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# Tying It All Together: Implications for Classrooms, Schools, and Districts


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## *Tying It All Together*

### *Implications for Classrooms, Schools, and Districts*

Ryan Flessner, Kenneth Zeichner,  
and Kalani Eggington

#### **TEACHERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

While many educators understand that equity within and across schools will be achieved only when attention is given to changing the societal structures and policies that affect our educational institutions, it is also true that individual teachers, schools, and districts can and do make a difference in the lives of students. As Gay (2000) observes, “While systematic, multidirectional attacks on educational inequities are most desirable, individuals do not have to wait for these to happen before taking action on their own. Micro-level changes, such as those that take place within classrooms, are important, too” (Gay, 2000, p. 202). The teachers whose work is highlighted in Chapters 3 through 12—as well as the Madison Metropolitan School District of which they are a part—offer examples of individuals and a school district attempting to develop and implement changes to bring about greater equity in educational opportunities and outcomes for all students.

Teachers across the country enquire into their practices on a regular basis. As Caro-Bruce and Klehr (this volume) note, educators participate in

action research for a variety of reasons. They follow Noffke (1997) and Fisher (1996) in suggesting that typical reasons for such work include individual progress, student progress, knowledge production, social change, and personal meaning. The Madison Metropolitan School District's Classroom Action Research Program, from which each of the studies in this book originated, has at its core a set of philosophical assumptions that make it a fine example of the work teachers can do to create change in our educational institutions. This set of assumptions includes the following ideas:

- Teachers are competent, capable individuals.
- Teachers are a unique source of information and have much to add to the research base in education.
- Individuals can, and do, effect change.
- While district initiatives are important and shape the topics of study in the Classroom Action Research Program, teachers are respected as competent change-makers who add to the educational research base by developing unique questions and research projects that address the complex problems inherent in educating our nation's youth.

In this final chapter, we examine educational equity issues by first providing a brief overview of attempts to address inequities in our nation's schools. Next we explore aspects of educational literature that are concerned with equity pedagogy, drawing specific examples of equity pedagogy from the action research studies in this book. We then identify the overarching themes evident across the 10 studies, and synthesize key ideas for teachers, administrators, educational policymakers, and others who may be using this book as a springboard to action in our public schools. We close the chapter with a general discussion about the idea of teachers producing educational knowledge and about the relationship between the research of university researchers and action research literature produced by K-12 practitioners.

## **EQUITY AS AN EDUCATIONAL ISSUE**

Villegas and Lucas (2002) state:

Relative to White middle-class pupils, poor and minority students consistently attain lower scores on standardized achievement tests of reading, writing, mathematics, and science; are overrepresented

in special education programs, in instructional groups designated as low-achieving, and in vocational curricular tracks; and drop out of high school at much higher rates and enroll in postsecondary education in much lower proportions . . . This pattern of inequitable education is unacceptable in a democratic society, especially one as affluent as that of the United States. (p. xi)

The struggle for achieving greater equity in opportunities and outcomes in U.S. public schools is not new. Recently, we marked the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which formally eliminated desegregation laws across the country. While this celebrated case represented a significant moment in the movement for school equity, inequalities in schooling persist (e.g., Kozol, 2005). Consequently, educators must continue to advocate for equity. Gittell and McKenna (1998) note that "creating an excellent and equitable public education system has become a priority, but the means for achieving this goal have remained elusive" (Gittell & McKenna, 1998, p. 1). Politicians have proposed charter schools and tax reform to equalize school funding and educational quality as just two of a plethora of means by which equity in schooling might be attained (Vitullo-Martin, 1998). Inequities in school funding have been challenged in state and federal courts since the early 1970s (Gittell, 1998), and fiscal equity remains a contentious issue. While these approaches have drawn much attention to the inequities experienced by poor and minority students in our nation's schools, the gap between the haves and have-nots in our society continues to grow (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000). As a result, educators and researchers continue to explore alternative routes to achieving equity in educational opportunities and outcomes.

Wide variations in teacher quality have also received growing attention, as evidenced by reports such as "Honor in the Boxcar: Equalizing Teacher Quality" (Education Trust, 2000) and *What Matters Most* (National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996) that show inequities in how fully qualified teachers are distributed to schools serving students from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds. The federal No Child Left Behind law, which mandates that a qualified teacher staff each classroom, has brought to higher visibility the issue of the equitable distribution of qualified teachers.

Research on multicultural education has illuminated institutional issues concerning White privilege and racism (Fecho & Allen, 2002; King, 1991; Michie, 1999). Discussion of these *hot lava* topics (Glazier, 2003), though challenging and discomfiting to some people, provides a different perspective on problems within our schools and attempts to address

growing nationwide achievement gaps among students from different socioeconomic and ethnic and racial backgrounds.

## EQUITY PEDAGOGY: ORIGINS AND DEFINITIONS

Banks (1993) describes five dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure. Although it is only one piece of the multicultural education puzzle, equity pedagogy describes the types of classrooms students experience when “[T]eachers use techniques and methods that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups” (Banks, 1993, p. 6).

While the Civil Rights Movement brought attention to the needs of marginalized populations, Banks warns that many schools continue to promote pedagogical practices that foster a cultural deprivation model. Within such a framework, the role of education is to help “at-risk” students overcome their cultural deficits. Rather than valuing each child as an individual, the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students, the experiences of students from diverse communities, and the funds of knowledge and social practices in those communities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), cultural deprivation theories promote an assimilationist philosophy wherein students must adapt to a view of school success that is based on the traditions and expectations of the dominant culture (Nieto, 2002). In order to ensure greater equity through pedagogy, educators must attend to “. . . aspects of diversity including racial/ethnic origins, language, economic status, and learning challenges associated with exceptionalities” (Banks et al., 2005, pp. 233–234). Educators who attend to these matters help form an equity pedagogy that ensures that the necessary attention is paid to the strengths and needs of all students.

According to Banks et al. (2005), equity pedagogy includes:

1. Building a sociocultural consciousness;
2. Attending to cultural frames of reference and boundary crossing;
3. Practicing culturally responsive/relevant teaching; and
4. Engaging in reciprocal and interactive forms of practice.

As a starting point, these ideas provide teachers with the knowledge and awareness necessary to initiate processes of change within their classrooms. We examine each of these factors below and provide examples

from the previous 10 chapters that highlight what these elements look like in practice.

### **Building a Sociocultural Consciousness**

Because all teachers have gone through what Lortie (1975) calls an *apprenticeship of observation*—16 years of experiencing the work of teachers on a daily basis—it is unrealistic to believe that teacher education programs, as they currently exist, can enable teachers to unlearn many of the perspectives and practices institutionalized by their experience in schools. Thus, in intense situations, teachers are apt to revert to practices, curricula, and learning strategies that “worked” for them. From an equity standpoint, this tendency creates problems for students in today’s classroom, especially students who live in a world very different from the classrooms of yesteryear, as well as for students who come from backgrounds different from those of their teachers. Given the apprenticeship of observation as well as the consequences of the profound changes affecting our increasingly globalized society, it is essential that teachers acquire a sociocultural consciousness that enables them to see themselves as cultural beings.

Irvine (2003) notes that “teachers . . . operate from the concept of positionality, that is, they have frames of reference for viewing the world depending on how the world makes sense to them based on personal history” (Irvine, 2003, p. 57). In order to connect with students in ways that promote learning, teachers must be willing to examine their positionalities, address the prevailing assumptions and biases, and begin to view the world, their students, and their classroom experiences through a variety of lenses. In developing a sociocultural consciousness, teachers gain an “. . . awareness that one’s worldview is not universal but is profoundly shaped by one’s life experiences, as mediated by a variety of factors, chief among them race/ethnicity, social class, and gender” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 27).

The studies presented in this book provide glimpses into real classrooms and illustrate teachers who are working to attend to their positionalities. The chapter authors are teachers who are developing, or have developed, a sociocultural consciousness. For example, in her work with Davonte, a seven-year-old African American boy, Barbara Williams directly confronted her well-established teaching philosophies, rethought her position as an educator, and established “sacred time” with a young man who otherwise may have experienced the failure that too many African American males face in schools. By valuing Davonte as an individual learner with specific educational needs, Williams viewed the world of schooling through his perspective. She then made changes in her practices

directed at creating experiences in which Davonte could enjoy the feelings of successful accomplishment so often reserved for students from middle-class, White backgrounds. Williams's work with Davonte is an example of how equity pedagogy requires teachers to move beyond the mechanical use of curriculum programs and teaching practices to instead engage in dynamic and ongoing interaction with students. Through this process, Davonte's individual needs were more adequately met.

Shannon Richards began her study by examining the effects of her teaching on students labeled as English language learners. By studying her own teacher behaviors, questioning her role in contributing to her students' lack of understanding, and valuing her students' input and feedback, Richards established a critical stance toward her own practice. She used information gained from interviews with all her students—English language learners as well as native English speakers—to develop specific strategies that addressed the disconnect between herself and her students, regardless of race, linguistic background, or ethnicity. Richards's willingness to critique herself, to examine assumptions about learners from other backgrounds, and to take action to improve the children's school experiences provides readers with an example of a teacher working toward teaching for social justice and toward equitable schooling for all students.

Another study that addresses the issue of sociocultural consciousness is that of Van E. Valaskey. Valaskey examined tracking at the high school level, a taken-for-granted, institutionalized practice used in many high schools, and one that starts early in a child's educational experience. Many researchers (e.g., Oakes & Lipton, 1999) have concluded that the practice of tracking students into ability levels creates false conceptions of homogeneity within tracks, labels students as deficient, and limits the opportunities available to students placed within lower academic tracks (generally students who come from low socioeconomic or minority backgrounds). By confronting the assumptions, prejudices, and biases in such practices, Valaskey and his teaching colleagues critiqued tracking policies, revisited conceptions of high-quality teaching, and set out to redesign instruction so that all students could succeed. This willingness to rethink structures deeply ingrained in American schooling exemplifies the kind of action that is needed in order to dismantle the elitist, exclusionary policies that inhibit the potential for all students to experience success in school.

### **Attending to Cultural Frames of Reference and Boundary Crossing**

Aside from frequent differences in racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, students and teachers often differ in their cultural frames of

reference. The life experiences of classroom teachers are often substantially different from those of the students with whom they interact. For this reason, it is essential that teachers build on the *funds of knowledge* their students possess. González, Moll, & Amanti (2005) define funds of knowledge as “. . . historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 72).

Rather than superficially addressing diversity only by celebrating holidays or eating foods from “other” cultures, teachers need to capitalize on the resources provided by students’ household practices and the funds of knowledge in students’ communities. Paying attention to the interaction of students’ family, peer, and school environments is essential if educators are to assist students as they attempt to navigate the sometimes conflicting spheres of influence between home and school (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991).

Rose (1989) observes:

Through all my experiences with people struggling to learn, the one thing that strikes me most is the ease with which we misperceive failed performance and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order. Class and culture erect boundaries that hinder our vision—blind us to the logic of error and the ever present stirring of language—and encourage the designation of otherness, difference, deficiency. (p. 205)

From this perspective, failure is redefined as a mismatch between the in-school and the out-of-school cultures in which students are immersed. To successfully navigate the boundaries between these cultures, students must continually evaluate the conditions in which they find themselves, interpret the key structures, norms, and rules in their various environments, and establish the flexibility necessary to succeed in sometimes competing worlds. Rather than leaving students to fend for themselves, educators can lessen this burden by actively seeking information about individual students and their communities and families, and utilizing this information as they create learning experiences that build in positive ways on the cultural resources that students bring to school.

Nieto (2002) likens this process to the building of a bridge that connects the students’ environment with that of the dominant culture by acknowledging these differences. By participating in such work, teachers contribute toward leveling the playing field for all students and can also reveal their commitment to each student and validate the knowledge and resources that each student brings to the school and the classroom.



Denise M. Hanson's study is an example of the work necessary to assist students as they participate in dual worlds. Her work with native Spanish speakers shows how teachers can utilize the traditionally underappreciated talents of students and thereby place the students in leadership positions. By actively engaging high school students with Spanish-speaking backgrounds as teaching assistants, Hanson created authentic learning environments in which native English speakers could experience the knowledge and resources of those who are often silenced in our English language-dominated schools. In addition, she created opportunities for these frequently marginalized students to interact socially with students from majority backgrounds, who might otherwise see them as less intelligent or academically incapable. Rather than providing patronizing opportunities for students to share their heritage, Hanson's approach provides valuable insights into the ways in which teachers can validate and engage students who might otherwise experience an overwhelming disconnect between their lives inside and outside of school.

A second study that represents the ways in which teachers can assist students in their attempts to meld the worlds of home and school is that of Kate Lyman. Lyman's continued attention to the conversations and interactions of her second and third graders allowed her to incorporate the experiences of all her students as she designed learning opportunities for her class. Lyman drew on her knowledge of students' lives, which she gained through careful observations inside and outside of her classroom. By dealing with issues such as racism, gender bias, homophobia, sexual reproduction, drug use, and AIDS—issues that were prevalent in the discussions and writings of her students—she was able to showcase the knowledge and life experiences of children who traditionally have been lost in the rush to raise scores on standardized achievement tests. While continuing to hold all students to high standards, Lyman created a learning environment that stressed the need for multiple perspectives, mutual respect, and collaboration. In her work, she afforded her students the opportunity to link their home lives with their school lives. In so doing, Lyman came to understand the complexities of her students' lives and used this knowledge to deepen the process of learning as a community experience. Lyman took action to acknowledge the fact that, in order to succeed, students must be allowed to build on their prior understandings, their experiences, and their natural curiosity to examine the world around them. She has recognized that learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers.

## Practicing Culturally Responsive/Relevant Teaching

Florio-Ruane & deTar (1995) make the point that “[D]iverse teachers and pupils meet each other on the presumed common ground of public education” (Florio-Ruane & deTar, 1995, p. 28). However, this “presumed common ground” is less than neutral territory. King (1991) writes, “. . . education is not neutral; it can serve various political and cultural interests including social control, socialization, assimilation, domination, or liberation” (King, 1991, p. 140). The history of education in the United States (not to mention the social and political history), shows that many students—and teachers—are ostracized by the formal structures of schooling. In order to address this issue, teachers must understand that culture (their students’ and their own) is a lens through which different individuals experience the institution of schooling.

Several researchers (Ballanger, 1998; Compton-Lilly, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) have written about the need for culturally responsive, or relevant, teaching. Rather than taking a color-blind approach, which claims to see “children” instead of “color” but often ignores the important part that culture plays in navigating school experiences (Paley, 1979), culturally relevant teaching helps educators realize that “equity” and “sameness” are not synonymous in classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Geneva Gay (2000) stresses:

[A] very different pedagogical paradigm is needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups—one that teaches *to and through* their personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments. Culturally responsive teaching is this kind of paradigm . . . If educators continue to be ignorant of, ignore, impugn, and silence the cultural orientations, values, and performance styles of ethnically different students, they will persist in imposing cultural hegemony, personal denigration, educational inequity, and academic underachievement upon them . . . It is incumbent upon teachers, administrators, and evaluators to *deliberately create cultural continuity* in educating ethnically diverse students. (pp. 24–25)

In her work with African American males in Madison high schools, Quynh T. Nguyen explored the factors that allow some Black males to succeed while others fall behind in, become disenchanting with, and even drop out of school. Like other researchers in the field of culturally responsive teaching, Nguyen details the need for teachers who are knowledgeable about the curriculum they teach, have effective classroom management

skills, tie curriculum to the lives and experiences of their students, form lasting relationships with students, remain open-minded, provide additional support when necessary, and expect excellence from all students. Her interviews with students labeled "high achievers" and "low achievers" bring to light the similarities in each group's educational needs. Unfortunately, not all students experience classroom teaching that exemplifies these characteristics.

Next, Julie Melton examined classroom practices that inhibit or support the mathematical learning of minority children in her fourth-grade classroom. By examining the confusion and frustration of her African American students, she was able to experiment with alternative strategies in order to help them become more flexible, comfortable, and proficient with learning mathematics content. Rather than expecting all children to learn in similar ways, Melton exemplifies the need for teachers to experiment, and to work outside their comfort zones as they attempt to create learning experiences that attend to the needs of students from a variety of backgrounds. Because Melton took seriously her students' needs, she was able to use their experiences as a basis for learning and help them develop into more critical thinkers in mathematics.

Finally, by examining classroom dynamics and social structures in her classroom, Diane Coccari also practiced culturally responsive teaching. Her efforts to address issues of power and domination in her sixth-grade classroom are examples of what Villegas & Lucas (2002) deem a moral imperative—the necessity for teachers to act as agents of change. Rather than allowing a faction of the classroom's male population to constantly dominate discussions and activities, Coccari purposely created nonthreatening situations in which other students, mostly girls from minority backgrounds, could take risks, experiment with leadership roles, and be validated for their contributions to the classroom community. By dealing with issues of difference and by creating collaborative community experiences for her students, Coccari developed an affirming atmosphere in which all students could participate and succeed academically and socially.

### **Engaging in Reciprocal and Interactive Forms of Practice**

While attempting to build bridges between students' cultural backgrounds and the practices of schooling, teachers need to reexamine the dominant transmission model of teaching. This view ". . . emphasizes the correct recall of content taught by means of highly structured drills and workbook exercises" (Cummins, as cited in Zeichner, 1996, p. 145). Similarly, Villegas & Lucas (2002) argue that in this model, ". . . knowledge is assumed to be a

reality that exists separate from the knower and that has always been 'out there' waiting to be 'discovered' " (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 66).

In contrast, reciprocal and interactive forms of practice draw on students' prior understandings, create opportunities for students and teachers to participate in collaborative inquiry, and validate the experiences, knowledge, and curiosity of each member of the classroom. Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González (2005) suggest that reciprocity in teaching practice entails the creation of enduring social relationships between students and teachers. In this type of arrangement, both students and teachers are aware of their obligations to the learning process.

Jane Hammatt Kavaloski's description of her high school students' service-learning projects provides an example of this type of reciprocal and interactive teaching. Hammatt Kavaloski transmitted knowledge to her students, but she also created an environment in which her students were able to become engaged in an exploration of the life of a key figure in the Civil Rights Movement. Because students were responsible for teaching sixth graders about the life of Malcolm X, they were deeply motivated to learn all they could about this historical figure. Hammatt Kavaloski provided resources and classroom structures that facilitated this learning process, but she also remained aware of her position as a learner, not only about Malcolm X, but also about her students, their talents, and their willingness to achieve academically. By taking this position as a learner, Hammatt Kavaloski could better identify with her students. Many scholars believe such identification to be a key aspect of equity pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2002). This stance of the teacher as a learner provides the teacher with continued exchanges upon which to build relationships, and it models the types of connections Hammatt Kavaloski wanted her students to form with the sixth graders they would mentor. In this example, a multidimensional, interactive pedagogy existed that engaged learners of various levels in a common experience that promoted inquiry, community building, and accountability to others. This type of learning opportunity differs substantially from the traditional transmission model of teaching experienced in the majority of classrooms.

Another example of reciprocal and interactive practice is the work of Erik J. Shager and his students. Shager, who was concerned about the school district's dropout rate, challenged his students to conduct a research project on this issue. The students' backgrounds made them well suited to this type of educational task. Each of Shager's students had experienced some sort of disappointment or failure within Madison's traditional high schools and had sought a different type of learning environment by enrolling in one of the district's alternative programs. Shager used these personal experiences of his students as resources to create opportunities

for them to share their expertise, gain further information, and explore their findings. What evolved was an in-depth, complex inquiry into the reasons students feel disconnected from the educational system, become disenchanted with and rebel against that system, and eventually drop out of school. Shager's work powerfully explores the importance of redesigning learning experiences within our classrooms, and it shows how individual teachers can make a difference in the lives of their students by attending to the resources that they bring to school and enabling students to investigate an issue of great personal significance to them.

Taking the reciprocal and interactive model one step further, we can examine the impact of these equity pedagogy studies from the students' perspective. So far we have focused on the changes that educators have undertaken to enable greater equity. But if we truly believe that learning is a reciprocal and interactive process, we must also conclude that this form of teaching empowers students to better address the inequalities in their own worlds.

For example, Hammatt Kavaloski's alternative high school students learned lessons in their service-learning projects—about preparing for teaching, diligence, responsibility, and creativity—that they could apply in their own lives in settings where they are subjected to prejudicial actions and behavior. A more subtle lesson they may have learned is that some people resist learning (as was the case with several of the sixth-grade middle school students they were teaching). In a real sense, these experiences helped the high school students prepare for some of the harsh realities that exist in society and that competent and experienced learners such as themselves need to address.

Likewise, Valaskey's study examined and addressed the injustices of tracking and exposed students who would have otherwise been confined within their own "assigned" ability levels to heterogeneous social groupings. Such exposure prepares students to better work with, and relate to, people who do not share the same abilities, attitudes, and experiences. Successful interaction with people who are different is a hallmark of contemporary pluralistic societies.

Coccarri recognized that a dominating group of White boys existed within her classroom community. She could have solved this problem temporarily by exerting her own dominant authority. Instead, she chose an approach that resulted in all students being able to see that social problems can be resolved by sharing power, elevating other people, and building a sense of community trust. Obviously this lesson has the potential to assist these students in becoming more socially adept.

These studies and the others highlighted in this book demonstrate the power that action research can have in supporting equity pedagogy. In

addition, each study provided students with mechanisms for addressing equity issues in their own lives. With this knowledge, these students were able to take the lessons they learned and apply them to areas of their lives in which equity might not be such a priority. By engaging in reciprocal and interactive forms of practice, educators and their students all benefited.

## **LOOKING ACROSS THE STUDIES: WHAT CAN WE LEARN?**

It is our hope that this book affords teachers, administrators, policymakers, and others the opportunity to examine school structures and practices that contribute to educational inequity. As we continue to strive toward more equitable school experiences for all children, it is essential that we develop ways in which we can take action to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds are validated and appreciated within our schools. The studies presented in this book showcase the idea that:

Teachers are not merely practitioners, professionals, facilitators, pedagogists, test preparers and administrators, or even competent content specialists . . . [M]ore than anything else, teachers are thinkers and decision makers who have a deep, thorough understanding of their content as well as a repertoire of teaching skills from which they choose and match these skills and content knowledge to classroom behaviors, situations, students, and curricula. (Irvine, 2003, p. 49)

The challenges ahead are complex and demanding, and efforts to implement equity pedagogy will most likely continue to be contradicted by policies and practices within and outside schools. We have assembled this general overview of the themes and ideas presented in this book so that readers can appreciate the challenges and can develop an agenda that addresses their particular needs. The following sections frame a possible agenda for equitable schooling by drawing on the themes developed throughout this volume. This agenda entails the following elements:

1. Attention to achievement gaps;
2. Empowerment of students from diverse backgrounds;
3. Engagement through culturally responsive practice; and
4. Activism.

### Attention to Achievement Gaps

The authors of the previous 10 chapters provide detailed descriptions of the work that needs to occur in order to address the ever-present—and growing—achievement gaps among students from different backgrounds. Lyman provided evidence that minority students' levels of reading comprehension are substantially lower than those of their White classmates. Hanson's discussion of standardized test scores across the district illuminated the problems associated with instruction that is geared to preparing students to successfully navigate these exams. From a national, comparative perspective, Williams noted Wisconsin's abysmal graduation rates, in comparison to other states, for African American students.<sup>1</sup> Nguyen examined district data to shed light on the responsibilities educators have to minority students. Shager discussed the dropout problem within the district. The list goes on and on. Everywhere there is evidence of a crisis.

What makes these studies remarkable is the willingness of these teachers to utilize classroom action research as a mechanism for change. The authors provide a plethora of strategies, activities, and ideas that might be adapted to and attempted in other settings. These include placing students in leadership roles, examining inequitable school policies, creating sacred time for struggling students, designing collaborative, community-building classroom activities, and developing personal connections with students who are located, or place themselves, outside the mainstream.

Several of the teachers whose research is included in this volume also recommend ways in which school, state, and federal policies might assist educators in their quest for equity. Nearly every study mentions the need for additional time and resources; several of the authors question the validity of the standardized tests used to measure intelligence and school success; and many studies point to the need for schools to attend to the realities of students' lives away from school. If educators and policymakers are to make a difference, attention must be paid to the inequities inside *and outside* of our educational institutions that lead to the marginalization of poor and minority students. If these ideas are ignored, the achievement gaps will continue to cloud the educational futures of our nation's children.

### Empowerment of Students From Diverse Backgrounds

Because current structures and practices within many schools exclude a wide variety of students, educators and policymakers must begin to develop programs and practices that empower and acknowledge students from diverse backgrounds instead of marginalizing them. Examples of this type of work have been documented throughout this book. Richards detailed the interviews she conducted in order to assist her English

language learners as they attempted to understand and follow directions during class. By validating her students' feelings of frustration, she empowered her students to play a key role in evaluating and altering teacher practices. Hammatt Kavaloski's construction of a service-learning project created opportunities for students to capitalize on their abilities and expertise while working with younger students. Hanson's use of native Spanish speakers as teaching assistants is another example of creating leadership positions for traditionally silenced populations.

Again, many of these practices are adaptable to other settings. More important, these studies call for action on the part of educators and policymakers. This can be accomplished, as several of the authors have suggested, by differentiating learning experiences; by seeking, validating, and utilizing knowledge that students bring to school; by analyzing philosophies and practices that marginalize poor and minority students; and by encouraging and funding action research at the classroom and school level that focuses on issues of equity. González, Moll, & Amanti (2005) believe that:

The border between knowledge and power can be crossed only when educational institutions no longer reify culture, when lived experiences become validated as a source of knowledge, and when the process of how knowledge is constructed and translated between groups located within nonsymmetrical relations of power is questioned. (p. 42)

### **Engagement Through Culturally Responsive Practice**

As we discussed previously in this chapter, teachers who use culturally responsive practices create learning opportunities and environments that engage all students. Lyman's classroom practices—focusing on issues of bullying, reproductive health, drugs, and AIDS—add to the list of ways in which teachers used the experiences of students to engage them academically. By addressing topics that other teachers readily label as inappropriate for elementary school students, Lyman created an honest, realistic forum for the exchange of ideas.

Teachers, administrators, policymakers, and others who engage in culturally responsive practices can try some of the following ideas: listen to stories about, and participate in, students' lives outside of school; use background knowledge about students' life experiences to drive curricular choices; hold high expectations for all students; work against traditional practices that marginalize, silence, or ignore students from diverse backgrounds; and insist that schools demonstrate the capacity to ensure that all students receive a fair and equitable school experience.



## Activism

By simply completing their studies, the authors of the Classroom Action Research projects have shown their willingness to make a difference in the lives of all children. However, their work did not end there. Many of the teachers continue to participate in action research groups in the Madison Metropolitan School District. Some have taken leadership roles in schools and utilize their power to promote change. Others work outside the schools to instigate social transformation. Most important, each teacher has taken action. Shager inspired his students to become researchers themselves by collecting information, analyzing data, and sharing their findings with a variety of audiences. His work provided opportunities to excel to students who had been unsuccessful in traditional models of schooling. Lyman's class decided to make a difference by selling ribbons to support AIDS charities. By incorporating health, mathematics, and other subject areas, Lyman taught her students that inquiry can lead to activism. Valaskey's study questioned and dismantled a department-wide tracking system that teachers had previously taken for granted. The model of service learning that Hammatt Kavaloski introduced is still being used at her alternative high school. This type of leadership from these classroom teachers is an example of the power of action research to stimulate activism by teachers.

Educators, policymakers, and members of the general public can further capitalize on the findings and actions of these teachers. By participating in discussions about inequities, by questioning unjust school practices, and by creating safe spaces in which this dialogue can occur, educators and concerned community members can begin to form networks that take action toward change. A shift in world views, leadership from inside and outside of schools, and resources such as time and money are needed for these goals to become a reality.

## TEACHERS PRODUCING EDUCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

In addition to providing examples of practices that can be adapted to other settings to promote greater educational equity, the 10 teachers whose studies are published in this book have made important contributions to the knowledge base about equity pedagogy. In the previous section, we have shown some of the intersections among the 10 studies and the research of other university academics and teachers about similar issues. Traditionally, it has been assumed that research that contributes to the official knowledge

base about teaching and learning is exclusively the job of university-based academics, who publish their work in peer-reviewed books and journals. Action research by elementary and secondary teachers primarily has been considered to be a form of teacher professional development that benefits the teachers doing it, and their pupils. Even when elementary and secondary teachers have published their research in journals and in books such as this, many policymakers and university academics have not taken their work seriously (Huberman, 1996).

We have attempted to demonstrate in this book the value of viewing the practice of equity pedagogy from the perspective of classroom teachers who are engaged in it. We agree with Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993), who argued that examining classrooms from insiders' perspectives can provide questions, insights, and ideas that are not possible to achieve from richly contextualized classroom studies conducted by outsiders to these settings, even if these studies are richly contextualized. The kind of detailed, concrete, and specific information in these studies about various aspects of promoting greater educational equity potentially can help reduce the current disconnect between teachers and educational research (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002). Our view of education research incorporates both practitioner-generated knowledge that arises out of and is integrated with practice and outsider-generated knowledge that helps us see across educational settings (Zeichner, 1995). Historically, there has been very little integration between the action research studies of K-12 teachers and the research of university academics around particular issues and topics. The studies presented in this book have illuminated particular aspects of the practices associated with equity pedagogy. The action research of K-12 teachers has the potential not only to provide concrete and specific examples of practices in different settings, but also to challenge, and help revise and elaborate our theoretical understandings of particular issues.

As Caro-Bruce and Klehr (this volume) note:

Understanding that teacher action researchers are unique and important sources of pedagogical knowledge—and that their intellectual and leadership capacity remains largely unrecognized and untapped by the academic community—reflects a potential for new working relationships between teacher researchers and academics. (p. 22)

It is our hope that studies such as those presented in this volume will allow discussions between communities of researchers in order to act on the knowledge of those who strive to realize equitable schools for all children.

## CONCLUSION

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, there is much work to be done if we are to change the societal factors that influence our nation's educational institutions. While many may see this as an overwhelming, or perhaps even impossible task, some educators and some school districts are attempting to deal with issues of educational equity at a grassroots level. The authors of the previous 10 chapters and the Madison Metropolitan School District are examples of the beacons of hope that exist in many classrooms and districts across our country.

In the words of Villegas & Lucas (2002):

We are not so unrealistic as to believe that our schools can single-handedly change the inequities that are imbedded throughout society far beyond the schoolhouse door. However, there is much that we can and must do, and the time to start is now. (p. 201)

## NOTE

1. Education Trust (2004) states, for example, that in 2001 the high school graduation rates in Wisconsin were 44 percent for African Americans, 55 percent for Latinos, 54 percent for Native Americans, and 87 percent for Whites.

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