Connections
Spring 2007

Leaps
Marjorie Larner, Colorado

“Was Molly smarter than all the experts? No, she was just braver. The Administration’s exploitation of 9/11 created an environment in which it took a lot of courage to see and say the obvious… Molly had that courage; not enough others can say the same.”

And it’s not over… Now, more than ever, we need people who will stand up against the follies and lies of the powerful. And Molly Ivins, who devoted her life to questioning authority, will be sorely missed.” Paul Krugman in a column mourning the death of columnist Molly Ivins

On Monday morning, I barely stopped myself from standing on a table at a faculty meeting in an urban school and yelling, “Stop! Stop talking about the kids that way!”

The odds are if I had, I wouldn’t have been satisfied with the results. And yet, I still wonder. The picture replays in my head like a cartoon where my body stays seated listening to the discussion of how to control the kids with systematized and increasingly more serious punishments for infractions of dress code, being in the hallways without a pass and rude behavior, while my alter ego rises up to interrupt the direction of the discussion.

The next morning, in a more affluent school a few miles outside the city boundaries, I walked through the hallways surrounded by kids enjoying freedom of movement, choice of clothing, joking around with each other and with their teachers. The cartoon replayed in my head, this time with more specific questions: Why are the kids in the affluent school better dressed and behaviors that release freedom of movement, choice of clothing, joking around with each other and with their teachers.

Once as a meeting was starting, a teacher with whom I was feeling some beginning alliance whispered to me, “Many of these kids are involved in gangs and drugs. We can’t compete with that.” I whispered back to him, “If we don’t do it in this school, who will? What will happen to them?” He looked at me in a way that I interpreted as, “You are naive. You are not in the classroom with these kids.” I wondered where he did come with the horror of kids being just let go. I wanted to tell him stories of students and their teachers whose lives refuted his assumption. I suspected he could match me story for story, and I would not change his mind. My question was just a beginning for both of us.

I keep looking at how my beliefs about what actions are possible and right are influenced and limited by my own experience. My perceptions are colored by my Midwestern childhood in a school that was 100% Jewish kids with no Jewish teachers and no external acknowledgment.

I don’t often have the luxury of days set aside for “trainings,” or workshops to build new awareness through carefully crafted experiences. Rather, my work is to occur in real time in classrooms and hallways and committee meetings. I have to find ways to insert questions, new perspectives that shed light on assumptions and name inequities in the moment. With these short chances at conversation, each move has to count toward affecting instructional practice and relationships with students.

In the face of the punishing effects of an unsustainable accountability system based on standardized test scores, school systems across the country are asking out loud what service they are providing their schools. Systems from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles are considering and reconceiving school-based decision making and management and governance and are seeking ways to reward school success with increasing levels of school-based decision making and management autonomy.

New York City alone is in the process of dismantling a failed bureaucratic school management structure in favor of locating as much power, decision making, and resources as possible at the schoolhouse level. With that type of administrative discretion, teachers and principals will get to choose the type of professional development and external support they buy and receive. Imagine, no longer will a central office staffer demand this or that community will determine the type of professional development in over 1,000 school districts.

It is up to each of us to choose to make our organization equally strong as a voice for adult learning in the service of student achievement.

We can choose to make NSRF strong and I believe deeply that if we stay committed, we can and will choose a more socially just and equitable society.

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What’s Your Question?
(continued from page 8)

researchers to attend the forum and share their work.

Other participants pointed out that “work is needed. . . to document the research agenda, some essential history, etc.” and one suggested “incorporating the research into each local center’s work plan.” These comments reinforce the idea that in order to further influence others to transform schooling, CFG practitioners must be more deliberate about collecting data and presenting evidence that demonstrates how we make a difference for our students.

Because NSRF’s history is rooted in a tradition of “building reflexive democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone,” NSRF is in a unique position to bridge the gap between theory and practice and use our strengths to transform student learning by transforming ourselves.

So what is YOUR research question? How does your practice influence others, and how can you share that? Hope to see you at the third annual NSRF Research Forum in Florida on December 12th, 2007.

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Director’s Report
(continued from page 1)

including scholarship support when necessary.

We are the protocol people—we’re also the CFG people, the CFEE people, and the facilitative leadership people—no one else, and no other organization may lay claim to those things (one exception is our partner organization in the CFEE work—BayCES, with whom we are codeveloping that work). Choosing to support NSRF is a choice toward supporting the things we do coupled with our theory of action, which supports our mission statement of educational and social equity.

The choice to support NSRF is made with the understanding that the organization stay committed to its core values and principles. We have had many conversations and thought openly and honestly about the business of NSRF. NSRF is worthy of your support because we are, have always been, and will continue to be an organization committed to mission first. What we have realized and what we are asking you to support as a dues-paying member is that we must operate as a business in order to have the resources to further our mission.

And our time is now. I believe we are entering a perfect storm for teacher voice and teacher empowerment. In the face of the punishing effects of an unsustainable accountability system based on standardized test scores, school systems across the country are asking out loud what service they are providing their schools. Systems from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles are considering and reconceiving school-based decision making and management autonomy.

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As you consider your memberships, affiliations, and obligations this year, I am confident you will not only choose to become a dues-paying member of our organization but that you will encourage others to do so as well. I have had great counsel from trusted colleagues and critical friends in this time of transition for NSRF; our work is stronger, more important, and more critical than ever—it is up to each of us to choose to make our organization equally strong as a voice for adult learning in the service of student achievement.

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of our culture and difference from the mainstream society. Our parents unquestioningly came to the Christmas programs where we sang carols, including the German “O Tannenbaum,” in those years not long after WWII, where some of the parents had survived German Concentration Camps.

In my family, if I squinted, I could almost imagine us as Dick, Jane and Sally, which gave me great satisfaction on top of the uneasiness that no matter how close we might come, we could never really match that American picture. We internalized the dominant view of our difference as partially shameful. We were very verbal people and yet something deep within us was silenced. Maybe I’m overly sensitive about uniforms and hallway passes because of how stifled, controlled and bored I felt at school and how hard I took it when I got in trouble for noncompliance. School for me, to borrow the words of a colleague, was soul-crushing. I hear the opinions that what appear to me as harsh words and heartless authority might not appear that way to all kids. But I can’t help it. I feel an unbearable tug to act every time I sense anyone is silenced. So for me the question is not whether to act but about how.

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I am not finding it easy. A principal at a school where I’m working said his bottom line is, “We have to take care of our kids at all costs.” In a conversation with a couple of African-American parents, we shared a fear for our sons in the face of racism and anti-Semitism – and an uncertainty about whether to act but about how.

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L inda 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 introduce 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 would an inquiry 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