Six years ago my CFG made the decision to ground our work in inquiry. The significant consequence of this decision was that every activity could become purposeful. Our actions were based on real questions about our practice—questions that nagged us about a unit, about instruction, about a student, about assessment. Once we had established questions, we looked at student work for a reason; we observed each other for a reason; we explored texts, we participated in protocols—all to explore each other’s very real questions. This engaged us and sustains our work, year after year. For my first cycle of inquiry, I chose to examine my practice around my unit on The Great Gatsby. My tenth-grade social studies colleague and I usually team-teach most units. However, when I began the study of The Great Gatsby, my partner was teaching an integrated economics unit with our math teacher. Left to my own devices, I reverted to a traditional approach to the novel. I lectured, assigned study questions, and quizzed students daily. I paid absolutely no attention to the need to differentiate instruction for the wide levels of ability in front of me each day in our heterogeneous classroom. My first homework check demonstrated that 30% of students had not attempted the assignment and another 30% had incomplete work. Classroom discussion was abysmal, and students were disengaged and disruptive. I countered with assigning the second chapter, eight comprehension questions, and a quiz the next day. Well, they shocked me! 40% of students got a zero on the quiz and 5% earned less than 50%. The other 55% received higher than ninety; clearly, there was no middle ground. Students who had the reading list well, and those students with different areas of intelligence would not. We continued in that vein for the entire novel. The final exhibition for that unit was to write an analytical paper addressing The Great Gatsby as the quintessential novel of the 1920s. Ego! What I thinking—half of my students were unable to read the novel and I am asking them to write about it and I used the word “quintessential.” It was almost as though I had set out to see just what a failure I could create. I eventually saw that I had lost a valuable instructional opportunity. We all felt beat up by this experience. I could not afford to repeat this series of mistakes with future students. I wondered how I could improve student engagement, creativity, and academic achievement while studying The Great Gatsby through the development of authentic curriculum. The following are the steps I took to establish a question for inquiry:

**Step 1. Create a vision for change.**
I examined my data:
- 30% no homework and 30% incomplete work
- Poor class discussion
- Daily quiz – 40% of students scored a 0
- Essay: “How is The Great Gatsby the quintessential novel of the 1920s?”
- 40% of students did not do the essay
- 90% of students indicated The Great Gatsby was their least favorite unit

**Step 2. Formulate a research question.**
I needed to keep in mind that good inquiry questions are those that:
- cannot be answered yes or no
- do not begin with “why”
- could not be easily misinterpreted
- are not too narrow or too broad
- do not already have an answer

**Step 3. Turn the vision into a question.**
What would I like students to do differently; what outcomes do I want? I knew that I wanted this unit to be interdisciplinary in nature. I wanted students to have a clear understanding of the historical perspective this novel offered for a specific time period. In a conversation with a colleague, we noticed a parallel between art styles and writing styles in Fitzgerald’s novels. We wondered whether...

(continued on page 17)
Schools are social systems. In the work with reform and the redesign of schools we need to recognize that dimensions related to equity exist. Any way we look at it, there are, according to Peggy McIntosh, author of Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege, people who are “privileged” who do not see themselves as racist. They have been taught to recognize racism only in individual actions of meanness, not necessarily in invisible systems. This makes change hard and virtually impossible, at the school reform level, unless we raise consciousness.

Coaches and teachers, well-intentioned people, have to be aware that their assumptions guide their expectations and manifest success or failure for their students to believe that a privileged status exists in our social system, and it is both visible and invisible. Racism and inequity do not just exist in individual acts of meanness, they are inherent in all the thoughts and intentions, both conscious and unconscious. Our organization, the Technical Assistance and Leadership Center (TALC), in Milwaukee, is comprised of high school reformers engaging in systemic change. Systemic change takes a long time, even for those of us who work as change agents. We constantly chip away at it. In doing so, believing in the Critical Friends process, we asked ourselves how CFGs could be used to promote reflective practice, raise consciousness and address issues of equity. Our internal question became, “Can CFGs related to learning and teaching move teachers toward believing that all children can learn and should have access to successful learning experiences?”

Lessons Learned

We didn’t ask our schools to do what we weren’t willing to do. First, we used the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) Critical Friends philosophy to move our organization, TALC, toward reflective practice. Using CFG protocols helped us in our organizational work around issues of equity and consciousness-raising. We set operating norms that defined our organizational relationships and practice. We developed a process that guide our work. We used North, South, East and West: An Exercise in Understanding Preferences in Group Work. Using some of the text-based protocols with articles about race and diversity, we tuned our curriculum and instruction improved student learning. My questions build on my learning from, focus and refocus as an organization and move progressively forward with our work. Our training and experience has taken us on the path to becoming an emerging Center of Activity for CFG development. We sometimes struggle with our limited capacity to meet unrealistic expectations. This conundrum helps us identify with the systems we work with. They, too, have similar challenges with capacity. Teams often ask themselves, “How much can we do when we’re caught up in the day-to-day hustle and bustle?” “Now we’re expected to start up and sustain a CFG group?!” Since one of our operating principles is that “we must be the change we wish to see,” we make efforts to shape how schools might view practicing CFGs. Getting them to look at CFGs more as a tool than as just another chore is the challenge.

We decided to integrate reflective practice in our bi-monthly staff development institutes. We designed the September Small School Institute to address Culture. To begin with a foundation of awareness for this purpose, this unit was to create a visual art-integrated unit. I also wanted to appeal to as many of the multiple intelligences as possible, so my lessons and assignments were varied. As a result of the changes I made to my practice, I learned that authentic curriculum promotes student engagement and investment in their learning; that students develop critical thinking skills; and that students achieve at a higher level.

Throughout my period of inquiry, my CFG played a significant role in my learning. They helped me to formulate my inquiry question, tuned my curriculum, and conducted a descriptive review of student work. They observed my teaching, they pushed my thinking, and they motivated me with their questions and their comments. They then helped me to formulate my next question. My next cycle of inquiry was to examine how authentic curriculum and instruction improved student learning. My questions build on my learning from my first question.

There is nothing easy about this work. I spent two years digging at the question and searching answers in my students’ performance and achievement. I remember, however, the feeling of isolation I experienced when I lectured, piled on more and more punishing assignments, and watched my students fail. When I lean on my colleagues for help, I know that we are all in this together—all focused on improving student learning. When I know that my colleagues care about my work, it makes a difference.

Aimee Gibbons may be contacted at agibbons@spricem.com

Coaching for Educational Equity... (continued from page 15)