

# Searching for Answers: A Center of Activity Emerges in Milwaukee

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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*, many people who are “privileged” who do not see themselves as racist. They have been taught to recognize racism only in individual acts 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. We need to be aware 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 our underlying 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 couldn'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 principles 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 ethnicity, teaching, learning, and CFGs, helped us to use a common language and understand each other's perspective.

Since only two of our staff had formal training, we decided to hire Camilla Greene and RoLesia Holman to train our entire staff and other school leadership as CFG coaches. Because we had set the stage using various protocols and feedback techniques, it seemed to take a lot less time to get to the hard questions. With the skilled facilitation of our trainers, we were able to have healthy conversations about race, power, privilege, and equity in relation to student and teacher interactions and success or failure.

After our training, TALC staff used an adaptation of the *Tuning Protocol* with several of our documents, and finally we used the *Success Analysis* protocol.

Engaging in the CFG process helped support an emerging environment and laid a foundation by providing a safe place to have hard conversations about our work. We discussed what we bring to the work, the direction we're going, where we should be going, and why, personally, we engage in the work. This allowed us to surface assumptions, understand where we were each coming 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 small school teams 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 by surfacing underlying assumptions, we engaged our small school teams in the Diversity Exercise. When we asked participants to break up into small groups of four or five, we limited the categories to birth order, gender, and race/ethnicity. This became an ordeal, as the

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participants resisted our structure. The resistance was directed mainly toward the limitations of our categories. It seemed difficult for the participants to talk about what it meant to be male, female, black, white, etc. We found that this protocol pushed participants completely outside their comfort zones.

The discomfort was not limited to race. A faction of men broke off from the white group and became a men's group. Some black men joined the men's group and defined themselves as males. There was a black women's and a white women's group. There were no mixed-race women's groups and only one birth order group (which was mixed race). Once the participants had moved beyond their discomfort, however, which usually was moved by someone being honest and coming from their heart, they became immersed in the dialogue. They were so involved in their discussions, in fact, that they resisted again when we began to reconvene the groups to report back.

This experience forced the participants to deal with their good, bad, and ugly assumptions and stereotypes. Their learning was revealed as we debriefed the protocol. A connection had been made. The realization that what we had just put them through was what many educators put our students through every day in our classrooms. We harbor assumptions, and we form relationships and create expectations based on those assumptions. Furthermore, our students rise to those expectations both negative and positive. This is how we manifest success or failure with students. It was an eye opener for just about everyone who participated.

We learned that using CFG practices can help facilitate transformation. In developing safe spaces that allow for discussing difficult issues, if we are grounded, we can make an honest and productive approach to relationship building resulting in reflective practice. Who we are, and what we bring to our work-matters. Sometimes in the process, we experience discomfort, sometimes resistance. The process of improving learning experiences for children and adults requires that we look at our motivation, the assumptions that shape our expectations, and finally at our practice. ■

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together soul, role, institution, and social transformation.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Parker Palmer, Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, Chapter 1, 1998. In this chapter, Palmer addresses the issue of identity and integrity when it comes to teaching in the classroom. The ideas he puts forward are just as relevant and challenging when thinking about coaching for educational equity.

<sup>2</sup> See Julian Weissglass, Ripples of Hope, Building Relationships for Educational Change, 1998. My thinking and understanding of the many forms that oppression takes and what can be done to interrupt and heal from it has been deeply influenced by this book and my association with the author.

See also Stephen D. Brookfield, Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, 1995. This book gave me new insight into the connection of critical reflection and the recognition of hegemonic assumptions. Brookfield writes, "The subtle tenacity of hegemony lies in the fact that, over time, it becomes completely imbedded, part of the cultural air we breathe. We cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify any particular group or groups of people actively conspiring to keep others silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony are part and parcel of everyday life—the stock opinions, conventional wisdom, and commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that many of us take for granted. If there is a conspiracy here, it is the conspiracy of the normal."

<sup>3</sup> Parker Palmer, Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, 1990, p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> Myles Horton and Paulo Friere, We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change, 1990, p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> See Palmer, Courage to Teach, Chapter III, "The Hidden Wholeness, Paradox in Teaching and Learning," for an excellent discussion of this idea. Also see Palmer's new book, A Hidden Wholeness, The Journey Toward an Undivided Life, 2004.

In this book Palmer addresses four compelling themes: the shape of an integral life, the meaning of community, teaching and learning for transformation, and nonviolent social change.

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