

Why Social Equity? Why Focus on Racism? Why Now?

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In 1996 I was trained as a CFG coach. The reflective tools I learned pushed my thinking and my practice as an urban middle school teacher. I began to question limits that I had previously accepted. I started to pursue possibilities for collaboration, not only with my colleagues, but with my students as well.

I wish I could say that these changes in my thinking led to immediate changes in student achievement, but that wouldn't be true. I wish I could say that my efforts to build collaboration with my colleagues and kids were met with open arms, but that was also often untrue.

The truth is, that while I was transformed by my experience, and was able to initiate some dramatic changes in my classroom and school, the changes weren't happening nearly fast enough and the impact wasn't being felt deeply enough.

The little question "why?" kept nagging at me. Why were trust issues always getting in the way? Why didn't more teachers want to form Critical Friends Groups at our school? Why did some of my students achieve while others remained disengaged?

Given these differences, I began to wonder about my underlying assumptions and how I was playing them out in my classroom. What assumptions did I have about my kids and their families? Were my assumptions being played out in my expectations, my instruction, my behavior? Along the same lines, what were my assumptions about my colleagues and their resistance to change?



While I was wrestling with these questions, I had an experience that underscored the weight of our assumptions on our students. I was waiting in line at an Italian cheese shop and overheard the teacher in front of me complaining loudly about the "white trash" she was stuck teach-

During this same period of time, the popular press was cranking out regular reports about our failure to educate our children. Reports of a widening achievement gap between students like mine and their white counterparts were being published with alarming regularity.

I didn't need statistical reports to tell me what I already knew. Lots of my kids were disengaged, disenfranchised and on the fast track to ninth grade failure. I needed to understand my role and my responsibility in this crisis.

For me, *Looking At Student Work* has meant looking at the assumptions and bias embedded in my assignments. Understanding my kids' response or their refusal to respond meant examining the ways my classroom had remained mine and not theirs.

Most particularly, it has meant trying to understand my privileged role as a white service professional. I needed help to unpack this uncomfortable bag of issues and I turned to the process and the people who had first planted the seeds of reflective practice in my heart and mind.

In the conversations about adding "social equity" to our mission, at the

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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As why turned to what and how, I began to examine the differences that existed between my students and myself. I am a white woman; more than 85% of my students were children of color. While I had become relatively comfortable financially, most of my students and their families were struggling to make ends meet. I am a woman with strong views about gender equity and a "woman's place," yet many of my students came from homes where women were expected to "know their place," a place determined by their families.

ing in her classes at Kensington High. I grew up in Kensington and her comments both hurt and angered me. I excused myself and asked her if she thought her students were aware of her feelings toward them, she was embarrassed and apologetic.

Could my racism run parallel to her views about class? I wasn't trying to make her feel guilty then, and I'm not into a personal guilt trip now. I just think that my attitudes as a teacher can serve to either empower or endanger my students, and that my kids have a right to expect my support.

meetings about equity, in our efforts to "tear the silence" and have the hard discussions on the listserv, or in our CFGs, it is my continual sense of the widening achievement gap and the kids I'm not reaching, and the colleagues I have marginalized, that drives me to keep pushing the envelope of school reform.

I'm reminded of a question that Daniel Baron shared at a national gathering last year. He asked, "If not us, then who?" □

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