the issue of low achieving Bilingual students more directly as an inequity in the school, and exploring the more school-wide dimensions of her ELD question. "I saw their presentation, and I remember thinking, 'OK, next year I'm really going to do it. I'm going to address the issue of the low and stuck kids in the bilingual program – and how our approach to ELD was perpetuating that.'" Her inquiry work eventually led to the detracking of ELD at Belmont.

That next year, Belmont shifted its inquiry structure to include an optional mid-year sharing along with the traditional end-of-year sharing. The rationale was to enable inquiry teams to raise issues that had implications for decision-making about the budget, program, etc. for the next school year, since those decisions were often made in the spring before the end of year inquiry sharing. The mid-year sharing was also meant to be a way for inquiry teams to hear about each other's work before the cycle had ended and see where possible connections between teams might be. The Sheltered team, along with several other teams, opted to use this forum. Once again the team used meeting time to coalesce their learning, discuss potential implications for the school and plan their presentation. This time, they were even more specific and targeted in their recommendations.

Thus, the Sheltered team effectively used inquiry to advocate for change beyond their classrooms. The opportunity to make recommendations from their work had a positive and galvanizing effect on the team's inquiry process. Knowing there would be an audience and a way for their learning to inform decision-making motivated the team. Being able to *act* on the concerns they had identified gave the team a sense of efficacy in what could have been a situation that led to hopelessness or cynicism.

Challenges that came with the team's political work

Despite leading to individual and schoolwide changes, this political dimension of their inquiry work had a cost. The discussions about what and how to share their questions and findings took significant time from the team's own inquiry process. This tension was manifest in their meetings: some teachers wanted to be sure to take the opportunities they had to effect school change, while other teachers wanted to focus more on building their collective instructional approach.

A closer look at one of their meetings reveals this tension. In April of their second year of work, the team gathered for their monthly meeting. They settled down and started to negotiate their agenda for the day. On this day, Nicky had come with an idea for the agenda that the team could pick up their work on the AEMP curriculum. She had made copies of units from the AEMP curriculum, and introduced them:

I thought we could go through these model instructional units – look through them and maybe do some kind of jigsaw around them. The other piece was revisiting the continuum with benchmarks that we had generated after the LA conference – looking at that and seeing if we can get some more specifics now that we have some of this content under our belts that we've been trying out this year. To me it seems like we would have a more informed conversation about the continuum if we digested some of this curriculum and instructional units.

Laurie then added an agenda item, which was to go through the “Collaborative Inquiry Implications Form” that had been created that year by the Management Team.

And the other thing we *really* need to do is this school implications – because the Budget Committee is meeting tomorrow and this is partly influencing what is going on there. I think it's stuff we have already talked about, where we kind of put it off and basically it is

relevant implications of the whole school, group, or individual; program implications, time implications, human support, and financial support. Things that we need to continue our work, or that our work this year has informed us that we need.

Instead of the normal two hours, they only had one hour for this meeting. For the next forty minutes, the team wound up discussing the implications their work might have for the school and for next year's budget. The discussion was lively, and all participated. They wrestled with how far they could go in suggesting what the other teachers in the school (i.e. the Bilingual teachers) should implement. It was an important conversation, one they might not have had did the school's leadership not explicitly ask for their implications. However, with just twenty minutes left in the meeting, Nicky brought them back to the meeting's original focus – their AEMP instruction. With little time left, all they could do was read the units and agree on a later time to discuss them and begin constructing a cross-grade continuum of benchmarks and practices.

Despite their stated intentions, the team was drawn by the pull of the political work. This contributed to some real dilemmas at the end of their second year. Several teachers were going to leave the team, and they had not yet developed the cross-grade continuum of benchmarks and practices they had hoped to. Nicky expressed her anxiety about their status in an interview at that time.

So, yeah, do I worry both in terms of teacher continuity, that we're at a place with AEMP where we're just sort of getting proficient with it. And if we have three teachers who are no longer going to be either in the classroom or at the school really jeopardizes the possibility of full implementation. And that coupled with shifts in [Sheltered program] enrollment, I feel really uncertain and I feel very discouraged.

Thus the effectiveness of their school change work came, to some degree, at the expense of their team's work and learning.

III. Equity Work As Empowering – And Exhausting

The third tension or “double-edge” in the Sheltered team's work had to do with the nature of the equity challenges they were addressing. On the one hand, the team grappled with deep and

difficult equity issues – both in their practice and in the school – in ways that transformed their practice and staff dialogue about these issues. This brought a tremendous sense of accomplishment and empowerment to the teachers on the team. On the other hand, these challenges were complex and fraught with history, emotions and politics. Sustaining this inquiry was stressful. By the spring of their second year together, a number of the teachers on the team were exhausted, at times despairing.

The power of doing collaborative equity work

The Sheltered team's inquiry started with the intent to address the low achievement of students in the Sheltered program relative to the rest of the school, and to better address these students' various linguistic needs. Exploring this territory was empowering, even exhilarating for them, especially during their first year together.

They did not expect to encounter equity issues within their own team. By negotiating these, however, they developed greater solidarity about the difficulties they wanted to address in the rest of the school. In the course of their work together, the team members were able to change their conceptions of each other – and become allies in different ways. This enabled them to collaborate and learn and advocate together more authentically and more effectively. For instance, an unspoken tension in the group had been some of the White teachers' discomfort with Doris's communicative approach and constant critique of the school. They experienced her as a naysayer and cynic. Participating with her on the inquiry team wound up altering some teachers' perceptions of her. As Nicky reflected,

[I saw] that Doris is actually an expert in terms of somebody that people [i.e. African American parents] feel incredibly comfortable and safe with, and they will tell her things that they would *never* say to me or to most of the rest of us. And so I think there were a couple of shifts that happened, both in the way that I perceived the functioning of the group and in the way that I looked and listened to Doris as an incredible resource and a window into things that I did not have access to... It was uncomfortable. But I think that the end result of that was a shift in what was game to talk about, and we felt Doris buy in. And for me, the way that I perceived her as a contributor to the group.

The relationships and trust that developed on the team surprised Doris too. She had never been a fan of collaborative inquiry at Belmont, and she had not been close with most of the other Sheltered teachers.

Before [the Sheltered inquiry team started] I didn't see them and talk to them, because we were on different teams. And we would just see each other and say 'hi' and 'bye'. And then I really got to know them, and they are quite different from what you thought. All of us are striving for the exact same thing. I think they are very, very sincere in what they're doing. I think they want to change things. It's different.

Challenges of addressing equity explicitly

The challenges of their equity focus took their toll on the Sheltered team. So many dimensions of their work went beyond the technical aspects of instruction. Whether it was discussing the heartbreaking circumstances of a particular student, or taking risks in their classroom practice relative to race, culture and language, or naming inequities in the school and trying to address them publicly, the team continuously wrestled with difficult and emotional issues. Through their inquiry work together, their eyes were opened to realities that they would never be able to ignore again. During the last meeting of their second year as they were planning for future work, Diane stepped back and reflected:

I think the team could easily burn out. I think we've carried a *lot*, and we're not always that conscious of what we try to carry and try to deal with – and how we process it. So, I feel like it would actually be very helpful for everybody to just think about how have we functioned, how have we learned, what have we tried to deal with.

Everyone's heads nodded as she said this. This kind of meta-reflection on their process might have helped mitigate the exhaustion they felt. Unfortunately, her comment came at the end of the meeting, and the team was not able to make time to do what she suggested. The team had developed such a sense of urgency – about their instruction, the Sheltered program, and the school as a whole – and was attempting to act on so many fronts, that even though they found it energizing, it had become difficult to sustain their inquiry. While their inquiry energized them, it also pushed them to the brink.

Conclusion

The case of the Sheltered English team's work shows how an inquiry-based school-wide teacher community can provide fertile ground for bold work and learning in its sub-communities. It also shows how a sub-community within a school can, in turn, alter the broader professional community. The inquiry culture that had developed at Belmont was deepened by the work the Sheltered team did – both in the scope of their focus and in the way they named and addressed equity challenges in the school explicitly. As Ben reflected,

Our collaborative inquiry is really different than most people's. I feel like, traditionally at the school it has been very specific, subjects like using biography in guided reading and very specific instructional things. I feel like collaborative inquiry for us has been much bigger. It has been getting into a lot of the sort of meat of social equity issues at the school. And, it's exciting! And I feel that collaborative inquiry is totally the best forum for that. It is a great vehicle for that, but I know it hasn't been used much for that. So I'd say we're using it in a new way.

As the case of Belmont illustrates, inquiry can also provide a constructive way into issues that have traditionally divided faculties and constrained professional community. However, this case also suggests that because equity challenges raise strong emotions for teachers, it is important to consider the kinds of emotional support needed to sustain this work over time.

If teachers' learning is going to affect school change, teachers must be supported by structures and processes and people that enable them to bridge the learning realm of their team and the organizational change realm of the school. Public forums for teachers to share their learning and influence school change can stimulate that learning. Formally linking inquiry learning to schoolwide decision-making enables that learning to influence the organization more dependably. This case demonstrates both the opportunities and the challenges such links can create for the learning process.

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