School Three - The Cambridge Rindge and Latin School
Beth Graham, Massachusetts

Four years ago, when I became principal of a small school in a large, urban, conversion high school, I had the rare opportunity to grow a new community. I resolved to create a school that sharply contrasted from the non-intellectual institutions of which I had been a product. In order to begin this task, I was curious and promoted myself as head learner. For teachers, students, and parents, I modeled “not knowing.” I was curious about each other. The kids noticed that the teachers were starting to use similar practices. One of these teachers told me a kid came up to her and said, “Miss…, are you guys learning something?” (laughing) and that gave me hope.

K: (laughing) That’s wonderful.

Debbi, looking back over your growing involvement in NSRF – which began with the “California Protocol” at the Foshay – the acceptance of the role of co-directorship in NSRF isn’t that surprising! What are you going to do as a director of NSRF?

D: (laughing) I don’t know, yet.

But growing a professional learning community among all adults in our school meant emerging from a deeply embedded context of privatized teacher practice. What would it take to shift the culture of adults in order to best serve the needs of all students? We had to learn to work differently.

First, we had to create new structures to support our new learning. A schedule was created, therefore, that provided common planning time for teachers. Having time was not enough, however: teachers required my support as facilitator of those meetings in order to transfer their experience into a classroom. Curriculum into unexplored realms of essential questions and integrated, interdisciplinary, and thematic units of study. To make connections among disciplines explicit to our students, we learned that we needed to have time to reflect and make explicit connections to our school. Planning meetings were characterized by simultaneous free writing. We learned and practiced thoughtful, reflective, and civil discourse, however, our curriculum began to emerge.

While structures such as common planning time were critical to support our new learning, how we used the structures was pivotal in our becoming a professional learning community. For example, in addition to core curriculum meetings, a weekly meeting was convened for all advisors. While developing close, personal relationships with some students, we also learned that we needed that space and time to reflect together as a community of adult learners, as individuals. Using the Collaborative Assessment Conference, we examined student work from multiple perspectives, and surfaced our (often contradictory) assumptions about teaching and learning. Finally, the Tuning Protocol allowed us to ask for help in improving our assignments, and to design authentic assessments that provoked students to demonstrate deep understanding.

These structured conversations were so much more than nimble exercises and clever activities – this became the way we worked in our school. It was our culture.

As a result, the adults in our school became collaborators, and, ultimately, modeled thinking and learning for our kids. It was not unusual to observe teachers being transparent in their practice in front of kids: “Where do you think we should go next?” “What do you think we need to do to support your learning?” “As teachers became more comfortable in their new roles as coaches, or facilitators of learning, most were able to slip the bonds of having to be the expert in the room.

K: Can you talk a little more about learning how much you don’t know?

D: I think it really has put us in good stead that we’ve really had to be humble, because we truly couldn’t even possibly think that we knew anything, going in. We just continue to feel that same way, that we have had lots more experiences, and still know that there is a lot we don’t know, and that same sense of humility and wonder and questioning, but then hopefulness that we could think of that first institute, I think we still have that and I think that is what makes our institutes good at UCLA.

K: You talk about a sense of hopefulness. What hope do you have for schools now?

D: The hope that I see comes from a heightened sense of awareness of subtle discriminations and not just a willingness, but a sense of responsibility, to not let that be OK. The example that comes to mind is watching the students on TV from schools in east Los Angeles, which are the schools I serve. They were protesting in front of the school about the number of army and other military recruiters that more or less stay at our schools. They wanted to know why these people are practically camped-out on our school site, when they’re not visible at the schools in the San Fernando Valley and the affluent areas. I think a few years ago, students I was working with may have not been willing to say that or to take action around it or may not have even noticed that.

The other thing that gives me hope is seeing teachers and certain administrators feel the impact that a true CFG or truly using CFG processes can have on their teachers who had been to Critical Friends Institutes. The teachers had started coming into one another’s rooms and watching each other. The kids noticed that the teachers were starting to use similar practices. One of these teachers told me a kid came up to her and said, “Miss…, are you guys learning something?” (laughing) and that gave me hope.

K: (laughing) That’s wonderful.

Debbi Laidley can be reached at debra.laidley@lausd.net

Katy Kelly can be reached at kkelly@harmonyschool.org

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Katy Kelly can be reached at kkelly@harmonyschool.org
The Trouble With Friendship: Why Americans Can’t Think Straight About Race
A Book Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania State University

The most striking effect of our new community was among students who, in the past, had been told – implicitly, or explicitly – that they could not learn. There was a feeling of “we can do this!” in our school. As we developed portfolios and presentations, too, students became more accountable for their learning. Parents who attended and participated in these student-led presentations often left in tears of joy, for they had never before seen their child as learner. We had tangible evidence (signifi- cant increases in state and national test scores and college attendance, decreases in dropout rate, acts of violence, and discipline issues, and, most importantly, the narrowing of gaps in achievement among racial and socio-economic groups) to support the claim that ours was a learning community. But statistics cannot bring to life the “feel” of our school. In three years we transformed a place where thinking and learning were habits reserved for a select few, where the intellectual needs of students who needed to read texts and held conversations about the ways to regularly embed a focus on equity into the protocols we use to examine student and adult work. We’ve held meet- ings with “equity” as their theme or focus. And this past June, about twenty of us held an electronic book chat to discuss Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege; The Trouble with Friendship, Why Americans Can’t Think Straight About Race, by Benjamin DeMott. Having participated in these initiatives, I am taking stock and wondering about next steps. More important, I’m thinking about the impact of these actions on my work with other educators and whether students in my understanding are making a difference for students.

The need to embed a focus on equity in my work is an issue for me because I am white. Last year, a colleague of color from Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools (BAYCES) made it very clear that equity and race are on the table for her by virtue of her presence in any conversation. I cannot lay claim to that same consistency because as Peggy MacIntosh describes in Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege, as a white person in our society, I have the option to check in and out of this struggle at will. Given this reality, I am faced with ongoing choices and a need to continually examine both my own choices and my practice on behalf of students, especially those students of color who make up the majority of our student body in the urban schools where I work. So I’m asking myself, how will- ing am I to be disturbed? How much energy am I willing to spend mov- ing beyond what Victor Cary calls “admiring the problem” to actually work- ing to disrupt the status quo of discrimina- tion in our schools and society - and perhaps more important, how will I gauge my progress? Last week Camilla Greene and I co-facilitated the first half of a CFG seminar of a soon-to-be opened Afro-centric charter high school. I was the only white person present at our three-day session. The conversation was different from the conversations I’ve grown accustomed to in the predomi- nantly, or solely white seminars that I usually facilitate. Camilla and I used many of the same techniques and tools that we usually use, but there was an added layer to last week’s conversations. We didn’t need to read Curriculum as Window and Mirror to drive home the need for students to see themselves in their school’s materials and methods. Our framing question for the week was: How can we work as “gap clos- ers” while supporting the develop- ment of strong cultural identities for our students? Our question brought together concerns about “closing the gap” but linked them inextricably with the need to counter the social messages children of color are served on a daily basis by our dominant white culture. There was an implicit recognition that students needed to master the mechanics of the “tests” and master “the game” without getting caught up in the deficit-based rhetoric that is designed to keep them in their place.

In our CFG we have never dis- cussed the relationship between clos- ing the gap and students’ cultural identities, however we’ve made a commitment to have ongoing, explicit conversations about equity in general and racism in particular. Consequently, at our most recent meeting, we lis- tened to a song from this year’s Tony award-winning musical Avenue Q. The song is called A Little Bit racist, and it drives home the point that we are all guilty of biased assumptions based on our differences. As a theater- goer, I am thrilled that a hit show is tackling issues of race and homophobia, but the equation of biases and the promotion of “sameness” as the basis of our potential harmony is disturbing and potentially dangerous.

During our “Audio Rendering” and in our students’ cultural identity, members of our CFG wondered whether being a “little bit racist” was like being a “little bit pregnant,” and we went on to unpack the differences between having “colorblindness” and embracing diversity as our goal. Members highlighted the word “relax” and the phrase “everyone makes judgements” among others, and we all agreed to disagree with the song’s lyrics.

The sameness promoted by Avenue Q is reminiscent of the analy- sis in The Trouble with Friendship, where DeMott debunks what he calls the “orthodoxy of friendship,” describ- ing in detail the ways that a celebra- tion of friendship necessarily gets complicated about, or outright denies, the sys- temic racism that still grips our society and defines our cultural areas of citizen of color. When seen in this light, Avenue Q falls into step with a long list of “buddy films,” (continued on page 18)