

# 5 STAGES ON THE PATH TO EQUITY

FRAMEWORK CHALLENGES  
URBAN TEACHERS' DEFICIT  
THINKING



By Sonia James-Wilson and Michele Hancock

“Teachers are leaders when they function in professional learning communities to effect student learning; contribute to school improvement; inspire excellence in practice; and empower stakeholders to participate in educational improvement” (Childs-Bowen, Moller, & Scrivner, 2000). From an equity perspective, teachers also lead when they serve as change agents who collaborate to use equity-based approaches to meet the needs of diverse learners and to build on the strengths of their colleagues (James-Wilson, 2007). In both definitions, teacher leadership is inseparable from empowerment as teachers need to be empowered to lead and supported to sustain their efforts.

The five-stage empowerment trajectory is a framework for sustaining teacher leadership development programs. Researchers developed the framework as a result of a study focused on the ways in which teacher leaders in the Urban

Teacher Leadership Academy collaborated to recognize and challenge deficit thinking, and the influence they had on their colleagues’ thinking (Hancock, 2008). From 2005 to 2008, the academy was made possible through a partnership between the Rochester City School District and the University of Rochester and was developed and co-facilitated by the authors.

The Rochester City School District, located in western New York, serves 32,000 students in grades pre-K-12 and 10,000 adults. The students in the district are culturally diverse, with 64% black, 22% Hispanic, 11% white, and 3% Asian/Native American/East Indian/other. District facilities include 60 pre-K sites, 40 elementary schools, and 19 secondary schools. Poverty is one of the major challenges facing the district, with 84% of students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch, and in almost one-third of the schools, 90% of the students live in poverty.

## THE URBAN TEACHER LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

The mission of the Urban Teacher Leadership Acad-

emy was to develop teachers as leaders to influence others towards equity-based educational practices and school improvement. At the academy, teachers examined their own assumptions about diversity, leadership, and teaching and learning, and reflected on and internalized new understandings. Teachers applied to the academy in teams of three and worked with their colleagues to develop and implement equity-based school improvement projects. These projects were developed and piloted in the first year of the program, and implemented and evaluated in year two. The district also provided teams with a small budget to purchase required project materials.

One project helped to increase comprehension of grade-level vocabulary and communication skills, and encouraged parental involvement in school activities related to literacy. Through various school and community-based activities, families learned language development strategies they could use at home, and teachers participated in professional development to gain a deeper understanding and respect of students' home languages. In another school, a project increased teachers' awareness of their students' backgrounds. Staff traveled into the six communities where most of their students lived and participated in tours that parents led. As a result, they deepened their relationships with families, developed a greater appreciation of the obstacles many faced and the local supports available to them, and used their new understandings to make the curriculum more culturally responsive.

Academy performance standards reflect the six elements of the teacher leadership for equity framework (James-Wilson, 2007). They are also compatible with the seven essential standards of the district, those established by the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), and the Standards for Staff Development created by NSDC related to instructional leadership development and school-based professional development (Roy & Hord, 2003).

Specifically, the objectives of the academy program were to:

1. Prepare teacher leaders who are able to ensure equity for all students.
2. Encourage teachers to use inclusive leadership practices in schools.
3. Provide assistance to teacher leaders as they work to develop professional and inclusive school cultures.
4. Encourage teacher leaders to recognize, understand, and accept their role as "cultural workers."
5. Encourage teacher leaders to link their professional development to the school improvement goals of their buildings and the vision of the district.
6. Prepare teacher leaders who are able to provide professional development for others.

7. Prepare teacher leaders who are able to strengthen the ability of families to increase the academic achievement of their children.
8. Support teachers to develop the skills required to manage human and material resources in ways that ensure equity for all students.

#### THE FIVE-STAGE EMPOWERMENT TRAJECTORY

Despite the wide variety of school contexts within which academy participants worked, there were three key factors that contributed to their ability to lead equity-focused change, including:

- The ability to influence others to adopt instructional practices that support students' needs;
- The influence to change operational structures that were not in the best interest of students; and
- A school principal willing to share power and champion the work of teacher leaders, including the allocation of human and material resources, and defending the importance of their work in the face of skeptics.

In the research on which this article is based (Hancock, 2008), researchers used interviews and focus groups to gather data that help explain how district-sponsored programs provide a context within which these factors could emerge. From this data, researchers developed the five-stage empowerment trajectory to provide a conceptual framework for thinking about the ways in which districts and higher education institutions could collaborate to create programs that promote teacher leadership beyond the formal and technical roles most commonly in place in schools, such as department chairs, lead teachers, or curriculum specialists. Even though these stages are presented in a linear fashion, they are progressive and recurring. For example, even though nothing can happen until all parties are enabled (stage 1), the support required to initiate programs must be sustained throughout the program.

#### 1 ENABLING

During this initial phase, a school district partners with a higher education institution to make a long-term commitment to develop and implement the teacher leadership program. During the establishment of this partnership, it is imperative that both institutions assign formal leaders to manage and facilitate the program, and that these individuals have the authority to make decisions related to the financial support of the program. The University of Rochester provided space, assisted with the recruitment of teachers, and James-Wilson (co-author), then a full-time faculty member, directed the program. As a district administrator, Hancock (co-author) co-facilitated the program as part of her regular duties.

During the analysis of data from the study, three cat-

egories emerged to describe the role of the principal related to the development of teacher leadership. First, principals need to motivate and inspire staff to work diligently to improve student outcomes. They also need to be able to relate to staff who are not directly involved, including school-based planning teams and other community stakeholders, to communicate the importance of promoting teacher growth and development. Finally, principals need to empower the staff through the provision of human and material resources to ensure the sustainability of the work once a district-based program ends.

## 2 EXPLORING

During this phase, teachers in the academy program explored their personal and professional lives during professional development sessions held one weekend each month for nine hours. Their process of continual reflection and self-critique fostered a willingness and openness to re-examine and confront their beliefs, attitudes, and expectations for diverse students, their families, and communities. “The program taught us some new and valuable information related to racism, classism, sexism, and other issues that affect our children” one teacher said. “Many things read about and discussed in the program were things I had already begun researching and confronting on my own, especially through my personal relationships,” another said. “The readings and conversations deepened my understanding of these issues and allowed me to share what I have experienced or learned with other educators in our district.”

Academy teams used their schools’ improvement plans as the starting point from which to identify key challenges to the school’s ability to address inequities and to engage others in examining their practices and tendencies towards deficit thinking. Educators exhibit deficit thinking when their beliefs and perspectives lead them

to overgeneralize about students’ family backgrounds and demonstrate low expectations for students even before they come to school (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, pp. 159-164).

The challenge of low expectations resonated for one school administrator who worked with teacher leaders to examine ways in which belief systems and attitudes influenced the staff’s daily interaction with students and parents. “We were nailing the in-

struction, becoming better educators, but (closing the achievement gap) was really about our attitudes. I was compelled to take a closer look at data and realized that any gap is really about low expectations,” she said. By the end of the program, teacher leaders reported they had “the guts and the nerve to challenge deficit comments from their colleagues,” and that they learned to have “open and honest discussions with peers to challenge deficit thinking that weren’t uncomfortable or unsettling.”

## 3 EVOLVING

This stage involves building the capacity required to initiate and sustain the transformations in thinking and action required to encourage teacher leadership. Principals play a major role in establishing the conditions required for teacher leadership to thrive (Corallo, 1995), and at the school level, long-standing hierarchical governance structures prevent the support of newer conceptions of leadership that emphasize shared decision making and collaboration among teachers (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Flattening these organizational arrangements requires schools, teachers, and administrators to change the way they think about the concept of power (Buckner & McDowelle, 2000).

Hancock’s (2008) research suggested that principals who embraced and modeled shared, distributive leadership created the conditions for teacher empowerment. Academy teacher leaders explained that this was an essential element for generating support for their equity projects because their principals generated a sense that the equity issue being addressed was a schoolwide concern and not just of interest to the academy team.

## 4 ENGAGING OTHERS

Because teacher leadership that fosters collegial relationships encourages collective responsibility, student gains, and improved teacher quality (Sabatini, 2002), the academy program emphasized collaborative leadership. Every program component (including the curriculum, field trips, small- and whole-group activities, and the year-end presentations to school, district, and community stakeholders) provided experiences that supported participants to become collaborative leaders, which are described by Rubin (2002) as “strategic, logical, and systemic thinker(s) who understand the steps that must be taken to make things happen and who can engage collaborative partners in productive and efficient planning process” (pp. 55).

Two themes — group process and strategic planning — emerged in the data as collaborative processes teacher leadership teams used to create the conditions for effective equity project implementation. Working in teams to design and execute their equity-based school improvement projects allowed participants to make the most of the individual skill sets of each team member and pay attention to the functional dynamics of the group. Additionally, participants used three strategies to influence their colleagues’ practice, including recognizing

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Rochester, N.Y.

Number of schools: **64**

Enrollment: **32,000** students

Staff: **6,500**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	11%
Black:	64%
Hispanic:	22%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	3%
Native American:	0%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: **10%**

Languages spoken: **72**

Free/reduced lunch: **84%**

Special education: **18%**

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individual strengths, compromise, and conversations. Together these strategies helped to garner and maintain the commitment of individual team members and other classroom teachers in their buildings. Collectively they understood that achieving their goals depended on positive collaborative relationships.

## 5 ENERGIZING OTHERS

As revealed in the data, academy participants entered the program with a high degree of teacher efficacy. They were confident in their ability to influence student achievement and believed that it was their personal responsibility to do so. The power of this positive thinking was contagious and helped energize team members and colleagues. The majority of the participants had been teaching for more than 10 years and were ripe for the opportunity to become part of a districtwide initiative where they could make real change — not as a lone ranger, but as part of a dynamic and dedicated team of educators.

Interview and focus group data suggests that academy teams noticed there were professional practices that helped students to see themselves as learners. Because they were teacher-initiated, student-centered, and improvement-focused, equity-based school improvement projects encouraged teachers across their buildings to use these practices. This instructional focus helped energize their work and maintain momentum over the course of their two-year commitment. The teams promoted specific practices including: maintaining high expectations for all students, making connections between school and home cultures, making subject matter relevant to the lives and cultural backgrounds of their students, and engaging families in their children's education.

## ACHIEVING EMPOWERMENT

It is clear that “teachers cannot be given power (empowered) without accepting it” (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 1999, p. 26), but it is also clear that administrators must know how to create conditions that foster empowerment and that school districts must make long-term commitments to supporting schools. When schools consulted, involved, and engaged teachers in making key decisions, they enjoyed greater student and staff morale, and educators were more willing to adapt and change their practice to improve student learning. Over the course of the academy program and subsequent district teacher leadership initiatives, teams used equity projects as a vehicle to demonstrate that instruction could be changed, adapted, and reinforced to improve schools' ability to meet the instructional needs of all students.

Teacher leaders and their colleagues need ongoing support to make their work meaningful (Hart, 1994), and district-higher education collaborations focused on teacher leadership development are one way to provide a context within which teachers leaders can emerge and flourish. The findings from this study support the claim that the judicious planning, implementation, and evaluation of a teacher leadership program focused

on the real work of urban schooling can cultivate collaborative learning experiences to connect people, purpose, and practice toward a common goal of equity for all students.

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