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Inquiry as an Essential Practice for Equity-Centered Leaders and Teachers

Introduction

Inquiry is a process that supports not only student learning but also the professional learning of educational leaders pursuing equity in schools. Inquiry is an approach to continuous improvement that operates on a cycle beginning with identifying a question to investigate, collecting data and evidence to respond to that question, analyzing and making meaning of that information, and then communicating that new knowledge to relevant partners. When rooted in equity, inquiry can support educational leaders in improving pedagogical practices that help students—especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved—thrive.

High-quality equitable instruction and professional learning can harness inquiry by beginning with foundational questions, such as:

1. What is the exact problem I am trying to solve?
2. What change might I introduce to solve it? Why?
3. How will I know that change is an improvement?¹

These questions allow professional learning communities to contextualize local needs, consider evidence-based interventions or offerings to address local needs, identify

data and evidence that will speak to whether or not those needs are being met, and provide space for reflection and revision of professional learning offerings so they pursue goals of equity more effectively. Equity-oriented professional learning designed to include the tenets of inquiry ensures rigorous progress toward better meeting the needs of educators serving our most vulnerable students.

In this brief we:

- ▶ offer insight into inquiry as a way to support high quality equitable instruction and professional learning
- ▶ share the work of Inquiry Now—an exemplar of how professional learning can develop capacity in inquiry-based instructional leadership
- ▶ elaborate the possibilities of inquiry as a path toward educational equity for leaders, researchers, and policymakers

Inquiry-Based Learning and Leadership

In John Dewey's estimation, inquiry is a process that produces knowledge which is logically sound.² Through an inquiry cycle of questioning, investigating, and analyzing relevant evidence, knowledge is expanded and refined. Research indicates that inquiry-based learning has successfully been implemented in classrooms to address opportunity gaps and inequities while also improving learning outcomes and empowering learners.³ Similarly, inquiry-based professional learning can be used by professional learning providers to support equity-oriented leaders who are committed to serving learners often marginalized in public schools.

Inquiry-based learning has proven to be an effective method of instruction that encourages authentic and meaningful learning through thought-provoking learning opportunities connected to real-world

issues.⁴ Three common approaches to inquiry-based learning are:

1. Project-based learning: Complete tasks that culminate in applicable products, events, or presentations.
2. Problem-based learning: Collaboratively investigate meaningful problems and strategize potential solutions.
3. Learning by design: Become experts on a topic by creating, assessing, and redesigning projects.

All three aim to develop critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. Inquiry-based learning can also incorporate discipline-specific inquiry models, such as the scientific method or the process of historical investigation.⁵

While there are some variations, there are typically five stages, as shown in Figure 1, to the general inquiry cycle:

1. Orientation: Stimulate curiosity about a topic and address a learning challenge through a problem statement.
2. Conceptualization: Generate questions and hypotheses.
3. Investigation: Explore by collecting data, experimenting, and interpreting data.
4. Conclusion: Draw conclusions and generate/refine theories.
5. Discussion: Communicate findings and reflect on the inquiry process.⁶

For inquiry to be effective in professional learning, leaders must include the integration of continuous improvement of teaching, learning, and leading practices through collaboration and the use of data-driven evidence.⁷ Collaboration is strengthened when traditional hierarchical leadership models are abandoned in favor of communal approaches that include multiple perspectives and critique existing leading and learning practices.⁸ Professional learning leaders can foster

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Figure 1

Typical Stages of the General Inquiry Cycle



Stages from Pedaste et al. (2015).

communities of inquiry—where leadership can take more organic forms of organizing and facilitating by other members—by empowering others to identify and address equity issues and by fostering an environment that enables critiques of both teaching and leadership practices.⁹

The community of professional learners engaging in inquiry will need to actively gather and critically examine a variety of evidence ranging from system-level to classroom-level to individual-level data.¹⁰ Being prepared to integrate various types of evidence to interrogate equity issues allows the community to be better prepared to adapt to local and changing contexts and create practices that serve all students. Furthermore, for inquiry to address issues of educational equity, leaders must ensure that learners are developing an equity consciousness and understand what equity leadership looks like in action.¹¹ Much like inquiry-based learning in the classroom, inquiry-based professional learning for educational leaders can develop critical thinking habits, problem-solving skills, and expertise that coalesce to develop and implement solutions to problems of educational equity.¹²

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) expands its use of inquiry to go beyond the classroom and into schools—throughout districts and across the state—as it supports educational leaders learning to lead for equity. Inquiry-based leadership resists one-size-fits-all approaches to equity by rooting its questions in context-specific domains that ensure data collection and meaning-making are tailored to the unique needs of a given leader, school, district, or county. In this way, inquiry supports developing and refining our understanding of equitable school leadership.

21CSLA pursues its mission through professional learning that supports equity-focused leaders. It helps practitioners engage in inquiry and center equity, leadership, and continuous improvement to disrupt

systems of racism and oppression in California’s public schools.¹³ One example of this approach is Inquiry Now, a special project that cultivated leadership practices that supported marginalized and underserved students in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills.¹⁴

Example: Inquiry Now in Action

Inquiry Now was developed through a partnership between 21CSLA and the California Subject Matter Project (CSMP) to conceptualize inquiry as an approach to continuous improvement. The cross-disciplinary project supported goals of social justice for diverse learners through a combination of instructional and leadership support.¹⁵ Inquiry Now professional learning offerings supported instructional leadership development that leveraged inquiry-based instruction to promote more engaging and equitable learning.

21CSLA frames its approach to inquiry through problem-based and constructivist learning theories which suggest that learning to lead is best supported by relevant activities and experiences.¹⁶ 21CSLA’s professional learning offerings use inquiry to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that address real-world issues.¹⁷ Inquiry Now is one program through which 21CSLA engaged in continuous improvement. The program took a multidisciplinary approach where leaders developed pedagogical expertise in order to support the implementation of inquiry in the classroom. Inquiry Now also developed leaders’ ability to cultivate investment in inquiry-based learning among various partners (e.g. faculty, families, the community) who might be less familiar with or somewhat skeptical of the approach.

As shown in Figure 2, Inquiry Now conceptualized inquiry as an approach to equity through its model focused on questions and the collection, use, and analysis of evidence which leads to meaning-making and communicating new knowledge.

Figure 2

Inquiry Now's Conceptualization of Inquiry as an Approach to Continuous Improvement



Question-Driven

Inquiry can address equity issues by posing queries related to access, opportunity, and inclusion. For example, CSMP suggests asking, “Who is learning? Who is not? How do we know? How might a change in methods impact student learning? How can educators work together to improve student learning?”¹⁸ These questions create an opportunity to explore professional contexts as they relate to marginalized populations and to inform relevant, equity-centered professional learning that addresses leaders’ needs. This means that instructional leaders are no longer assessing teachers’ adherence to superficial content instructional standards, but rather empowering teacher teams to identify and effectively address student learning needs.¹⁹

Data and Evidence

Equity-focused inquiry prompts educators to think critically about what kind of data and evidence can be collected to respond to equity-oriented questions. For example, moving beyond grades and test scores to include classroom participation, observations, and interviews help educators respond to inquiry questions more thoroughly and effectively.²⁰ Furthermore, data collection can transcend the classroom into different areas of schooling to address issues of equitable school leadership at various levels and how leadership engages with the inquiry process itself. Preparedness to integrate various types of evidence to interrogate practices allows school communities to better adapt to changing contexts and create practices that serve all students.

Inquiry Now ensured its applicability to diverse educational environments across California by designing its professional learning offerings so that they were relevant to a specific region. For example, they curated a set of images and artifacts from places like Tehama County or Los Angeles County to support investigations and the development of questions that centered student experience in a local context.

Inquiry Now, in its module on data, encouraged leaders to leverage multiple perspectives and sources of data to inform decision-making and provide equitable opportunities for students to engage in inquiry. In its module on analysis, Inquiry Now supported leaders in considering hypothetical scenarios and imagining how they might engage students and teachers in authentic dialogue to make meaning of the data and evidence. This practice supported shared responsibility through analysis and meaning-making.

Meaning-Making

Next, data analysis supports meaning-making, the development of new knowledge, and perhaps additional questions to investigate. CSMP argues, “Because these new understandings are cultivated through careful investigation, based upon analysis of relevant information, and carefully considered through collaborative dialogue among peers, they are more likely to take hold, impact school culture, and positively impact equitable school practices.”²¹ By rooting its professional learning in inquiry, 21CSLA ensures powerful learning experiences for leaders learning to lead for equity.

While school leaders strive to become collaborative instructional leaders, they may often find themselves positioned in the traditional role of administrative supervisors.²² However, effective instructional leadership should not be limited to a managerial role over teachers and staff. Instead, leaders can foster communities of inquiry, where leadership takes more organic forms of organizing and facilitating.²³

Communicating New Knowledge

Sharing new learning and insight broadens the impact of inquiry-based continuous improvement efforts. Importantly, the dissemination of findings can expand the array of practical approaches to addressing equity issues for both teachers and leaders.²⁴ Promoting inquiry-oriented teaching is a long-term process that requires school leaders to consistently think about, and communicate with teachers about, inquiry.²⁵

Implications and Applications

Inquiry-based professional learning supports equity-centered instructional leadership by fostering social-emotional well-being, life-long critical thinking, and capacity building. Given the sociocultural nature of learning, learning is not solely about cognition but also rooted in relationships. Inquiry, and the rigorous learning it supports, is bolstered by positive relationships between teachers and students. This logic extends to educators and leaders; when their relationships with students and colleagues are strong, that well-being supports the demanding work of teaching and leading.²⁶

Similarly, the goal of cultivating and supporting lifelong learners does not begin and end with students. Rather, the habit of inquiry extends to educators and leaders who facilitate this work. By identifying equity-focused questions, collecting and analyzing relevant data, making meaning, and communicating new knowledge, leaders themselves engage in inquiry cycles that support their lifelong professional learning.²⁷ Relatedly, developing a habit of inquiry supports educator capacity as it “offers both a structure and path forward in [leaders’] continuous improvement efforts.”²⁸ Leaders can leverage the inquiry process of questioning, investigating, and interpreting to meet the needs of students and the given moment of public education.

Inquiry for equity involves system-wide collaborative efforts that actively seek out effective instructional practices. These efforts are grounded in social justice and require critical examination of evidence to understand which students are and are not being served.²⁹ Ultimately, instructional leaders must cultivate a culture of inquiry³⁰ throughout the whole school to center equity. Schools that successfully implement a culture of inquiry into their everyday practices are better able to perceive shortcomings in the instructional process and make appropriate improvements.³¹ In other words, these types of schools are dedicated to questioning established beliefs and practices of teaching through the use of data-based evidence.³² Some practical examples of ways school leaders can promote a culture of inquiry among teachers include holding space for peer discussions, sharing knowledge, modeling teaching behavior, setting high expectations, and distributing leadership duties.³³

Why is inquiry an essential part of professional learning for leaders?

Inquiry provides leaders with “powerful learning opportunities” that address meaningful problems of practice; support sensemaking through exploration, collaboration, and analysis; and take an equity

perspective to transforming education systems.³⁴ Professional learning experiences rooted in inquiry empower leaders to develop practical approaches to equity issues, share new knowledge, and engage in continuous improvement.

21CSLA and CSMP’s work on inquiry and equitable school leadership has implications for policymakers. For example, policymakers could adopt standards for professional development that are rooted in inquiry to guide the design, evaluation, and funding of professional learning provided to educators.³⁵ Design considerations include collaboration (to deepen meaning-making) and investigations of school improvement rooted in equity.³⁶

Ultimately, 21CSLA and CSMP demonstrate the importance of using inquiry to guide educational equity efforts, both instructionally and with regards to leadership.

Other strategies educational leaders can implement to foster supportive conditions for teachers wishing to center equity in inquiry-based learning are:

1. Creating shared responsibility and establishing conditions for teamwork (e.g., co-teaching, team teaching, scheduling common planning and reflection time)
2. Implementing flexible school structures (e.g., teacher autonomy for blocks of time, avoiding competing demands)
3. Training teachers in formative (as opposed to summative) assessment and supporting access to data (e.g., using data to plan instruction, equity audits)
4. Providing recognition for exemplary practices (e.g., formal praise, leadership opportunities)³⁷

Inquiry Gone Wrong

If not planned strategically and executed carefully, equity-centered leaders can encounter challenges and obstacles when attempting to use inquiry to support professional learning. Consider the following example: Principal Consulta was concerned by low attendance rates and unilaterally decided he wanted to investigate root causes of chronic absenteeism at his high school. He assembled an inquiry team of faculty, staff, and administrators and instructed them to design a survey to administer to students at the beginning of the school year. When analyzing the data, Principal Consulta started each meeting by sharing his thoughts first and then soliciting feedback from the rest of the inquiry team. Finally, once conclusions were drawn about primary reasons for chronic absenteeism, that information was shared with other faculty and staff at the high school.

Principal Consulta failed to use inquiry in a few effective, equity-centered ways. First, he did not begin the process by building a collaborative team where members were empowered to contribute ideas and offer critiques of current practices related to student attendance. Alternatively, Principal Consulta might have begun the inquiry process by sharing concerning attendance data with team members and soliciting their insight into causes of chronic absenteeism as well as potential responses to this equity issue. Furthermore, Principal Consulta picked a topic that needed refinement in order to better address the equity issue at hand; while chronic absenteeism is certainly a matter of access and opportunity, the initial query might have asked, “Who is most impacted by chronic absenteeism?” Or, “How can educators and leaders work together to improve attendance rates among students of color?”

Next, Principal Consulta did not plan for an array of data at various levels that would speak to his inquiry question concerning the root causes of chronic absenteeism; in addition to student surveys administered at various points throughout the school year, interviews and focus groups with students, families, and teachers would likely generate essential evidence to better understand chronic absenteeism. Principal Consulta’s habit of top-down leadership continued in the meaning-making phase of the inquiry process when he shared his thoughts on data analysis rather than fostering an environment that disrupts traditional hierarchical models in favor of communal approaches that prioritize multiple perspectives.

Finally, Principal Consulta failed to communicate the new knowledge learned during this inquiry cycle (if any) by siloing the information within the high school rather than sharing it more broadly across the entire school community or, even more ambitiously, across the district and county.

Inquiry is an essential practice that both leaders and teachers can use to address inequity; when done well, inquiry is collaborative, multifaceted, and equity-centered.

Reflection Questions

- ▶ **Professional Context** What are some examples of inquiry-based leadership and/or professional learning in your school or district?

- ▶ **Leadership Capacities** How does professional learning, in your context, support inquiry at the leadership level? How does it support educational leaders learning to lead for equity?

- ▶ **Equity in Schools** What equity issues exist at your school or in your district? How might inquiry-based professional learning support addressing those issues?

Additional Resources

21CSLA-Specific Resources (CSMP)

California Arts Education Framework (2020)

tinyurl.com/cdeartsedframework

California ELA/ELD Framework (2015)

tinyurl.com/cdeelaeld

California Health Education Framework (2019)

tinyurl.com/cdehealthed

California History-Social Science Framework (2016)

tinyurl.com/cdehistory

California Mathematics Framework (2023)

tinyurl.com/cdemath

California Science Framework (2016)

tinyurl.com/cdescience

California World Languages Framework (2020)

tinyurl.com/cdeworldlanguages

Inquiry Across the Disciplines: Excerpts from California's Curriculum Frameworks

tinyurl.com/inquirydisciplines

General Resources

Breaking New Ground with California's State Seal of Civic Engagement: Early Adopter Profile—Orange County Department of Education

tinyurl.com/cacivicengagement

Evaluation of the California Subject Matter Project: California Science Project Case Study

tinyurl.com/cspcasestudy

Notes

1. Hinnant-Crawford, 2020
2. Dewey, 1938
3. Battey & McMichael, 2021; Wilson et al., 2010
4. Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008
5. For more on discipline-specific inquiry models in California, see Additional Resources section.
6. Pedaste et al., 2015
7. Blase & Blase, 2002
8. Emihovich & Battaglia, 2010; Harris et al., 2017
9. Talbert et al., 2010; Reitzug, 1997
10. Harris et al., 2017
11. McKenzie et al., 2006
12. Callahan, 2022; Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008
13. 21CSLA, 2024
14. California Subject Matter Project & 21CSLA, 2024
15. 21CSLA & California Subject Matter Project, 2022; Battey & McMichael, 2021; Callahan, 2022; von Secker, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010
16. 21CSLA, 2024
17. Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008
18. 21CSLA & California Subject Matter Project, 2022, p. 2
19. Talbert et al., 2010
20. 21CSLA & California Subject Matter Project, 2022
21. 21CSLA & California Subject Matter Project, 2022, p. 2
22. Emihovich & Battaglia, 2010
23. Reitzug, 1997
24. 21CSLA & California Subject Matter Project, 2022
25. Towers & Panayotidis, 2012
26. 21CSLA & California Subject Matter Project, 2022
27. 21CSLA & California Subject Matter Project, 2022
28. 21CSLA & California Subject Matter Project, 2022, p. 5
29. Friedrich & McKinney, 2010
30. Little, 1993
31. Krüger, 2010
32. Earl & Katz, 2002
33. Uiterwijk-Luijk et al., 2019
34. Young, 2015
35. Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017
36. Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017
37. McKenzie et al., 2006; Talbert et al., 2010

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21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit 21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research.

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