



UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE AT SCALE
A Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Equity and Excellence at Scale: An Eco-cultural Perspective on Change

An Interview with Carol Lee



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

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About Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale

This interview was produced for the Web site *Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale*, a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The site grew out of a forum convened by the Institute in 2006 which brought together a group of prominent education advocates and stakeholders to create a powerful, integrated framework that would reconcile divergent ways of defining educational equity and excellence, along with differing – and sometimes competing – views about which strategies work best to promote high-quality education for *all* students.

Please visit www.annenberginstitute.org/equity for more essays, multimedia materials, and interviews containing definitions of *equity* and *excellence* and descriptions of strategies educators today are employing. We invite you to participate in the dialogue by using the site's interactive features.

Interview conducted by Heather Harding, principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University


The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization at Brown University that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools, especially those serving disadvantaged children. The Institute works through partnerships with school districts and school reform networks and in collaboration with national and local organizations skilled in educational research, policy, and effective practices to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

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Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University
Box 1985
Providence, RI 02912
www.annenberginstitute.org

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 HEATHER HARDING: *I have four areas that I'm interested in talking with you about and getting your feedback on, if they make sense to you. One is, I want to give you the opportunity to talk a little bit more about why it's important for educators to have the eco-cultural perspective that you talk about in the briefing materials for the Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale forum – it sort of weaves through a lot of your work.*

I also wondered if you might talk about what you said on the panel that we were on at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting about White supremacy clouding our vision when we're trying to do some of this work from an educational equity and excellence perspective. One thing I was hoping you might speak to after we launched this site with content from Howard Fuller was that I wanted to know more about why you chose to take your schools charter and whether or not that had anything to do with scale, because one of the big features of the equity project here was that we have to think about this equity work at scale.

Cultural Influences on Learning

CAROL LEE: We can start with the eco-cultural perspective stuff. I think that my response here is going to relate to my response to the second question. I am increasingly convinced that the discussion about, for example, the achievement gap is correctly situated in issues of political discussions around questions of equity and opportunity to learn and that that's a fundamental grounding for that discussion and a *necessary* grounding for that discussion.

At the same time, I think that understanding the problems with this achievement gap also reflects fundamental questions about how humans learn, and the reason that I'm increasingly interested in trying to link these two discussions is because I think that as long as our grounding is in the political realm – and I'm in no way arguing that it absolutely has to be – just because we have scientific grounding for the work isn't going to make it happen. It's politics that'll make it happen.

But I also think that issues having to do with culture and learning are, particularly as it relates to people of African descent and other populations that are not identified as

Carol D. Lee is co-coordinator of the Spencer Research Training Program at the School of Education and Social Policy and professor of African American Studies and of Learning Sciences at Northwestern University.

INTERVIEWER
Heather Harding is a principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

White, are pretty much taken out of the discussion of fundamental scientific questions about learning.

Either there's some fundamental principle informed by science about how people learn that's derived from studying White people – and so there's one big set of macro theories here – or, if you're looking at diverse pathways by which people learn, it doesn't have anything to do with us or it doesn't have anything to do with science, especially around learning.

People in human development are much more likely to think about issues of cultural influences around socialization and family-social networks. But when it comes to the school question, it's not in the realm of science. So, I think that there are a number of scientific domains having to do with cognition, having to do with social-emotional development, or having to do with understanding how social and emotional development and cognitive development are intimately and dynamically intertwined and linked for all human beings. And this fundamental understanding that we, as human beings, move from one setting to the next – as human beings, we're hard-wired to be sensitive, to look for patterns in our environment in order to navigate and figure out what we're supposed to do, especially when we meet situations that are new. And when we meet situations that are new, our default response is: What does it have to do with what I already know?

So if we're going to consciously design environments to help people learn stuff – that being one of the specialized jobs in school – it seems to me that it inevitably flows from those premises that I stated: that you have to take into account what young people know, believe, experience, do when they're not in school. Historically, in the field of education, what kids who are poor and kids who are identified as non-White do – those sorts of routine practices have been historically viewed as deficits to be overcome. And I think that the kind of work that all of us have been doing has been about trying to reposition that argument – to say that not only is it *relevant* what they know, do, experience, value outside of school, but it has to be taken into account and that it's *not a negative resource*. That doesn't mean that there aren't negative resources in their environment. There certainly are, but there are also positive ones.

The Importance of Prior Knowledge and Experience: Thinking about the Whole Child

One of the scientific challenges in terms of studying and, particularly from my perspective, learning about particular subject matters is trying to figure out: What role does prior knowledge, experience, et cetera play? That's what I try to do in my work. In mathematics, that's fundamentally what Bob Moses is doing with the Algebra Project, which I think is the most sophisticated program that I've seen trying to connect to prior knowledge and experiences of kids in relationship to mathematics.

It's what the people in the Chèche Konnen project at TERC are doing in relationship to science. There's not a lot of his work out there. But there is work going on in that way. Eco-cultural perspective is also important because it leads us to consider in terms of schooling the intertwining of social, emotional, and cognitive development: how kids view themselves, how they view what you're asking them to do, how they view the people in the places, teachers, peers all count a lot for the goals that they form and the effort they put into persisting.

I think on this connection between social-emotional development, identity, and learning; and here I think Nailah Nasir at Stanford and Margaret Beale Spencer at Penn are doing some very outstanding work in this area as well. So I think, in summary, that part of what an eco-cultural framework calls for is thinking about the whole child – the whole child in terms of, as I said, social, emotional, and cognitive needs and resources – and understanding that those extend beyond the walls of a classroom or a school. I also think, though, that this kind of holistic and cultural orientation places huge demands on what teachers need to know and what schools [and] organizations need to know and what administrators need to know in order to design school cultures that are capable of thinking about and addressing these sorts of holistic needs and resources.

Examining and Changing Adult Practice

 *Tell me a little bit about what the demands are on adults who are trying to create this.*

I think that first, it requires a fundamental conceptual reorganization and that kind of change is very – it's hard to achieve. That we all grew up in the United States, surrounded by images and messages that tell us that anything associated with being poor, Black, or Brown is a problem, and so how to confront those assumptions – those folk theories – I think is challenging for adults, and how to do it in ways that are not threatening, because the same principles that I'm talking about in terms of children's learning or the learning of kids, I think, is equally true of the learning of adults. And to the extent that the adults in the school community feel threatened, they're going to resist in the same way kids resist.

I think it also requires, in many instances, either very different conceptions about the nature of teaching in subject matters, so the work, certainly, that I've done around response to literature involves, I know, very different ways of thinking about what people need to know – what novices need to know to learn how to read – what I'm calling *canonical literature*. The default mode, particularly in high schools, is you ask kids to do things that you don't even know yourself how to tell them how to do it. In science, I think that some of the interesting work that Beth Warren and Ann Rosebery and others – Chèche Konnen – have done is to say that they do a lot of looking, for example, at history of science, as well as looking at the professional practice of scientists as ways of expanding their understanding of what might be linkages between things kids do and what we need to do to do science.

And in both of these cases, it involves very close examinations of practice. It involves creating artifacts of practice, often in the form of video records, that practitioners, researchers, often together, can sit and seriously study, because in the Chèche Konnen work, for example – and I found the same thing again in analyzing a lot of these video records that I have – is that kids will say things that teachers don't understand [that] are actually interesting and emerging and potentially generative connections to the disciplines you're trying to teach.

But because the teachers have this more constrained view of what counts as knowledge, they can't see what the connection is. So I think that we have to be able to design schools as learning spaces for everybody who's there, so that teachers and administrators can anchor what will be an emergent and evolving, real understanding of the demands of the stuff they want to teach and what kids know and what kids bring to that enterprise – not in the abstract, but looking at how that emerges and is revealed and what goes on inside classrooms. I think for administrators – I also think that it requires that . . . again, here I'm thinking about, say, Luis Moll's work – it really requires that teachers have a foothold in communities. They have to know families; they have to spend time in neighborhoods.


If they're insulated in that school building, no matter what you say or what they read, they really can't connect to families and neighborhoods because they don't know anything about them and they don't feel comfortable there.

I think for administrators, it requires figuring out how to navigate the constraints that typically come from school districts and states and the feds, for that matter, to be able to resist those restraints in creative ways in order to create spaces that allow time and support for reflection on practice. You can't sit in a classroom all day and be expected to be reflective.

 *You have to have time for that and support.*

You have to have support, and neither of those by themselves is sufficient. Time with no support is a waste and support with no time is a waste – it's not productive.

The Need to Challenge Cultural Assumptions *about Diversity across and within Groups*

 *You were talking about helping the adults have a more emergent view of knowledge. What is the challenge in classrooms that are ethnically and racially diverse?*

It's the same thing. For me what is interesting is that we make this idea – first, we work from cultural assumptions. Homi Bhabha calls this “the box problem.” We work from the assumption, for example, if we've got a classroom full of kids – Black kids – that means we know all we need to know about them because they're all the same. We don't have real empirical evidence either from the research side or the practice side to be able to document how *within-group* diversity differs from diversity *across groups*. So if you've got a

school, you might have a classroom where the kids are all Black, but some are middle class, some are poor, some are from Caribbean backgrounds, some are from African backgrounds, and some are from backgrounds of, historically, being here for a long time. Some have come from very cohesive families, and some come from families that are pretty messed up, irrespective of the socio-economic questions.

All that represents some level of coherence – that is to say, they’ve got a lot of stuff in common because they’re Black – but they’ve also got a lot of differences. And we don’t know whether the differences in that kind of variation . . . How’s that different than if I’ve got some kids who are one-point-five-generation Mexican American and second-generation Hmong and some particular version of European American? We don’t know to what extent the differences among those kids are because of the different groups they come from. How much different is that? What does the difference mean, versus the Black variation? We don’t know that. We don’t think about that.

That’s why we try to make the case somehow that this is so complex that it’s going to be really hard for teachers to do that. My argument is that if you think about families . . . I have three children. They’re all two years apart. They grew up in exactly the same set of circumstances and they are three completely different human beings.

And so my job, my whole life, not just when they were children, because when they were very young it was one set of observations. When they got into the middle childhood, it was a different set of observations, and when they got into adolescence, it was another, and now that they’re grown people, it’s another. My job is to watch them and to study them to try to understand them. And not make assumptions that say they’re from the Lee or Madabuti family, therefore . . .

There’s some things you can predict because they grew up in this house, but there’s a whole lot of ways in which they’re very different, and the way that I manage that variation is by appreciating it and studying it to see what it reveals to me. To me, that’s the attribute of a good parent who is driven by love, and I think it’s the same attributes of a good professional teacher who’s also driven by love.

Valuing Heterogeneity as a Resource


Youth culture is a resource that often goes across socio-economic status, ethnicity, and immigration status, because they all listen to the same stuff, even when there’s language variation. And the other point – and this is a point that Kris Gutierrez makes and I think it’s very important – we typically do not view heterogeneity as a resource for the emergence of creativity. But it’s precisely heterogeneity – tensions, conflict, difference – out of which all creativity emerges. Creativity does not emerge out of homeostasis – everybody’s the same.

Part of that shift, for me, is coming to value the heterogeneity as a resource. If kids bring a lot of different stuff to the table, that means there are more opportunities for everybody

to get a different perspective on whatever it is you're trying to learn. You've got some kids – Spanish is their first language – so they may bring in some whole set of things about Spanish/English cognates that actually ends up being a resource for the kids who are English speakers.

In Japan, in the early grades, there's no tracking at all. In mathematics classrooms, for example, they focus on errors, not on correct solutions, and it's the heterogeneity of the error solution paths that opens up the opportunities for kids to make connections between ideas, to weigh a wider range of kinds of evidence. It's enriching rather than problematic.

It's like people who have children with special needs – children who are born with birth defects, children who are autistic. Those parents – again, because they're driven out of love – learn to be extraordinarily adaptive, trying to figure out: How do I understand the gifts that this child brings? There was something on Oprah yesterday.

 *I saw that too.*

You saw that? Those kids – they had to amputate their legs. And how that kid, the older one, learned to view – that's the most adaptive and powerful orientation that we could help kids develop in schools. There's an old Black saying: How you learn how to make lemonade out of lemons. How does getting knocked down become an opportunity, become a blessing?

I saw a program some years ago and they were interviewing people, all of whom had diseases where there was just a question of when they were going to die, and they all talked about how it turned out to be such a blessing – what they learned about life that they probably would not have learned in any other way.


It's that the human enterprise – this goes back to the scientific stuff – the human enterprise is fundamentally about learning to be adaptive. The only way you survive as an individual, the only way you survive as a group, the only way you survive as a species is that you must learn to be adaptive to change. Now, that's what the fundamental human enterprise is in terms of learning. Why are we going into school saying, "If everybody's not the same, we can't teach them"?

They don't all come in knowing the same thing. They come in – you get kindergarten teachers, they put this crap in the newspaper all the time – kids come in and "they don't know their alphabet, they don't know their colors, they can't count to ten, so they can't learn." Well, what else do they know? Maybe they can't count, but they can handle money. Maybe they don't know their alphabet, but they know the Cheerios box when they see it. They know *something*. If they didn't know anything, they'd be dead.

That's the fundamental issue. When you don't know nothin', you don't last, 'cause the environment is a mean sucka. It'll take you out whether you're a baby or a seven- or eight-year-old – if you're still here, you figured out something. You got something on the table.

And the challenge is for people who love other people who are dealing with challenges – how does the parent of a severely autistic child understand the resources and gifts that that child brings? How does that parent – those kids – who had to cut their babies’ legs off understand, what’s the great gift of spirit that potentially can emerge from this? For me, that’s the kind of transformation in a fundamental orientation about difference that education really requires, both on the research end and on the practice end.

Independent, African-Centered Charter Schools: A Successful Model

 *I don’t want to take up your whole morning, so let’s move to . . . I’m dying to put you in dialogue with Howard Fuller on choice and charter schools. And I confess that I have some curiosity about this, having only read, maybe, one article, but I heard you talk about the school, and from knowing some about your commitment to African liberation and some of your political work. How did this school and you get in charters? How do those things come together?*

Well, I had two very simple explanations. Personally, I think that charter schools are the best thing that happened to the Black community. Many of us, including Howard [Fuller], for years have been struggling to establish independent, African-centered schools. And, while the schools themselves, in terms of children’s development, culturally and intellectually, have been very strong, economically trying to sustain these institutions has been extraordinarily difficult and the number . . . We are the oldest continuously run African-centered school in the country, and when we started, there was bunches of us, but they’re not here anymore.


And among the challenges was the fact that we were trying to serve – there were two, but the one we were trying to serve – we always had mixed-income kids, but largely kids from low-income backgrounds and with big money problems. And so when this opportunity came to be able to provide this model that we had been doing for twenty-some odd years, that we knew worked, to kids, with no tuition – and to be able to pay our teachers something close to what they would get if they were working in public schools – it was a tremendous opportunity.

And the issue is that it’s *our* money. We pay taxes. We pay a lot of taxes. So what is the problem with us getting some of it back? You know what I mean? To do things in our community. I think everybody that gets up on a soapbox to talk about what Black education ought to be about ought to be fighting to get as many charter schools as they can. That’s where the rubber hits the road.

The Challenges of Scaling Up the Model

And it’s directly connected to the question of scale. The scale question is precisely what we’re dealing with now, because we’ve had one school for almost forty years. Now we’ve got three, and there are substantial challenges to trying to scale up across three campuses,

and our goal is to end up with at least five. But they're tremendous challenges figuring out how to do that scale-up. It is not easy or straightforward in the least bit.


 *What are the top three?*

I think the top one is how to create a sense of cultural coherence in community across three buildings that are in physically different places.

The second is how to strike a balance between having sufficient kinds of supports in the form of curriculum assessment, assessment systems, the delivery of social services, professional development, with having enough support for creativity and divergence within and across campuses.

And the third is, it cost a lot more, and so one of the things is that when we compare the money that we get from having charters to the money we had when we didn't have charters, we feel like we're in rich-man's land, but in reality, we really – this isn't something we have been particularly good at.

Building Capacity to Attract Funders


 *You still have to go out . . .*

We still have to go out and bring in additional funds because it just takes a lot more money. We need a much bigger infrastructure to manage that scale.

You've had no interest from external funders, or . . .

No, it's not even that. What we find is that we have great ideas. What we have not had – what we are in the process of building now – are the people to carry it out. So, we're convinced the money's out there and that we can get it – it's just that we need people dedicated to doing that, among others. But building that capacity to attract additional funding is another requirement of this work.

Building a Sense of Community across Campuses

 *What kind of things are you doing to create the community across the physical campuses that are really different?*

We have common professional development across the campuses. We're trying now to begin to build departments that go across campuses, like a primary department, so teachers in the primary grades across all three campuses collaborate to do observations in one another's classrooms. They do curriculum development – all that sort of stuff – together as a group.

In the subject matters, we're going from the middle school, high school, continuing so we're forming a math department that includes the high school math people, middle school math people, so they're thinking about the trajectory of what kids would be learning in middle schools that's preparing them for high schools – that kind of thing.

We have an orientation, like a week-long retreat each summer at the beginning of the school year, that teachers across the three campuses attend together. They leave the city, go do stuff together. So those are some of the ways in which we've tried to build a sense of community across campuses.


Also, one of the things that we're going to begin to try next year is that what we call our *flagship* schools, which are the elementary schools that we directly transform from the independent schools to the charter, is where we have the teachers who've been with us the longest and they understand the whole inner workings of this thing – it's like second nature, a second skin for them. We're starting plans now for next year, trying to take some of those people and reposition them in new positions where they have one foot in the classroom and one foot in the administrative positions, where they're trying to work and socialize with the teachers who are new.

 *In the newer schools.*

In the newer schools.

 *That makes a ton of sense.*

Maintaining a Successful Independent Model with Public Money: A Political Enterprise

 *Having been in your school, the question is: What challenges, what risks, what compromises did you worry about or have to address going to the public domain? I went to the flagship school and I was struck by how cohesive the culture, the ideology, the messages [were], and it seems to me in other charter schools when they grow, when they go to another campus, or independent schools that have gone charter, they have to work really hard to maintain that, because now it's just in the public domain, right? People can mess with it. How have you been able to address that problem? Or has it even been a problem?*

One is that we understand that this is a political enterprise and we take the position, at least in terms of being in Chicago – I may be off in these numbers because the Latino population is growing, but it's about forty percent Black people in Chicago – and our position is, if this is what the “Mayo” wants to do, we gotta begin it. Our biggest debates were around the decisions to go charter rather than wrestling with problems about maintaining our cultural integrity after we got it, because there were a lot of people who feared that we would not be able, essentially, to sustain an Afro-centered focus with public money.

What I said to them – there are two things. What I said to them at that time was, in the politics – this is all political. It's political because in the midst of the various waves of reform in Chicago public schools – there's a lot of them, but the second wave when the city district wanted more money from the state legislature – the Republican governor said

to the Democratic mayor: “If you’re going to get the money, ’cause we’re tired of pouring money down a wastecan, you gotta take it over. It’s your baby.” And Daley said, “Fine.”

And so, our position is, Daley don’t care whether you got a Black liberation flag, a Puerto Rican liberation flag, you know, a social justice . . . He don’t give a hoot about that, ’cause none of that is threatening to him. It’ll only become threatening to him if, when, the little babies come out of our schools, start trying to run for mayor – then he may get concerned. Up to that point, he don’t care. What he cares about is that he can post Betty Shabazz achievement scores saying, “My reform works.” That’s all he cares about. We ain’t out there fightin’ him. That’s all he cares about.

And so we say, “That gives us leverage,” and we didn’t hide it. It’s part of the contract. We said from the very beginning, and we’ve argued from the same terms that I have that this is a fundamentally sound educational philosophy, and we’ve got twenty years of evidence to prove it. So, I think that we have to, one: not be afraid, to be bold, and to understand that it is a political arrangement, and that means that we cannot be insular. It means that we have to show our chief finance officer, whatever you call him, he sits on the board of the Illinois charter schools network, right? So, being in that position means he’s always in a position to keep navigating that charter schools association, so they don’t want to work against that. You know?

We stay connected to the alderman, we stay connected with state legislators, you know, we stay connected because when we first tried to get the charter, they didn’t give it to us and had no good reason for why. And so Paul Vallas was the CEO at that time, and we went to every connected Black people that we could think of and they all started to call Paul Vallas saying: “Why did you not give these people the charter?” So my husband made an appointment to go see Paul and we thought we were going in there to convince him that he should give us the charter and he had already made up his mind, because it’s political. It’s all political. Paul doesn’t want all these people calling him.


Calling him, right.

And as soon as we hit there he looked at the gap. He turned out to be a very good friend of ours in the charter school office. He’s not there anymore. I can’t think of his name but he looked at him and said: “How could you let this happen?” In our face. “How did you let this happen?” and he said: “Check my schedule.” He told the secretary: “Change my schedule. I’m coming down to view their school tomorrow.” The very next day, he came to visit our independent school, and that’s how we got the charter.”


It’s all political. And so we said, we cannot be insular. We have to be open, and we showed them a month or so ago. Arne Duncan, the new head of the school district, came to visit our second elementary campus and he stood there in the midst of our rituals that we are African people struggling for national liberation. You know? But in the process the humanity of this . . . this is not this insular, you know, “We love Black people, hate White people” kind of thing. In our school, as you saw, female adults are called Mama, male

adults are called *Baba*; *Baba* means *father* in Swahili. So he's "Baba Arne," to all these little Black kids coming up: "Hi, Baba Arne." You know what I mean?


It brings him in, and so I think being open about what we do, not being insular, and staying politically connected allows us to navigate this political game to understand that that's what the enterprise is.

 *Yeah, it's very powerful.*

And I should also say that the other mantra that I have is, our board is this political game – I don't know how long it will last, but it will not be here forever. And so our position is that we will get as much out of it as we can, and when we can, we own our building. And we hope to come out of this with another piece of property that we own for a high school and so we will play it . . .

 *It's a resource.*

. . . as long as it's there to be played. And when it's over, we'll still be able to continue. We continued before, we'll continue after.


 *Wow. It's very powerful.*

But I just think, all these Black people can get up and run their mouths about what schools need – well, get out and do it! And I don't mean that as a challenge or to be negative. Just because you can. Every person – every major city and state has some charter plan and there's no reason why we can't get out. Build an Annenberg school!

 *Right!*

We need as many of them as we can get. Ahh, put a bug in your ear.

Connecting the Cultural Approach and the Choice Approach

 *What was interesting to me about my talk with Howard was we focused his talk on – he wanted to talk about the school he's working with in Milwaukee, and we talked a little bit about scale and his position as choice advocate out in the world, particularly around funders. And I think he's been somewhat frustrated that there aren't more African American charter school operators. So even when the funders come a-calling, there's no capacity for them to invest in, and so I think he has some of the same questions. I was just thinking, doesn't Carol Lee have some charter schools? I just wanted to hear about it from both sides and, having been in your building, I think it's a good connection point between the cultural approach and the choice approach.*

Choice means you can be cultural.

 *Right. It's to tailor it to the customer.*


And there are other African-centered schools – at least three, I believe, in Detroit.

 *I know about the one in Detroit.*

And there's one in L.A.

 *There's one in L.A. It's not charter – it's still independent – or is it?*

No, I think . . .

 *Have they gone charter?*

I can't think of the name of the school. But it was a huge battle – independent Black institution. Total split, and many of us just left.

 *Yeah. I do know that history well – I read it, studied it.*