

# Confronting Inequity / Teacher Leadership for Equity

*Adam Alvarez*

**Small groups of committed teachers can drive change.**

Unlike educational equality, which may focus on school outcomes alone, equity is more justice-centered and tends to refer to school outcomes and structures in relation to access to opportunities, including health care, curriculum, and academic and social supports. School leaders often grapple with challenges to building equitable learning environments and opportunities for all students. When schools become more racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse, student needs may also change. These challenges can cause tension within school communities, requiring a concerted effort to effectively address them.

In this context, the role of teacher leaders is essential to school equity efforts. Not only are teacher leaders able to support overburdened administrators, but they also have insight into their colleagues' concerns and are well positioned to respond to students' varied needs. Accordingly, Milner, Laughter, and Childs have stressed a need for better systems to develop teacher leaders for equity.<sup>1</sup> Building on this research and my work as a facilitator for teacher leaders involved in equity-improvement school programs, I want to share here how schools can best support teacher leaders in their work toward equity.

## **Developing Partnerships**

Creating partnerships between equity-minded teachers in a school is an important first step for equity work. To begin the process, teacher leaders and school administrators should consider the following question: *Who are the equity-focused teachers in our school?* Given that equity work may require teachers to challenge their assumptions about how schools and society operate, it may be best to begin with exemplar teachers who: are skilled at building culturally responsive lessons; value students' voices; or support programs for marginalized student groups, such as LGBTQ groups or black student groups. Because many educators express uncertainty or lack of knowledge about social issues students face, partnerships among equity-focused teachers can be foundational to schools' change efforts.

In one of the school districts I support, an administrator told me that there were many teachers who could benefit from learning about equity but would likely decline to participate. But at this stage, it is unnecessary to single out "teachers who could benefit" and much more advantageous to gain momentum with already equity-conscious teachers who just need to know that they are supported. In the end, this administrator formed a diverse group of interested educators from across middle and high school, including core content teachers, counselors, and athletic coaches. Small groups like this can impact school change, including among other faculty members.

## **Co-Constructing Spaces for Dialogue**

After developing partnerships, teacher leaders working for equity should designate space and time to engage more freely in conversations about themselves and others. Working toward equity often requires a close examination of how power and privilege operate in schools and society. Because issues of power and privilege may be new topics for some teachers, partnerships and co-constructed safe spaces are important to encourage dialogue. (In some schools, this work may need to be facilitated.) For other

teachers, having a co-constructed space where their own observations and stories of marginalization are validated can be an empowering opportunity.

Within their co-constructed spaces for dialogues, teacher leaders develop a capacity to grapple together with tough issues, such as racism or sexism in school and society. Through various learning activities, the teacher leaders can broaden their social, political, economic, and cultural understandings. To illustrate, one equity group I worked with created a community map, which outlined five areas of the city where students in the school lived. Our discussion focused on how students and teachers in the school viewed each of these areas and the students living in those communities. Through our discussion, teachers began making connections between race, social context, and school success outcomes.

There are two questions to consider in co-constructing spaces for dialogue. First, *where can teacher leaders meet regularly (weekly or monthly) on campus?* Meeting on campus can be important for building and maintaining a presence of equity-focused teacher leaders. Such meeting places should be relatively private but not secretive or hidden. Second, *what norms will guide teacher leaders as they engage in dialogue?* While these norms should be discussed and agreed on, they should generally include equal participation of all voices and freedom from judgment.

## **Encouraging Collective Action**

From their partnerships and ongoing dialogue, teacher leaders working for equity learn to formulate strategies for collectively addressing equity issues in their schools. The process by which teacher leaders engage in collective action with each other, and ideally their colleagues, mirrors a participatory action-research approach. That is, teacher leaders gain a deeper understanding of equity and equity-related problems in their school context; then, they discuss solutions to address the problems and develop implementation plans. While they are implementing their solutions (for example, professional development for teachers on micro-aggressions, or working with a student group), they return to their co-constructed spaces to reflect and refine their action plans.

Plans for needed collective action may vary widely by school. While some schools seek equity work as a proactive approach to meeting their students' needs, others may be responding to a serious incident that prompts legal action. In one school, teacher leaders engaged in collective action by facilitating small group discussions for their school's faculty and administrators during a professional development day. The teacher leaders directed the conversation with questions related to students' racial, cultural, and gender identities. In another school, teacher leaders engaged in collective action by developing a curriculum for exploring diversity. The school district responded by allocating time each week for designated classes to teach from the curriculum materials, which covered a range of topics, such as race, sexuality, and language.

## **New Opportunities**

While I don't recall ever having the opportunity to address school-based equity issues during my own six years of teaching, I am pleased that more schools today are "allowing" such opportunities. I have discovered that, given the support, space, and time to discuss equity issues, knowledgeable educators

who care about more justice-centered school outcomes can make a significant impact on school practices and help negotiate the tension that comes with change. Empowering such teachers is an essential first step in addressing school equity concerns.

## **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> Milner, H. R., Laughter, J., & Childs, J. (2015). Developing teacher leadership for equity. In M. A. Khalifa (Ed.), *Handbook of urban educational leadership* (pp. 85–90). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

**Adam Alvarez**, guest columnist for H. Richard Milner IV, is an assistant professor of urban education at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. Follow him on [Twitter](#).