Inquiry Circles
An Appreciative Approach to Professional Inquiry
Betty Bisplinghoff, Georgia

“In the long run, a people is known, not by its statements or its statistics, but by the stories it tells.”
- Flannery O’Connor

Inquiry can poke air holes in your life!” These were the words of a group member at a recent NSRF Inquiry Institute. The group consisted of experienced CFG coaches who worked together to explore the viability of inquiry in our work using the Inquiry Circles Protocol. By shaping inquiry questions as laid out in the protocol, the group succeeded in moving beyond their current work world—ones characterized by recent, huge budget cuts, school closures and job losses—to a place that required better understandings of what was good and strong in their work.

The Inquiry Circles Protocol is intended as a way to refresh our professional lives through an asset-based approach to inquiry. In constructing this protocol, I was inspired by the Appreciative Inquiry model for organizational change generated by Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2003). They proposed that “organizations move toward what they study” (p. 29). This protocol recognizes the power of our questions to influence our actions. In essence, how we inquire influences the culture of our schools.

It is my hope that the Inquiry Circles Protocol will help us remember to be curious, to share and develop our stories of professional strength, and to rebuild a narrative culture around us that contributes to a healthy and enriched professional life.

The protocol intentionally asks us to focus on what is healthy about our life’s work, but also helps us unwrap such gifts through specific acts of appreciation.

In essence, we are asking: How do we build community and share our stories of how we are making a difference in the quality of our work experiences and in the public conversation about education?

This information should be at least as prominent in our discourse on schooling as the problems that are more often highlighted.

It is interesting to consider, as a professional community, what our stories will tell us about the actions we should support in order to make a positive difference for professional educators as learners and for students as learners. The protocol supports time for participants to think for themselves and to think in collaboration with others. It is a reflexive and expansive process. This is the dance of professional inquiry – space to reflect alone – space to reconsider in the company of respected others – space to act and grow.

The title of the protocol, Inquiry Circles, was chosen for several reasons:

1. to highlight the cyclical nature of inquiry – questions lead to more questions
2. to denote the continuous connections of understanding that inquiry can support
3. to present a method for supporting inquiry that asks people to circle-up and share their stories of hope and promise

Overall Purpose:
To generate robust inquiry questions that can lead our work in support of teachers and students as power-based learners.

Supporting Goals:
• to place inquiry at the heart of our work
• to support reflective practice
• to encourage the development of an evidence-based, positive narrative culture
• to build on the good
• to develop a vision-based professional voice

This protocol may be used as an agenda for a day in the design of a CFG Institute.

A summary of the protocol is reprinted on the opposite page, and the full version is available on our website, at www.nsfharmony.org/connections.html
You can reach Betty Bisplinghoff at bettysb@arcges.uga.edu

The Real Crisis in Public Education

Kevin Gallagher and Rise Reinier

Dear President,

A fifth grader observed, “I learned some disabilities don’t revolve around legs and arms.” Michele’s comment reminded us that every individual is unique, each having different strengths and needs. We believe that our public education system can meet the needs of every child; however, NCLB mandates are having a crippling effect on this goal.

Students need time to improve student reading and writing, students need time to practice reading great books and writing while studying mentor authors. Students need to have voice, a valuable commodity that’s becoming more endangered as we institute “cookie cutter” curricula. Learning is social. Our students need to have time to talk, listen and share with each other.

Students need to practice reading the world critically, discussing issues of injustice, gender and power from multiple perspectives. They need opportunities to reflect about possible action plans for positive change.

Finally, voluminous standardized testing does not improve student learning. Students might become better test takers but not critical thinkers who know how to negotiate and improve their worlds. Standardized tests provide only a small window of information about a student on one particular day. We work with them every day and gather much more pertinent useful information all the time.

Teachers are not averse to being held “accountable” as some critics

The following are recommended classroom sizes:
• K-4: up to 15 students per class
• 5th-8th: up to 17 students per class
• high schools: up to 22-25 students per class

Prologue by Bill Cosby

“Connections: A Journal of the National School Reform Faculty”

Dear Mr. President:

I am the parent of two children in the Texas public school system. I have a sixteen-year-old daughter in the traditional public school and a thirteen-year-old son in a charter school. My daughter is an exceptional student with a positive sense of direction. My son has a passion for the mechanics of how things work; he has been diagnosed as dyslexic.

I am writing this letter to ask for the reduction of classroom sizes in our schools.

The idea is that no child is left behind. Mr. President, the reduction in student-teacher ratio will be paramount in improving the education process of our children. Please ensure that all students have a real opportunity to succeed.

Sincerely,
Jerry Stephenson
1811 Grand Cayman Way
Mesquite, Texas 75149

Letters to the Next President - What We Can Do About the Real Crisis in Public Education

Published by Teachers College Press, available on www.tcpress.com