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Friends School of Baltimore: Critical Friends Groups in one Quaker School

Research Proposal

Sandi Morton

Quaker Decision-Making Process is similar to the structure and process of Critical Friends Groups. I propose that Friends School of Baltimore, with its understanding and utilization of Quaker-Decision Making Process, facilitates the introduction and sustainability of Critical Friends Groups into the culture of the School.

The School

Friends School of Baltimore is an independent college-preparatory school with just less than 1000 students ranging from Pre-Kindergarten to grade 12. It is associated with the Religious Society of Friends and a member of the Friends Council on Education. Friends School is also a member of the National Center for Independent School Renewal (NCISR was formed in 1998 by five (5) independent schools that were also members of the Coalition for Essential Schools). NCISR, like the Coalition of Essential Schools, is dedicated to continual school renewal and provides member independent schools with support and venues for collaboration (National Center for Independent School Renewal). One of the benefits of NCISR membership has been the introduction of Critical Friends Groups to the School. The self-reflective work of a Critical Friends Group is very similar to Quaker practice and process.

Critical Friends Groups at School have been voluntary. The impetus has come from some faculty and one principal. Senior administration has been supportive but not

been totally committed. The one exception was the 2003 – 2004 school year, when membership was required for new faculty.

Friends School of Baltimore – History and Mission

The Quaker movement began in England in the 1650's. Its founder, George Fox, believed that revelation was ongoing and that each person has within themselves the ability to experience the truth. There is no need for clergy or any other official to explain the Truth, or the Light. Because individuals may be "...fallible in our discernment of the Truth ...Corporate discernment by the gathered Meeting (for Worship) is essential" (Minding the Light: 3).

The first established Quaker schools were in England. The schools were established to provide Quaker children with a "' guarded' education, one that protected the children from the influences of the larger society (Friends Council on Education 4)." When Friends arrived in America they immediately established schools to educate both boys and girls. Friends School of Baltimore was founded in 1784 and is the oldest school in Baltimore.

The mission and philosophy statements of Friends School of Baltimore show how the school specifically uses the self-reflective nature of Quaker practice and process to provide the framework of a Quaker education. The mission states that the School...."provides a coeducational, college preparatory program guided by the Quaker values of truth, equality, simplicity, community and peaceful resolution of conflict (Friends School of Baltimore, Inc.)." And the second paragraph of the School Philosophy states that

Quaker education is a pilgrimage - a seeking after Truth that is not static or fixed, but is in a continual state of fulfillment. Friends endeavors to be a learning community for both students and employees. It needs and seeks the support and cooperation of all members of the School community - students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, and friends - in achieving its goals. The School values its freedom to experiment and to enter fields of controversy. The School cherishes simplicity, reflection, meditative concern, and hope - values that permeate every aspect of Friends School life and which are most directly practiced in regular Meeting for Worship (Friends School of Baltimore).

Quaker Process and Critical Friends Groups

Early Quakers did not settle on dogma or doctrine, but they did document their faith and practice to guide members and to formalize the process for conducting business. Quaker Decision-Making Process is a formal structure that requires “...the leadership of a facilitator, the clerk, and ...the full participation of every member in the ...group – listening silently and attentively, as well as speaking” (McHenry 13). Friends schools, unlike Quaker meetings, are not egalitarian institutions, and though not all decisions are made using this process, the school communities are encouraged to use Quaker Decision-Making Process whenever feasible. The schools encourage professional development that supports self-reflection.

In February of 2002, five (5) faculty from Baltimore Friends attended the NCISR Annual Meeting at Wilmington Friends School. We attended sessions using a Critical Friends Group model. The similarities and differences to Quaker process were obvious. The most obvious difference is that Quaker process is based on the assumption that spiritual energy is involved in the decision making process. We were immediately comfortable with the process.

A Clerk or a Coach?

In Quaker groups the clerk is the servant leader. In the Advices for Clerks in the Faith and Practice of Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, clerks are admonished:

- You, as clerk, are the Meeting's servant, not its master. The Meeting is likely to repose great trust in you and will usually help you cheerfully if you find yourself at a loss.
- ...Your attitude may help set the pattern of worshipful listening.
- Do not leave preparation to the last minute.
- Your main task is to discern the Meeting's united mind. This is harder to do if you participate in the discussion. You may find that the discipline of detachment leads to a new and deeper relation with your fellow members.
- ...seek to assess the value of individual contributions. Do not forget that the silence of some is often of greater significance than the speech of others.
- In the meeting...deal courteously but firmly with those who speak too long or stray from the point. It is well to permit no side discussion but to insist that all who wish to speak address the clerk.
- Try to keep a sense of proportion and a sense of humor. Do not be overly brisk or allow the meeting to drag. Be alert to those who need encouragement to speak (Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 73).

The NSRF Web page notes skills that coaches practiced in training (National School Reform Faculty):

- Setting norms for working together
- Active listening
- Understanding guidelines for dialogue
- Understanding the dynamics of offering and receiving warm (supportive) or cool feedback
- Formulating clarifying and probing questions
- Using protocols for examining student and teacher work, for solving problems, setting goals, observing peers, and building teams (National School Reform Faculty, "Frequently Asked Questions")

A Friend or a Critical Friend?

Quaker process requires the involvement of all members. The members should come to the group prepared to be patient, open, humble and teachable. In her pamphlet, Barbara Caldwell states that each member needs to be ready to commit to:

- Open-mindedness and a willingness to change one's mind;
- A willingness to surrender pre-conceptions, ideological principles and deeply held beliefs to the wisdom of the group;
- An understanding that the process takes time;
- Trust in and respect for the ...group and the process;
- An understanding that the group is wiser than any one individual;
- A willingness to hear each person's views without prejudice;
- A willingness to contain reactive emotion (e.g. fear, anger, irritation) while focusing on the work task at hand;
- Patience and the ability to use silence constructively (Caldwell).

Working together in Critical Friends Group, members

- Focus on improving students' learning and success.
- Build trust by engaging in significant work while providing a safe environment for taking risks.
- Make their work public (e.g. "deprivatize" their work) by collaboratively examining work done by their students and by themselves (e.g. teaching practices, curriculum, school culture issues).
- Give each other usable feedback.
- Encourage diversity of thought, experience and perspective.
- Draw on the expertise of those within the learning community, as well as on the expertise of "outside" resources.
- Engage in reflective discourse based on the ideas contained in "texts" of various types.
- Engage in reciprocal learning, within learning communities and in NSRF as a whole.
- Develop and share leadership within the group.
- Continuously challenge one another to adapt practice towards fostering educational and social equity.
- Are accountable for continuous improvement toward helping every student to succeed in school.
- Use, create and support structures that lead to the above outcomes (National School Reform Faculty, "NSRF Mission Statement).

Clearness Committee or Critical Friends Group?

To Quakers, a Clearness Committee is the structure that helps individuals reach a deeper understanding of an issue or a dilemma and provides that individual the clarity to move forward on the issue. A group of caring Friends/colleagues meet with the person seeking clearness. The process requires asking searching and clarifying questions and creating a safe space for the person to seek the truth. Clearness Committees are bound by an agreement of “double” confidentiality:

- Group members will not speak with others about what happened during their time together.
- Group members will not speak with the presenter about the issue unless she/he requests a conversation. “(Clearness Committees)

“The purpose of a CFG is to support educators’ professional development in order to improve student learning. The learning is done within the context of a professional learning community with colleagues” (Fischer-Mueller).

Queries or Questions?

Quakers use queries as a way of ensuring both personal and corporate self-reflection and examination. Friends consider queries to be the “best way for Meetings and individual Friends to live their spiritual and temporal lives. It is the practice in most Monthly Meetings to read and consider a query at each meeting for business” (Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 37).

“Within the professional learning community (CFG), I/we utilize tools and strategies that help me/us acquire the knowledge, skills and perspectives I/we need to address the question(s) I/we have about my/our practice” (Fischer-Mueller).

“The focus is often in the form of a question” (Fischer-Mueller).

Chronology of Critical Friends Groups at School

Five (5) faculty attended the NCISR Annual Meeting held at Wilmington Friends, in February 2002. We found the culture of NCISR very comfortable and familiar. We were determined to bring the Critical Friends Group model back to school. When we got back to school, we formed a planning committee that included the five of us and the middle school principal. The middle school principal has been the strongest supporter and most collaborative colleague in strengthening the role of CFGs at school.

Our first goal was to have more faculty experience an NCISR meeting and work with the Consultancy and Tuning protocols. We were able to take ten (10) people to the NCISR Spring Cluster Meeting at the New School of Northern Virginia.

Our second goal was to send someone to coaches training. I was able to attend the CFG Coaches Training Institute at the Watkinson School in June 2002. Part of the training involved creating an action plan for starting Critical Friends Group at School. My action plan included a de-briefing meeting with the middle school principal, an introductory meeting for the head of school that I would attend with the middle school principal, and an introductory and planning meeting for faculty.

During the meeting with the middle school principal we prepared for our meeting with the new head of school. We felt that the culture of our school would not support mandatory Critical Friends Groups, though it would be helpful to have CFGs mandatory for the first two (2) years for faculty new to the School. We planned to train coaches in-house. Meeting times for groups would be monthly.

The middle school principal and I were able to meet with the new head of school in early September 2002. I did send the head of school information on CFGs before our meeting. The head of school was very supportive. She decided to set the CFG meeting dates in advance and to rotate the times through the school day and after school times so that no one group would be inconvenienced on a regular basis. This was a huge concession on the part of administration. It helped to relieve the tensions with other initiatives. She suggested that a CFG session be showcased at faculty meetings. We decided to have a dinner meeting to introduce CFGs to a core group.

The introductory dinner meeting with faculty took place in October. The middle school principal and I gave a brief history of NCISR and Critical Friends Groups. We used a power point and NSRF video, Looking Together at Student Work. We asked who would be interested and came up with a core group of seven (7), including teachers and administrators. This group is still working together today.

In February 2003, our Critical Friends Group was asked to present a demonstration during our all-school professional day. As the result of the demonstration, interest in forming another CFG began. The second is still working together today.

During the summer of 2003, I trained four (4) new coaches from interested faculty.

Critical Friends Group for New Faculty

For the 2003 – 2004 school-year, membership in a new faculty CFG was mandatory. The group met four (4) times a year, from 5 pm – 6 pm, right before the new faculty dinner. The timing and the venue pretty much guaranteed failure. New faculty balked at the long day, the group did not meet long enough or often enough to bond, and new faculty were not given any relief from regular duties.

Membership in the new faculty Critical Friends Group was made voluntary for the 2004 – 2005 school-year. Before the first new faculty dinner, new faculty attended a demonstration CFG. A breakfast was held two (2) weeks later for those new faculty interested in the CFG. Of those who attended the breakfast, seven (7) became members of the new faculty CFG. This group met once a month. The mentor – clerks from each division took part in formulating the queries for the group.

The new faculty CFG is the format for this school year. The mentor-clerks have been more involved and several have become members of the CFG. We have a new head of school this year. He has been involved with NCISR and CFGs at his previous school and has supported the new faculty by taking away token duties from those members who belong.

What has worked

- CFGs should be voluntary
- Queries should be universal in nature
- Administrative support on all levels is key
- Top administrative support is crucial to developing an all-school culture
- Meetings need to be scheduled at convenient times
- CFGs needed to be valued by the School as an important professional development tool
- Faculty who belong need to be recognized and commended
- Reduction of duties for the new faculty CFG – especially coaching and after-school supervision – sends a message that membership in a CFG is a priority
- Most committed faculty will participate in any case
- Emphasis on new faculty professional development

Where do we go from here?

I plan to survey faculty and administration to determine their:

- Understanding of Quaker Decision-Making Process and CFGs
- Experience with Quaker Decision-Making Process and CFGs
- Level of comfort with Quaker Decision-Making Process and CFGs
- Perceived connections between Quaker Process and CFGs
- Suggestions of support needed for faculty to increase participation in CFGs
- Suggestions of ways to publicize CFGs in new and creative venues

I expect the surveys to show that being a Friends School, with the understanding and utilization of Quaker Decision-Making Process, facilitates the introduction and sustainability of Critical Friends Groups into the culture of the School.

I also expect the surveys to define a path for the School to take to increase participation in CFGs. And with the support of the new head of school, I feel the outlook for CFGs at Friends School of Baltimore is very hopeful.

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