

Forming Learning Communities is Just the Beginning ...and Can Be a Dead End

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I felt affirmed in this space where both my questions and expertise counted, amazed by the potential learning from a long, deep, collaborative discussion of just one piece of student or teacher work, ...However, once the novelty began to wear off... dissatisfaction grew. - Ellen Key Ballock (2007)

Many report being rejuvenated by the opportunity to work with each other in collaborative ways. But often after a good experience with other teachers, after learning what a learning community is, after learning some protocols to look at student work, very little happens when they return to their urban classrooms. - Camilla Greene (2003)

These quotes, the first from a relatively new CFG coach and educational researcher, the second from a seasoned veteran teacher and National Facilitator of CFG seminars, point out both the possibilities and the pitfalls involved in this potentially powerful school reform model.

CFGs are at the heart of the work of the National School Reform Faculty. I have been in a CFG since being trained as a coach in 1996, and I cannot imagine a return to teaching in isolation or facilitating school change without this collaborative support. But while learning and working in community with others is more productive and powerful, it is not a foolproof recipe for student success. Collaborating with teachers and other stakeholders to create the schools our children need and deserve is an essential nonnegotiable for me, but in order to really tap into the potential power of a CFG, a foundation of trust and a commitment to the struggle around issues that really matter must be nurtured and built. Simply dividing up staff members and labeling them teams, houses, CFGs or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) won't do it. Attending a summer seminar and dividing into family groups won't do it either. In other words, as my colleague, Daniel Baron, often says, "CFGs are necessary but not sufficient," if we are committed to transformational change in our schools. In order to really learn together and translate that learning into meaningful changes for students, individuals must be willing to change themselves, or as Margaret

Wheatley (2002) says, we must be "willing to be disturbed." Without an explicit focus on disturbing the status quo, CFG structures can become mired in the shallows. If participants don't have the will, skill and access to the multiple perspectives needed to dig deep and reframe some of our own deeply held beliefs and practices, teacher communities can become little more than teacher support groups. Dennis Sparks of the National Staff Development Council recently defined reframing as "providing other ways to think about a situation" (2008). It is precisely this reframing coupled with changes in practice and consistent internal group accountability (what I like to call "closing the loop") that is needed to ensure that adults are thinking about what really matters for students and that our thinking and "talk" as adults gets translated into the "walk" or practice of real, changed learning experiences for students.

Talking about common problems and dilemmas is a big first step against teacher isolation, and our CFG protocols require that presenting teachers focus on changes we can make in our own practice, potentially flipping the script of deficit-based models that blame students and their communities for the gaps in our practice. This focus on teacher responsibility is significant. Nevertheless, many CFGs are made up almost exclusively of white, middle-class teachers, and in elementary settings, the groups tend to be disproportionately female as well. In these homogenous groups of dominant culture adults the practice of reframing does not come easily. For example, if the teachers recognize the need to address gaps in achievement scores between their white students and their students of color but are pursuing supposedly "colorblind," equal support to all of their students, these teachers are unlikely to monitor their own teaching for biased practices. Lacking diversity themselves, the teachers' perspectives are necessarily limited by their own experiences, despite their best intentions. Without the benefit of diversity, teachers can use protocols and work hard at collaboration, but our results will be akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. In order to plot a new course

(continued on page 14)



around the iceberg of racial and socioeconomic inequity, there has to be some diversity and dissonance present among the adults. It's hard to take the risks needed to reframe and relearn in an atmosphere of sameness. Where's the provocation, the influx of multiple perspectives and divergent experiences, the disturbance? Where's the willingness to engage in the inside-outside work called for by our colleague, Victor Cary of the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools (BayCES)? Cary (2005) states that, "The work of creating equitable and excellent schools is fundamentally about changing ourselves, and thereby our relationships with others." He goes on to say that doing this work means being able to reflect on our inner lives while also focusing on our assumptions about oppression, power and hegemony. I'm not saying white teachers can't do this transformational work, but as a white teacher myself, I am saying we cannot do it in isolation. Our learning must be informed by alliances with colleagues and stakeholders across difference, and it requires a conscious decision to change the way we frame the discourse.

Changing the Discourse

Working in alliance and changing our discourse opens up possibilities for the transformation of our practice and our vision, with and for our students. Eubanks, Parish and Smith (1997) define Discourse I as the way we think, talk and plan in order to maintain or reproduce the status quo in schools. They call for a new discourse, what they call Discourse II, as the basis for real change in our schools. BayCES (2003) offers the following excerpt from the full text to distinguish between the two types of discourse:

Discourse I

- Singular Truths
- The work of adults
- Discipline & control
- Dropouts

Discourse II

- Multiple Stories
- The learning & experience of students
- Alienation & resistance
- Pushouts

There was some limited diversity in my first CFG. We represented differences of race, gender, religious upbringing and sexual orientation. And yet, in our fledgling efforts at collaboration, we were engaged in a relatively comfortable Discourse

I exchange of feedback, in which the presenting teacher framed the examination of student work with a question, and no one ever questioned or pushed back on the "frame" or focus. We did not discuss the foundations of our individual or collective dilemmas. We were dedicated to finding simple solutions to complex problems that were often systemic in nature. The opportunity to discuss issues of oppression, power and hegemony was present, but the opportunity was not addressed. Instead, our CFG was energizing and as Ellen said, "we felt affirmed..." after each meeting, but as Camilla indicated, it was unclear what, if anything, was changing for the bulk of our students.

At one CFG meeting, I presented a videotape of my science class and shared a dilemma about my students' lack of reflection. I wondered aloud what I could do differently to support greater student reflection and the transfer of knowledge from a lab activity to a pencil and paper test and on to their future studies. However, I never acknowledged the skin I was in and the ways it shaped my perspective. I was concerned that my kids completed lab experiments, enjoyed the hands-on activities, and then moved on to the next lab without grasping the real science content involved. I got some good, concrete ideas from my colleagues, ideas about slowing down and using our science journals more. I put my CFG's feedback to use the very next day and the lab was much more successful, at least on the surface.

However, I didn't seek or receive feedback about the lack of student-centered conversation in my class, where all discussion and all power flowed through me. As the presenter, I did not address my role as a white teacher working with students of color, and no one else identified these differences as a fundamental feature of my classroom instruction. My limited frame set the boundaries, and no one mentioned my failure to differentiate supports for my students with limited literacy skill or English language fluency. Instead there was an unspoken acceptance that I was doing the best I could as a teacher who only spoke English in a linguistically diverse class of 33 adolescents. We stayed focused primarily on my work, the work of adults, and we missed the chance to really explore what it would take to reframe my/our focus on the learning and experience of my/our students.

After about a year of working as a CFG member, it finally dawned on me that I needed to directly engage my students in these teaching and

learning conversations. Like the V-8 commercials in which people slap themselves in the heads, I realized that my diverse group of students had critical information to share with me, their white teacher, about what they didn't understand about my content, and whether my directions, which were clear to me and to my similarly educated colleagues, were in fact clear as mud to them. Looking back this seems like an obvious step, but in my experience, sharing power with students was relatively unusual, especially between white teachers and their students of color, who were generally treated as disinterested parties in their own education.

Along similar lines, I have been involved with teams of urban educators in CFGs across the country, teams in which predominantly white teachers describe their problems with "hard to reach parents." Recently, a CFG in Oregon recognized this framing of parents as the problem as Discourse I and flipped the script to Discourse II, reframing the problem as one of "hard to access schools." Changing the discourse led to a host of new possibilities and responsibilities for welcoming parents into the schools. Discourse II challenges mostly white, middle-class participants to surface and examine both their assumptions and the power dynamics parents and families face in meetings and spaces that we organize and control. Reframing the problem challenges us to ensure that invitations to parents and other family members are more than one-sided requests for homework support, or disciplinary backup. Discourse II calls for "The Essential Conversation(s)" (2003) that Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot describes where both parents' ghosts of former experiences with schooling and the inherent power of home and school partnerships are acknowledged, allowing alliances based on mutual respect to be forged on behalf of students. Conversely, staying stuck in Discourse I means more of the status quo, an ongoing search for the right prize or bribe to get bodies into the seats at the next parent or family night, without launching or sustaining a partnership in any true sense of the word.

As our experiences with CFGs evolve, many of us, both white teachers and teachers of color, are struggling to reframe the process and our conversations into Discourse II. Working together as a Consortium for Educational Equity (CFEE), some of us are embracing the fact that we, either as educators in isolation, or as CFG members stuck in Discourse I, especially in schools where we teach

across differences of race and class, don't have all the answers, and that we often aren't asking the right questions. We are working in alliances across difference to extend the collaborative process to include the voices of students and their families. In our individual practice and in our schools and systems, we are moving beyond the shallow Discourse I, the familiar, surface level of school reform into the deeper Discourse II, the uncomfortable, waters of transformation. While we are still committed to educating other people's children, we recognize the importance of naming and reframing the culture of power (Delpit 1995) in order to support the access of each student, regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, national origin or special needs, to academic and social success in our schools and communities. We are no longer content to simply revise our practice, or restructure our schools, the critical outside work of school reform: instead we are committed to doing the inside work as well, in order to transform our relationships and our teaching to meet the needs of each student in our care. ■

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