Engineering A Path Towards Equity
Cahn Fellows Program - Cohort 16

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Abstract

As we engineer our path towards equity, we want to ensure ALL students are engaged in cognitively demanding tasks, thus leveling the proverbial "playing field". During our journey of increasing cognitive demand and improving equitable practices with a focus on English Language Learners and students with disabilities, we discovered that we must start by examining our own beliefs and practices around student and adult learning and what we are all capable of accomplishing. This deep dive into our espoused theory vs. our theory in use has helped us rethink; reimagine a path towards ALL students and adults meeting proficiency and towards winning the game.

Introduction

In the early 2000's the Belmont Cragin neighborhood housed many of Chicago's overcrowded schools. It was common to have elementary schools that were designed for 600-800 students have nearly 1,200 students. Parents advocated for a new school in the community that offered a Magnet program. In response, Chicago Public Schools purchased an unoccupied parochial all girl's high school to be retrofitted as a new elementary school. In 2010, Marvin Camras Children's Engineering school opened its' doors to 550 Prek-8th grade students.

Camras is situated in a residential area in the Northwest side of Chicago. Over the past 9 years, Camras has grown to a population of 950 students where the majority of the student body come from homes where a language other than English is often heard/spoken and primarily Latinx decent. A little over one-third is officially identified as English Learners. Often our students come in with capabilities of communicating to a degree in two languages. These communication skills tend to revolve around social constructs. The knowledge of both languages outweigh that of a single language speaker, when comparing to a native speaker in either language our students are behind.

Although our staff demographic makeup does not mirror that of our students, nearly two-thirds speak a 2nd language and about 80% of our teaching staff is ESL and/or bilingual endorsed.

Our school vision is to be a world class engineering school, where all our students are at proficiency, exhibiting strong habits of mind and leading their community to prosper.

Our academic program includes a balanced literacy approach in grades PreK-2 where teachers have used Lucy Calkins work as a springboard for their units, Engage New York Literacy units in 3-8 and Eureka Math materials in grades K-8. All students have a science block daily and participate in health, physical education, art, STEM, literacy, and music throughout the year. We implement a late exit bilingual program.

Statement of Problem

Camras' founding administrators had several basic beliefs based on best practice. First and foremost, all students could learn at high levels and that failure was feedback. Students in the bilingual program should be taught in their native language while acquiring the target language. Students requiring specialized services should have services implemented in LRE to the greatest extent possible. All students should be provided learning experiences they may not otherwise have especially in the field of science and engineering. Finally, the administration believed assessments should be used to inform instruction and decisions made rather than be used for evaluative purposes. These simple beliefs based in best practices attracted high quality educators to Camras and have led them to stay. These best practices drive decisions at Camras yet have not translated into strong positive results as measured through Chicago Public Schools' School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP). During the first three years of the revised SQRP, (beginning 2013-2014), Camras was rated a 2+.

Teachers worked alongside with administration to first improve overall student attendance then work on My Voice, My School Survey results (based on teacher/student feedback regarding the school). Camras' rating inched up yearly via points, (although not apparent in rating) until finally achieving a level 1 rating in the 2016-2017 school year. Throughout the process of improvement, we have tried to understand why our students' attainment levels, as measured through NWEA, weren't higher. Other measures, such as the number of teachers attaining proficient/distinguished on Chicago Teaching Framework, systems and structures for grade level and professional development, network and district recognition of strong program implementation for Literacy, Math and Social Emotional Learning would suggest otherwise.

During the 2017-2018 school year, our school partnered with the University of Chicago Consortium and began to dig deeper into the area of student achievement and improve our rating in

SQRP. We disaggregated our On/Off track data. This data defines "on track" as having a grade of A-C in Reading and Math, an attendance average of 95% or higher, and no misconducts in groups 3-6 of Chicago Public Schools' Student Code of Conduct. As a school, we noticed that by the time our students reached 8th grade, our girls were outperforming the boys by twice the amount. So, our girls had about 90% on track record, our boys had about 45% on track. Upon further investigation, we noticed this trend remained fairly consistent regardless of year and performance.   This led us to our original question "How might we engage our middle school boys at deeper levels?"

Methods

After our summer institute at Cahn, my ally and I knew we wanted to write in equity and espoused theory vs. theory in action into the question but weren't sure exactly how to go about it. Not only did we want teachers' espoused theory on instruction to match what was really happening, we wanted to make sure our own espoused theory on best practices in learning matched our theory in use as it related to adult learning. In doing so, we wanted to make sure our systems and structures for both adults and students aligned. My ally and I also knew we became open to our question potentially changing if we dug around a little bit.

Our original thoughts were to work with our Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) head on with the idea of equity and how we might infuse that into our work, which includes discussing our own biases and understanding of how it impacts the work we do. We also began planting the seeds of what equity with our staff so they can begin to examine their own biases and implications it has on teaching. From Dr. Riehl's summer session, we were inspired to use an image to help convey an area of need. We used an available image from the Internet where there are three illustrations each of three boys, each a different height, standing in front of a fence looking at the baseball game (see Appendix A). We said the game is like our curriculum. In the first picture, where nothing is really done, some students aren't able to access it. We likened the second picture to the Multisystem of Supports, some students need no boxes, some need one, some need two. We then discussed how the system is a great "for now" or "in the meantime" approach but is potentially flawed if not done correctly. Students can't carry the boxes/extra supports with them all the time. The system was not designed to support a lot of students needing 1-2 boxes. As we spoke these words, our ILT members really took interest in the image and we ended up using it with the whole staff. We didn't realize that our image was also flawed and did not align with what we were saying our beliefs around equity were.

From our school improvement plan (Continuous Improvement Work Plan – CIWP) our ILT had previously identified that we work on cognitive demand. Based on previous years feedback on grade level, we wanted to ensure teachers felt the time spent was "useful". We also wanted our ILT to move away from this idea that PD has to run in an "I do, we do, you do" fashion. We wanted to "up" the cognitive demand we were putting on our own staff and have them embrace productive struggle and questioning as a way to improve our own practices.   Therefore, we designed a 4-5-week inquiry cycle for teachers to use during grade level. The first 2-3 weeks would be spent on learning more about, planning, and implementing safe practice around a topic. The next week would involve peer observation; the last week would be where teachers brought in student work to discuss what they saw. Our ILT decided the first cycle would be around standards and the next following one around questioning.

In the meantime, my ally and I spent time looking into our data in different ways. We also began to notice how our staff responded to the different data sets. We noticed our staff was more open to exploring why our middle school boys were not being successful and what they may do to change that, as opposed to exploring why our students with specialized services and identified English Language Learners were not doing so well. For example, our middle school teachers created a list of students who needed additional interventions. Upon pulling data for these students, I noticed over 90% of the

students were English Language Learners. When I brought this up to the team, inclusive of my ally, no one was surprised outside of the fact they thought it would be 100% of the students.

Within the same timeframe, our Instructional Leadership Team began our work in improving cognitive demand for our students. In addition to defining elements that play into cognitive demand (standards/expectations, questioning, rigorous tasks, academic language) our team conducted a walk-through of classroom instruction to determine a baseline of our practice. We found our Tier I instruction tended to have a cognitive demand level of 2-3 (as measured the TRU-Dimensions Rubric) while our small group tended to have a cognitive demand level of 1-2. In addition, we tended to over scaffold whole/small group with instructional practices such as modeling away the challenge, providing too many visual supports and overly simplified language.   In addition, both in observation and by teachers' own acknowledgment, many were not differentiating instruction appropriately to accommodate the language needs of our students.   This seemed to answer why our students may not be showing higher attainment levels and why some of our identified English Learners ended up "stuck in the bilingual program", being referred for intervention, and/or for Specialized Services.

With this new dive into data and practice and our takeaways from the summer, we changed our question to "How might we better align our espoused theory on equity and growth mindset with our theory in use to drive academic outcomes for our Diverse Learners and English Language Learners?"

Our outcomes:
1. Teachers will engage in high cognitive demand professional development.
2. Teachers will use data to intentionally plan for high cognitive demanding tasks that provides access without removing challenge (prevent over scaffolding).
3. Increase the cognitive demand in small group instruction.
3. Students who are identified as English Language Learners and/or will engage in high cognitive demanding tasks.

Our first cycle was around standards, revisiting them, and understanding the grade level standards as well as the standards above and below.   What we found was that there was limited impact on student learning. Although teachers were better able to articulate what was expected above and/or below grade level, planning didn't necessarily change. In addition, based on observations, we didn't see a change in instruction. As we moved into our second cycle around questioning and how we may use it as a driver to have students engage deeper into the work. My ally and I started to really investigate how might we match our espoused theory with our theory in use. During our ILT meetings, we tried to refrain from telling the ILT members what we thought, instead we would ask them questions to help deepen their own thinking and understanding. Furthermore, we had the ILT members reflect on whether or not they had seen a change in their own lesson planning/instructional practices within their own classrooms and answer why or why not, then that of their grade level teammates. We then posed the question to ILT, how might we have teachers implement what they are learning with a quicker turnaround time. The ILT tweaked grade level meetings to include more time for teachers to discuss and create/commit to bite sized actionable items they would discuss the following week. Our big focus was how do we move away from "check the box" to a more profound impactful implementation of learning.

Throughout the learning cycles, we would continue to reference the image of the children watching the game. During one of the grade level meetings, my ally pointed out the flaw in the image and said why aren't we focusing in having students play the game and some teachers nodded their heads in agreement. This sparked a renewed curiosity and offered us a new lens in which to look at the work. We were intentionally changing existing systems and structures to help promote change. My ally's and my question became how the existing structures and systems might be blinding us as to either what really needs to change or how might it actually be changed.

This became more evident when reflecting how tweaking grade levels worked in seeing more impactful change in the classrooms, the ILT decided to put even more ownership on teachers by

changing the last cycle's rhythm. The ILT proposed that teachers choose their own "project" around cognitive demand, implement it and then present it to the grade level. Therefore, during the 2-3-week cycles, teachers were to do their own research on the topic (constraints were it had to be an area we had studied this year). In lieu of peer observations, teachers were to record themselves either video or audio, self-reflect or reflect with a partner, improve their implementation and discuss impact based on student work. The ILT's ask was they wanted administration to present the project idea to the grade level teams. My own initial reaction was a bit of fear. I thought that it being at the end of the year, teachers would resist. However, I trusted the ILT's judgment and knew they wouldn't propose something they themselves wouldn't support. My ally and I added some non-negotiable items that allowed for teacher choice but helped move the work forward. The ILT worked out timelines and took over the facilitating of the cycle. We are in the midst of this cycle.

As Dr. Reihl discussed inquiry cycles in theory are cyclical, in reality, they take many twists and turns and have multiple entry points. There have been additional things that we have worked on with our teachers that we know are influencing the work of teams.

First, we have decided to tackle bias head on with our instructional leadership team. We have read through articles and research, watched videos, and has had conversations about how this might be influencing our work. We have relied on The Opportunity Myth by The New Teachers' Project to help refocus our work in equity, discuss and reflect upon our existing structures and systems, and recommit to providing the best for our students. It has helped both the ILT and staff set common language, ideas, and goals in early February to refocus and re-energize the work we are doing.

We have also worked with the Bilingual Lead teacher and Diverse Learner/English Learner Specialist to learn about and implement what the more current research says about bi-literacy, while the special education team has been working on raising expectations for our students that need specialized services. During the time I have met with these teachers, we have come to understand how much policy we must follow that may not be supported by research. And how much this policy is influencing us and may actually be part of the reason our espoused theory doesn't match our theory in use. These individuals, some of whom sit on ILT, have also made connections with the work being done in ILT and grade level. They are noticing and feeling that rather the work they are doing is an "add on" to the work of grade levels and ILT, it is actually supported. These individuals are excited to help organize how the learning and work they have been doing this year will be used during next year's learning.

Finally, we have implemented Ways of Knowing not intentionally in the work of the project, but to help teacher teams understand how one another needs to hear feedback from one another has also been powerful. This has then allowed the teams to build deeper relationships and in turn get the work done.

Results

Some of the key outcomes from the project:
We are on track with the following:
- Teachers are engaging in cycles of learning around areas that impact cognitive demand that we are asking students to engage in. The structures of the professional development have changed to give teachers more ownership in the learning, thus improving the cognitive demand being placed on them.
- As teachers are choosing the students to focus on, they are truly concentrating the work on English Learners and/or students requiring specialized services.

What we are working on still:
- Teachers providing the appropriate scaffolds for language to be within the zone of proximal development without overly reducing cognitive demand.

Key outcomes that we have added after the project began or have been influenced by the other work we are doing:

- Staff is becoming aware of their underlying biases that are influencing expectations of students and therefore impacting teaching and learning. They have been more open to owning and discussing their own beliefs and challenging others.
- The administration and instructional leadership team is getting closer to aligning our own espoused theory to theory in use by making a conscious effort to both remain focus and continuously assessing impact of our professional learning on student learning by asking "what is the evidence of change?"
- We have been more mindful of how existing structures and systems may be prohibiting change.
- We have been more mindful on how to keep our staff curious by asking questions of them instead of giving answers.
- We have continued to keep the conversation with staff about equity.

Reflections

Our work will continue next year around equity and cognitive demand. We will explore how data is currently influencing our beliefs about the students and how we instead use the data to continue to improve cognitive demand. In addition, we will be exploring whole staff the research on biliteracy and the brain as a way to work through some of our current biases on who is actually an English Language learner and how to best help them learn.

My own reflection on my growth as a leader is that initially in my mind, this project was going to be more technical - like thinking about what routines, checklists, structures can we put in place to ensure what we are doing is in alignment to our espoused theory. However, our project has taken a more adaptive one for our staff, instructional leadership team and myself. Our staff has had to examine our own beliefs (mostly subconscious) about our students. We have had to ask ourselves, although we say we believe our students can learn, do we really mean at high levels? Are we using the same meaning of high levels for all students? My leadership team has had to examine what we believe our staff is capable of. Our staff believes in and celebrates high levels of collaborations, but what were we really asking teachers to collaborate on? Were we engaging them in cognitive demanding learning that will really impact teaching and learning or are we asking them to mimic procedures and routines at surface level? For myself, taking a deep reflective look to see what beliefs I hold that lead me to subconsciously put things in place that prevent everyone from moving forward.

Although the district is beginning to address the equity issues through our learning summits, it can be easily glossed over or done as a check the box way (i.e. we attended that Professional Development, we read that article) without allowing the equity issue to really help us reflect on how the current practice may perpetuate or break the concerns. If it weren't for the Cahn fellowship, we wouldn't have had the tools to be able to begin to self-reflect at deeper levels.   My ally and I are continuously noticing what is either making us or our staff uncomfortable and/or stagnant in moving the work forward and looking as to how to address it in ways that align with our deep-seated belief in equity for all.   We have taken this opportunity to do our own research through readings and professional development opportunities for the specific purpose of making intentional examination of our practices and actual changes of our practice.

In participating in this program, I have learned that to focus on an area of concern does not always equate to following a sequential set of steps in resolving it. It is okay to ask a question (or two or three), take some steps and revisit, tweak or shift what we are doing in order to meet our larger goal. Problems worth solving do not have easy answers. They are a great puzzle that need care to ensure that they begin to get solved. In the future, I know that I have to own more of the questions around how I might

change something about what I'm doing to better support the change that we are trying to accomplish. Through this specific project, I learned that I have to make sure my actions match my words... if good teaching involves cognitive demand, where students are allowed to "play the proverbial game" instead of watch it, then I too must allow our staff to do the same.

About half way through the year, when I began to notice change was not happening, my initial gut reaction was to tell my team what I noticed. Instead, I started to ask the team more questions to ensure they saw something similar then think of possible solutions. I also made sure to use encouraging words. However, what I did not do and in retrospect what would have been beneficial was to set up short-term goals up front and celebrate those wins.

In addition, there was a unique situation that occurred in our building this year. We had a mercury incident that resulted in our school building being shut down for almost two weeks and our students being housed in two alternate school sites.

During the two weeks, I had to work through managing the reality of our building being evacuated/closed in terms of logistics (transitioning students between buildings, supporting teachers in obtaining materials/copies), understanding and working with several local and national agencies as they coordinate clean-up efforts, keeping stakeholders informed and calm when minimal information was available, and keeping the focus on student learning both during and after the ordeal. During the two weeks, I relied heavily on Lily's presentation of leading through crisis (for obvious reasons), Barbara's presentation on self-care (to ensure that I was both physically and emotionally able to handle the unknowns coming the next day) and on Ellie's presentation on Ways of Knowing (in helping to quickly identify individuals' preference to help build/focus teams that the Cahn project was ultimately about students and their emotional well-being, as well as health).

In the aftermath, relying in the experience of refocusing the troops (like Gettysburg taught us) and again Lily's presentation where she discusses leading beyond the crisis helped me work with my team to rather quickly refocus on student learning and continuing the work of the school.

My ally's reflection:

As an Ally, this project and the Cahn program has helped me to reconnect to why I went into education-equity. It is easy to lose sight of what is most important in the day to day operations of a school yet it is imperative to keep what is most important at the forefront of our minds and everyday decision making. Throughout this project, I have cultivated a deeper understanding of my espoused theory versus my actual actions or theory in use. In reflection, I realize that there are times of misalignment. I am aiming not only to articulate our vision but to ensure that my actions align and support our vision. Through this process, I discovered that the first question that is asked may not be the final question that is explored. Real change takes time, thought and reflection. Also, it is easy to focus in on technical issues presented but it is more difficult to address the real/adaptive issues.

Being part of the Cahn fellowship as an Ally allowed time to deepen a partnership/ relationship with my principal. This time allowed us to reflect upon my personal growth areas as well as the growth in our schoolwide improvement. The sessions allowed me the opportunity to partake in professional development, readings and conversations with others to push my thinking as well as the thinking of others. The area of study that impacted my work the most during this year was around systems of change. During this learning, it allowed me to reflect upon which phase we are in and the process of change as a whole in moving the work forward. We have moved through each of these phases and at times the phases have intertwined. It has helped me in understanding the importance of sticking and reflecting on one priority to see change and get closer to reaching our vision.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to all involved in selecting our school project. It is an honor to have a distinguished program understand and acknowledge the work we are doing at Camras as meaningful work. Thank you to all the professors and mentors at Cahn who have taken time to not only listen to my own difficulties in leadership, but lovingly support my growth to becoming more reflective in practice and confident in action. Finally, thank you to Camras staff and parents for allowing me to not only dream the big picture ball game, but helping design and implement a plan that allows the big picture to come to fruition. A team is only as strong as their weakest link and unfortunately at times, that is the principal. I am grateful for the opportunity to strengthen my own leadership as to strengthen our Camras team.

EQUALITY VERSUS EQUITY