



*photo provided by Meg Riordan*

# What Does It Take to Teach for Deeper Learning and Equity?

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**I**n classrooms across the United States, many of our most struggling learners experience instruction best described as what Martin Haberman (1991) calls, “the pedagogy of poverty,” where pedagogical practices tend more towards giving information and controlling behavior than creating spaces where students identify questions, make meaning, and solve problems in their communities and the world. Many teachers are ill-prepared by teacher education programs or professional learning opportunities to change the pedagogy of poverty observed in so many schools, and often teachers’ own schooling experiences reflected this kind of instruction. Teachers then frequently experience professional development that affirms such instruction, with facilitation that fails to support them as engaged, curious, autonomous professionals.

As a result of this “pedagogy of poverty,” learners that are most underserved—students of color, immigrants and English Language Learners, low-income students, and those receiving Special Education services—often spend class time filling out worksheets, which promotes high compliance but low engagement, inquiry, critical

thinking, or creation of new ideas (Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlaender, 2015; Friedlaender et. al., 2007; Kohn, 2011). They are denied deeper learning opportunities, which we define as those that provide support in not only mastery of rich skills and content, but also the ability to think critically, collaborate, communicate effectively, self-direct learning, and believe in oneself. Instead, our students of color and others marginalized by income, language, or ability experience diminished opportunities anchored in illiteracy, lack of self-efficacy, low engagement, hopelessness, and criminalization (National Center on Education and the Economy; 2007; Children's Defense Fund; 2007; Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlaender, 2015). At a time in our world when college and deeper learning skills are critical for participation in society and the global economy, far too many underserved students struggle within classrooms and schools that reinforce low-expectations and inequity.

What, then, can educators do to dismantle inequity and the “pedagogy of poverty” in classrooms and schools? How can leaders and teachers support deeper learning and equity for all learners? If, to paraphrase Maya Angelou, “when we know better, we must do better,” what do educators need to know in order to “do better?”

The authors set out to study two urban schools in New York City that seemed to be “doing better” in order to figure out how they are helping teachers create equitable spaces for deeper learning for all students. We think of equitable spaces as those where all learners have multiple points of access to rich content as well as tools to support their success in developing the deeper learning skills defined above. Equitable spaces also incorporate the kinds of social justice curriculum that Freire (2000) refers to as, “problem posing pedagogy,” pedagogy that attempts to liberate and transform. When looking for these schools, we turned to respected colleagues and educators in the field who pointed us in the direction of schools that were grappling with designing learning experiences for deeper learning and equity. We then spent the fall and winter of 2017 trying to understand their professional learning experiences, the kinds of curriculum and instruction teachers were constructing and enacting, as well as the experiences of students. We observed classes, talked to teachers and leaders, spent time observing the range of professional learning experiences, and engaged in focus groups with students about how they saw issues of equity

and deeper learning in their classrooms. After months of observing, talking, reading, and analyzing, we started to notice trends across both schools that seem to have implications for many. It is worth noting that this is a small scale study and that in opting to look deeply at two schools identified as successful models of teaching for deeper learning, we hoped to draw upon their work to create a framework for understanding professional learning for equity. It is our further hope that future studies will attempt to apply this framework and examine a wider variety of schools.

We wondered if professional development looked “different” when it focused on supporting students’ deeper learning and equity. We knew that prior research had identified the major components of good professional development: 1) is extended over time, 2) provides teachers with collaborative opportunities for active learning, and 3) is relevant to classroom practice (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2013; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). But we noticed additional features that spanned these two schools which suggest that professional development for deeper learning and equity needed something more to be effective. In both cases we noticed that teachers had experiences during professional development which mirrored what they then were expected and able to create and enact with their students. This shouldn’t surprise us as we know that it is often our own practice (rather than research) that informs what we do in our classrooms. We do what we know.

In the end, we identified three features of professional learning that matter if teachers are to know and do better to support all students’ deeper learning and equity: 1) content, 2) design (instructional strategies and mindsets) and 3) ownership.

### **Content: It Matters What Professional Learning Is About**

Part of what makes schooling equitable for students is providing opportunities to explore issues of equity in the world around them. No matter how rich the learning is, if it doesn’t help students to answer pressing questions about their community, lives, or the world around them, then it doesn’t truly empower them to enact change in themselves and outside of the classroom. In order for teachers to do this kind

of work, they also need opportunities to think about the kinds of curriculum and pedagogy that support students in this kind of critical “reading” of the world. The teachers we observed spoke of powerful professional development steeped in learning “about compelling topics” and then “doing fieldwork” or “interviewing experts” to build their content knowledge and skills. Teachers were engaged when the content was relevant, open-ended to encourage grappling with tough issues, and invited multiple perspectives. They highlighted content focused on historical events, such as the 1863 Civil War Draft Riots in New York City and the Gulf of Tonkin incident; others named science-based explorations of “green” buildings and genetic testing. One teacher expressed, “Our professional learning is about learning and learning by doing and it’s that mindset that we want our kids to have. We want them to have an experience, learn, and reflect. It’s the pedagogy that we believe in and as teachers have had the chance to experience.”

Transferring her professional learning to the classroom, this teacher then engaged her eighth- graders in a case study titled, “Fight For our Rights,” exploring San Francisco 49er’s quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s decision to kneel—rather than stand (as is tradition)—during the national anthem. Her students were invited into the content to “take a stand” by reading texts and articles that provide multiple perspectives on this issue. During one researcher’s classroom observation, students participated in a Socratic Seminar guided by this question: “Some people suggest that Colin Kaepernick should be fired. Should he? Why or why not?” This content, these questions, engaged learners in genuine inquiry into fairness, racism, and inequity, as evidenced in the following dialogue from the Socratic Seminar:

*“In the article, the journalist said, ‘players are encouraged, not required’ to stand up during the national anthem.”*

*“I agree. My article said that, ‘As an American citizen, Colin Kaepernick has the right not to stand.’ He shouldn’t be rebuked. Also, he tried to make his protest less offensive by taking a knee instead of sitting.”*

*“I also agree. The league can’t legally fire him because standing is not required. I want to also add on that Colin Kaepernick is allowed to express an opinion; he’s not under orders or confined to act differently*

*because of his role on the team. However, as a black man, he might be perceived as more outspoken or out of line because of his actions. That's what my article indicated."*

*"I respectfully disagree. His actions don't support his commitment to his team or to the national anthem, or the country."*

*"I respectfully disagree. As citizens we have the right to say whatever we want. And as an African American, he has the responsibility to speak—or show—his opinion."*

The teacher interrupted: "Let's pause. Where does the right to speak or say what we want stop? Can someone give an example of someone exercising the right to speak that has been limited by law?" The teacher's own experiences in professional learning that engaged her in authentic questions and used structures to support investigation into these questions (we say more about this next), allowed her to transfer this experience to her classroom. Her experience of "doing better" and learning effectively through her school's professional development became the basis for her students' experiences of learning deeply through content that sparks questions around equity.

### **Design: Content Matters, But So Does Pedagogy**

We know from Dewey and the long line of educators addressing democracy in the classroom, that to create democratic, equitable classrooms, students need pedagogy that models democratic ways of being. Beyond just following directions, memorizing, and regurgitating information, structures that support deeper learning are essential. We identified a series of practices that teachers at these schools used to help support democratic classrooms, that we propose are foundational for deeper learning and equity:

- clear learning targets and ongoing checks for understanding, protocols to guide equitable discussion,
- a balance of collaborative and independent learning,
- peer critique and feedback on emerging work,
- developing academic vocabulary embedded in texts students are reading (as opposed to stand alone memorization),
- Socratic Seminars, sentence starters and stems that support collaborative discourse between students.

We believe they are foundational because our data collection demonstrated their power in supporting all students in accessing and engaging with rigorous content. To support growth mindset in the classroom, students needed chances for revision, targeted reading strategies to access complex text, and multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning and progress. And they needed to know that the classroom is a safe place to try, and that practicing is a part of the learning process.

Additionally, teachers needed professional learning that modeled and explicitly taught these kinds of structures and mindsets, as well as engaged them in frequent practice that helped them learn how to do this. For example, at one of the two schools where we observed, each teacher's professional learning opportunity, from grade-level team meetings to inquiry group meetings to department meetings, started with an "ice breaker" activity (to build trust or learn about their colleagues), followed by a protocol for engaging deeply in a question of practice, involved individual and collaborative writing and discussion, and concluded with reflection or debrief. In a number of professional development sessions all teachers took notes and did their writing in a Google document that allowed them to co-construct and document their learning. This structure was the kind that supports deeper learning as well as equity: it supported collaboration and self-directed learning, as well demonstrated attention to ensuring that everyone's voice was included in that co-construction. What became evident over time was that teachers were not just exposed to instructional strategies for deeper learning and equity, but that those strategies were ingrained routines in their own learning that therefore became natural to transfer to their classrooms. Teachers learned to "do better" by experiencing it, appropriating and practicing it, and applying it to their own practice to support all learners.

### **Ownership: Who Decides What Teachers and Students Should Learn?**

While the literature is replete with admonitions for educators to ensure that teachers and students own their learning, schools are filled with examples of teachers and students engaged in worksheets, prescribed curriculum, and teachers asking questions that have little to do with students' own contexts, problems, and social/political challenges. Just as students need opportunities to grapple with the real structural



inequities that they experience around race, class, gender, ability, language, class, or religion—teachers need professional learning that is built around their burning questions of classroom practice.

In both schools we found deliberate and relentless attention to supporting teachers in being leaders in their own practice. In one instance the principal told us that in the first few years of the school's launch, teachers simply pushed back on externally driven professional development that focused on administrative concerns rather than teacher questions. In the end, the school moved more intentionally towards professional learning that was teacher owned and led. While that did not mean the abandonment of outside expertise that helped drive the school's goals and mission, it was done in tight alignment with teacher driven inquiry. There were three facets to ownership that emerged as particularly important:

- Teachers need autonomy in creating curriculum that is responsive to students' needs, issues, and questions.
- Teachers need to engage with other teachers in inquiry groups that are teacher led and driven, to engage in activities similar to those they expect students to experience. They need to ask questions, design ways of learning about those questions, explore and test their assumptions, and share their learning with others.
- Teachers need to receive feedback and coaching that is specific to their needs, rather than a large scale professional development with generic materials for all classrooms. Professional learning for adults needs to honor different needs. For instance, one school coach described her work with teachers in this way:

*The role of instructional coaching for us is a leverage point—it's a challenge because it's individualized...it's really personal. It's shifting the way that we as adults learn. I'm helping one teacher to engage students and shift her mindset so that students drive the learning. She's creating a case study on Flint, Michigan's water quality and students are advocating for people in need and using science to do that.*

Through targeted coaching to meet an individual teacher's needs, students are encouraged to have a voice in their learning—to identify questions that emerge, to consider how to investigate the water crisis



as well as issues of race or class, and to determine how to advocate for those impacted. In this instance, coaching supports this teacher by helping her to invite genuine student inquiry and promote deeper learning, thus providing learners with a voice in exploring the content.

We all want our students to be engaged deeply in their learning, using academic language and discourse and persisting through challenging texts and ideas in order to make sense of the most pressing questions in the world. But we forget that teachers need help in learning how to do this as well; we forget that “better” teaching is not instinctive, and the best curriculum and materials cannot supplement the autonomous professional practice of teachers. Instead, teachers need targeted professional learning experiences that support them both in terms of content and pedagogy that models equitable practice, and also empowers them to ask their own questions in order to empower their students. In this way, we can better equip teachers to support all students, especially our most underserved, in deeper learning that promotes equity.

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