

# Inquiry Focus Puts Students at the Center

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Linda and I have been training CFG Coaches in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools for almost ten years. From time to time, we have imagined what coaches training experience might be like under ideal circumstances. In our fantasy scenario, a group of educators would be selected, trained, and immediately start applying their learning with students in a clinical setting. The strength of this approach would be to move participants towards the immediate application of the training as CFG Coaches to adopt an inquiry stance, design learning, implement it, and study its effects on students within the context of a CFG. We often wondered if such a seamless integration of inquiry into the work of a CFG in the real world of schools was possible.

Well, last summer, the Miami-Dade Summer Demonstration School Project (SDSP) provided us the opportunity we had been waiting for.

Implemented at six school sites during the summer of 2006, the project

aimed to improve summer school opportunities for students by creating instructional settings that provided high-quality learning experiences through the implementation of best practices in teaching. Four common design elements formed the foundation for teaching and learning at each of the six SDSP sites: quality instructional programs, responsive teaching, global citizenship, and student development. We believed that each of these elements could be most effectively addressed within the context of a high-functioning learning community and we jumped on the opportunity to prove it by putting our work to the test.

Each of the six SDSP sites was assigned an experienced NSRF coach responsible for facilitating daily team sessions—teachers taught for half a day and came together as a learning community during the second half of the day. The program enabled us to adopt an inquiry stance about our own work and led us to explore what would happen if students were taught by a group of teachers who were part of a learning community that met regularly to read and discuss relevant articles, design instruction, and collaboratively examine their practice and the student work resulting from their assignments. One

of the questions we explored was: Will having an inquiry focus make a difference in how teachers approach instruction? If so, what impact will that have on student learning?



From the beginning, inquiry and data collection were embedded as part of the professional development expectations for all participants—teachers, site learning community facilitators, and district support facilitators. During the On-Boarding sessions held at a local university, participants documented their learning by writing daily session reflections. These reflections were reviewed, shared, and discussed at the learning community facilitator debrief session, held at the conclusion of each day. These reflections provided valuable information about the experiences, concerns, and needs of participants in their seminar groups (SDSP site teams), which led to ongoing adaptation of the agendas to better serve the group's needs.

The On-Boarding experience began with a focus on understanding the twenty-first century learner as a springboard for reflection and thinking about the kind of teaching and learning experiences that would be necessary to fully engage every student in powerful learning. This activity was done with the entire group of teachers before they received their assignments to the specific SDSP site teams. Participants read several articles describing twenty-first century learners and discussed them in small groups using the Three Levels of Text Protocol. Working in groups, they then constructed their own graphic representation of the students they would expect to teach. The entire group then examined each other's creations by engaging in a gallery walk. The activity concluded with reflective dialogue prompted by the following questions: How would the characteristics of the twenty-first century learner add to the complexity of addressing the needs of these students? How might working as a learning community enable us to meet the needs of all students?

This activity set the tone for the kind of professional development that would follow. It focused attention on students and

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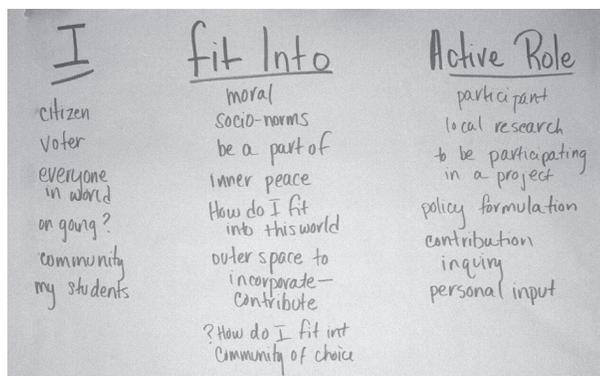
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encouraged teachers to think about curriculum as a means to engage all students in powerful, relevant, and authentic learning. This initial phase of the On-Boarding helped to develop an integrated approach that touched on each of the major design elements of the SDSP—quality instructional programs, responsive teaching, global citizenship, and student development. Perhaps more importantly, it helped teachers anchor their conversations around the students they would expect to be teaching and not those they wish would show up.

Building on this attempt to put students at the center of their work, each team developed an inquiry focus that would help them study the effect of their instructional approaches on students and document their learning.

The image below shows how one of the teams began to articulate the question they wanted their students to explore: “How do I fit into and play an active role in my community, the world, and beyond?” They generated specific, teacher-created markers that served to both design instructional activities and document student progress over time.



Facilitated by a district science supervisor who is also a trained CFG coach, the work proved exciting, generative, and empowering for the members of this team. The initial focus on inquiry created a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for teaching and learning that was visible throughout the rest of the six weeks in every SDSP school site.

We were determined that this Summer Demonstration School Project become a learning experience for all of us, to inform our future work with embedding inquiry into the CFG process. We became data obsessed. Data collection within and across sites included:

- Observation/field - notes;
- Critical Incident Reports;

- Student and teacher artifacts;
- Reflection on lessons and responses from students;
- Discussions with peers about daily activities and outcomes;
- Focus groups;
- Learning community session reflections;
- Teacher journals; and
- Photographs and video.

As we began to examine the data, we noted patterns related to the four major design elements of the program as well as to our wonderings about the ways the program would affect teachers, coaches, and students. Initial site visits focused on capturing evidence of how participants had adjusted from the On-Boarding phase which had mostly focused on building a learning community, developing an understanding of the curriculum models that would be implemented at each site, and developing site-specific inquiry focus, as well as logistics, planning, and preparation to receive students.

Participants reported that having done the collaborative work to develop the inquiry questions that would guide their instructional choices for the summer gave them a focus they had not experienced in their work before. Planning cross-curricular projects and events became easy because the theme gave them a way to connect their individual content areas to the bigger picture. Students reported being engaged and energized by the process.

The best way to sum up the experience came from a fourth grader. When asked by the videographer about his experience in the Summer Demonstration School Project he said, “This is way better than real school.” Asked to explain further he said, “In real school – if you want to tie a knot, they make you read a book and you still don’t know how to tie a knot. Here we get to do the real thing.”

Teachers reported feeling the same way. Because the inquiry focus was their choice, and the collaborative work they did was driven by their own needs and wonderings, the experience was powerful for them. As one veteran teacher says in her exit interview, “I’ve waited thirty years for this”.

We have a lot more to learn and think about, but we are feeling that our initial sense that inquiry work and CFG work are a natural match has been enhanced by this experience. ■

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