

Protocols in Practice A Passionate Inquiry Into Teacher Practice

Linda Emm, Florida

CFG work has always been about taking an inquiry stance. We ask questions about pieces of text, about the student and adult work we bring to the table, and always about our own practice: “how can I get better at this complicated art of teaching so that my students are eager to learn?”

We so love questions that Juli Quinn has become legend with her “Quinn’s 6”:

- What am I teaching?
- Why am I teaching it?
- How am I teaching it?
- Why am I teaching it that way?
- How will I know my students are getting it?
- How will my students know they are getting it?

Edorah Frasier and the Southern Maine Partnership developed the Probing Questions Exercise and the Pocket Guide to Probing Questions because they believe strongly that a well-asked probing question is the greatest gift a presenter can receive in a Consultancy.

We are all about questions. So is it any wonder that the idea of infusing more formalized inquiry into our work has been something so many of us have strived to do? The challenge has always been to make the



inquiry a seamless part of the work we do in our CFG, rather than something tacked on somehow outside the regular practice. NSRF facilitators in Florida have tried to do this for the past several years, with mixed results. Nothing seemed to really catch fire. Sometimes it even felt like we were giving something up to do the inquiry pieces, and we sensed that this wouldn’t be true if we could just figure it out differently.

Enter our partnership with the Lastinger Center for Learning at the University of Florida. Much to our delight, Professor Nancy Fichtman Dana is actively engaged in teacher research, and is the co-author (with Diane Yendol-Silva) of “The Reflective Teacher’s Guide to Classroom Research.” Pete Bermudez brought her work to the attention of those of us working with the Lastinger Teacher Fellows Program in eight Miami-Dade County, high needs, high poverty schools. Our work in Dade involves three-hour monthly meetings with faculty members committed to becoming reflective educators who adapt their practice to better meet the needs of their students. Sounds like a CFG, right? It does to us, too, which is why NSRF facilitators Tom Fisher, Belkis Cabrera, Simone Waite, Sandy Champion, Vanessa Vega, and I eagerly joined Pete Bermudez in the work.

Nancy’s work is centered on

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The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

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Protocols in Practice...

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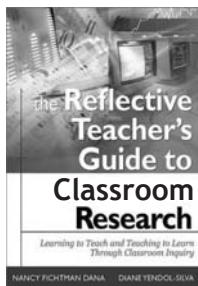
defining teacher inquiry as the “systematic, intentional study by teachers of their own classroom practice.” This is different from the usual way we wonder informally about our students’ work in that it is less happenstance, more visible, and more organized. She talks about how complex teachers’ work is, and the felt difficulties that affect our work. The place where these two areas intersect is the wonderings teachers have all the time. She believes that if teachers focus on these wonderings they will connect to an area they are really curious to know more about – and the idea for their inquiry project will be born.

To further help teachers find their wonderings, Nancy talks about there being eight passions that teachers have about their work. Sometimes these are what drove them to the profession in the first place. Often people enter with one passion and then become passionate about another area of their work. These are useful tools for opening the conversation with teachers about the inquiry process. However, it wasn’t until Belkis Cabrera asked people in her group at Chapman Elementary to group themselves by their passions that an idea was born to adapt Nancy’s passion into an activity similar to the *Profile of a Student*.

Profile of a Student is a beloved activity for talking about how it felt to be the kind of student you were in high school. How was your experience shaped by the kind of student you were? Were teachers able to engage you in high quality work? How? If not, what would it have taken to inspire you? The resulting conversations are profound and shed light on the kind of work we need to be doing with our students in the present. Might we adapt this format to get teachers talking about why they entered the profession? Most people get here through a strong passion, even a sense of mission. We wondered if this new process could help teachers both reconnect to their original sense of purpose and identify some questions they care deeply about?

Using Nancy Dana’s eight passions as a model, we thought about what they would look like if they described certain teachers. What would they be most interested in? How would their “interests” affect the content and context of their classrooms? What is the hook or passion that keeps them coming back day after day?

The Reflective Teacher’s Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn Through Classroom Inquiry, by Nancy Fichtman Dana and Diane Yendol-Silva



After crafting eight teacher profiles, we adapted the directions for the conversation to pretty much mirror those of the *Student Profiles Protocol*, and took the whole thing for a test run with our Lastinger Teacher Fellows.

The resulting conversations were intense and thoughtful. After identifying others with similar passions, these passion alike groups charted the kinds of questions they most wonder about. These questions have helped us get at the idea that teacher inquiry is grounded in passion. When that passion is combined with a sense that “if I just knew more about this one area, my students would be so much more successful,” it becomes easier to develop a question to guide the inquiry.

Pete and I brought the Passions Profiles to the National Facilitators’ Meeting last April, and had our colleagues look at them with a critical eye and actually try out the process. We received helpful feedback on some of the profiles, and are still fine tuning them. Since then, we have used this process in a variety of settings.

Several Lastinger Teacher Fellows have fine tuned questions which came out of this process and are crafting Inquiry Action Plans, which will drive their collaborative work as well as their Individual Professional Development Plans next year.

What we are most excited about is the natural flow of this work as part of the work a CFG does. We have been quite explicit here in Florida that a CFG or a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is NOT defined by who is in it, but by the work the group is engaged in. A critical aspect of this work is to be curious about one’s practice and be willing to engage in the ongoing work of adapting that practice to the needs of the students we serve. We know from experience and enormous amounts of research that the most effective professional development is work that is job-embedded, ongoing, and driven by the needs of teachers and students at the school site. Discovering ways to embed the practice of inquiry in our CFG work is a way to keep authentic learning at the heart of what we do. And that’s exciting. ■

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The Passion Profiles Activity and Passion Profiles are available online at
www.nsrffharmony.org/connections.html