There’s a gap in teacher knowledge base [for teaching English Language Learners (ELLs)]. The gap isn’t with the students, the gap is with us . . . As we, as teachers, increase our capacity to meet the needs of our students then we’re going to see improvement. So that perceived achievement gap — it’s not with the students, it’s with us. We’re the ones that need to close that gap and we need to focus on how we can improve.

- Allison Audet, Worcester teacher

Stephen Covey, the author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, encourages his readers to categorize challenges into two circles. The outer circle, the circle of concern, includes challenges that cause worry and angst but may be out of our immediate control. The inner circle, the circle of influence, includes challenges that we can actually do something about. By taking action over what is in our circle of influence, we become proactive agents of change.

In this article, we will describe a program that uses Covey’s philosophy to address a challenge that is pointed out by Uriarte, et al., 2011 — namely, a gap in our knowledge of how to teach our growingly diverse student population. In Covey’s terms, this gap is inside our circle of influence; it is something we can control. By taking ownership over our own learning, we can adjust our behavior, instruction and assessment and become more effective teachers for our students. It is important to remember, however, that the learning process is iterative. It doesn’t happen in one professional development session or in one course, but through a willingness to engage in a conscious inquiry cycle, a cycle of action and reflection that requires taking instructional risks and measuring the outcomes of those risks to inform future instruction. (Tung et al., 2011)
TEACHER INQUIRY AS A SOLUTION

Without inquiry we can allow ourselves to stagnate in our methods and we may miss out on exceptional learning opportunities. Teaching should be a cycle of inquiry. Through questioning of practices, student success, and curriculum we allow ourselves to self-assess and better perfect our teaching.

- Chavani Taylor, Worcester teacher

The Worcester ELL Teacher Residency Program (WELLTR), an ESL Masters program in collaboration with the Center for Collaborative Education, Cambridge College, and the Worcester Public Schools, was designed to address gaps in teacher knowledge through intensive training combined with classroom application. WELLTR teacher residents are encouraged to see themselves as agents of change, proactively meeting the challenges that lie within their circle of influence. Teachers consciously apply the cycle of inquiry — on a daily basis for small issues and then, over the course of a school year, through a more formal action research project on a larger issue. Whether on a smaller or larger scale, the process starts by defining the challenge and forming a hypothesis about the causes. Teachers then identify solutions and create a viable action plan such as a new scaffolding strategy, a new differentiation method, or a new approach to a student with a learning issue. After implementing their strategy, teachers then evaluate or reassess the intervention and reflect on whether it made a difference. Teachers go through this process multiple times a day for small classroom challenges and over longer periods of time for larger issues. The evaluation process requires collecting multiple measures of data, including student work, formal assessments, and teacher observations. This data helps to frame the problem and informs the teacher’s decisions about next steps. The cycle of action and reflection facilitates teacher learning and leads to positive student growth and achievement.

Effective teachers adopt inquiry as an intrinsic habit whereby they are continuously addressing their own knowledge gap about ways to meet the needs of their ELLs. “Instilling an ‘inquiry state of mind’ into yourself keeps education moving forward,” says instructional aide Katelyn O’Leary. “It’s self-evaluation and self-improvement…it keeps [us focused on] requirements of differentiation, scaffolding, and individualization that are necessary for a [diverse] population.” Teachers who take charge of their own learning develop this “inquiry state of mind” with a mission to reach every learner in their classroom and adapt their practices to meet students where they are. As teacher Nicole Girouard explains,
“I am a change agent by helping children get the education they deserve. I can change my teaching to suit their needs [so that they] become successful.”

TEACHER INQUIRY IN WORCESTER SCHOOLS
When asked to reflect on his day-to-day inquiry process, history teacher Sean Carroll discussed a time when his ELLs were struggling to engage with in-class texts. After exploring possible clauses, he implemented specific strategies to target this issue. Sean found that to engage his students, especially his ELLs, in the longer readings, he had to “take things that are huge and overwhelming and give them to [the students] in pieces,” a text-modification strategy known as “chunking.” Sean described how taking instructional risks and implementing research-based strategies helps him grow as a teacher and empowers his students to believe that, with the appropriate supports, they can meet the standard.

Kim Langhill, a first grade teacher, noticed that her ELLs struggled to show their content knowledge on summative classroom assessments. Recognizing that language can be a barrier, she reviewed her formal assessments and made changes to make them more accessible. “I’m much more aware of rephrasing and rewording the question and directing the kids to look at the visuals that are there to help them,” Kim reported. By taking out the unnecessary words in word problems, incorporating visuals, and offering her students multiple ways to show what they know, she saw an improvement in student performance on classroom assessments. Kim’s engagement in the inquiry cycle has allowed her to target the specific needs and challenges of her ELLs.

The preceding examples reflect small-scale, day-to-day inquiry that addresses immediate student concerns. WELLTR teacher residents also partake in a large-scale teacher action research project that aims to solve more complex, long-term issues at the student, classroom or school level. Ashley McPartland, an instructional aide at a school for Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE), noticed a student lack of engagement, which was manifested in the form of behavioral issues. After reviewing the literature on SIFE students, the effects of trauma, and the process of acculturation, Ashley implemented several strategies to teach behavioral expectations. She found that when she took steps to acknowledge student voice through student input and self-assessment, students became more engaged and felt more in control of their learning. “My responsibility is not only to decrease language barriers and the achievement gap, but also to find ways to reach and teach the whole student and reduce any barrier to academic success to the best of my ability,” she said. “One person can in-
crease protective factors for traumatized children, but a school-wide approach brings many people together and increases protective factors ten-fold."

Language arts teacher Melissa Poirier focused on the issue of ELLs struggling to comprehend complex expository text. For her project, she researched effective reading strategies and scaffolds, and then developed her own graphic organizer to use with students needing extra support to access the material. Multiple measures of data collection showed resulting improvements in both engagement and reading comprehension. Prior to engaging in this kind of teacher inquiry, Melissa was aware that “these ‘problems’ existed but I never knew how to address them or if I could solve them. After identifying a possible solution, I realized other teachers have had the same problem and now ask for [my] graphic organizer [so they can] resolve the problem in their classrooms.”

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD**

In the cases described above, WELLTR teacher residents implemented the inquiry process individually. However, WELLTR also explores the importance of collaborative inquiry as an essential, systemic practice for schools. Teacher Katerina Kambosos suggests that collaborative teacher inquiry can happen when teachers “find a peer mentor to share best practices with and problem-solve concerns.” When teacher inquiry is combined with opportunities to share this learning with others in professional learning communities and through collegial observations, the impact on teacher and student learning can be substantially deepened and expanded. “Finding that there is a common [issue affecting ELLs] can be empowering because you are not alone and you can brainstorm together,” says teacher Maria Poirier, “[When we] spread the knowledge of ‘good practices’ then they grow and share.” The circle of influence is expanded.

This approach builds on the belief that educators are lifelong learners who must continuously adapt to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. By promoting teacher inquiry, we can encourage lasting professional development. And when that inquiry is teacher-driven, educators can make informed changes in their everyday practice that have a significant impact on student growth. Over time, when inquiry becomes habitual—both individually and systematically—the gap in teacher knowledge can be addressed proactively so that every student can have equal access to a meaningful education.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS
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