NSRF’s Living History
Interview with Kim Feicke and Tanisha Davis Doss
Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

How would you describe your goals and your work to our readers?
Tanisha: In 2000 I was involved in a principal internship program and my placement was the Madison Middle School. My supervising principal was Jill Hudson and she invited me to attend a summer CFG training. After my CFG training, I was involved in coaching at the middle school and following my internship, I began facilitating for CES Northwest. Eventually, I began to facilitate nationally for NSRF.

Kim: Why was this a big question? My goals in life are continuous personal growth and achieving social justice, which for me revolve around doing what it takes to interrupt and transform the institutional oppression that is built into both our school system and our larger society.

How did you get involved with NSRF and how are your goals aligned with NSRF?
Tanisha: Through NSRF, I have established relationships with other educators who share my passion. I have also established strong alliances across different schools and I’ve continued our efforts to support marginalized students, and the folks I was working with were doing the same.

Kim: How has your involvement in NSRF provided your efforts in support of marginalized students?
Tanisha: My work with NSRF has given me valuable tools and skills for collaboratively improving our practice, and I’m beginning to look at how to use them in order to develop a sense of urgency.

How has your involvement in NSRF affected your work as a school coach and NSRF facilitator?
Kim: How will educators know when they are experiencing success in their efforts to narrow the racial achievement gap?
Tanisha: This book has already helped me to proactively own what I don’t know as a white educator in a way that empowers me to step up as an ally and an advocate. Cornel West describes what I’ve been feeling lately as being “... trapped in the narrow framework of the dominant liberal and conservative views of race in America, which with its worn-out vocabulary leaves us intellectually debilitated, morally disempowered, and personally depressed...” I don’t feel so disempowered well and I welcome this book and its strategies as a much-needed support in my efforts to hold myself accountable for the interconnection of educational inequities and the creation of equitable opportunities for each student.

Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools
Book Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

The book also offers specific strategies and activities that groups, such as CFGs, can use to breathe new life into their commitment to hold themselves in the risk zone where real change and growth can occur. Prompts in the book set the stage for provocative, Discourse 2 conversations that go beyond admiring the problem and can lead to viable changes in our work with our students.

I haven’t finished reading this book, it just arrived yesterday in the mail, but I know in a way that touches all the points of the compass the authors describe that this is going to be a critical resource for me in this next period. Lately, I’ve felt overwhelmed by recent developments like the murder of Sean Bell by the police in New York and the profiling and violent arrest of the Iranian student by campus police at UCLA. This book has already helped me to proactively own what I don’t know as a white educator and I welcome the way you are using it, e-mail nsrf@nsrfharmony.org.

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Glen E. Singleton and Curtis Linton: design transformative professional development for school districts. Singleton is an African-American and Linton is white. These two leaders have formed a coaching alliance and friendship based on mutual passion for having courageous conversations about race in order to address its impact in our schools today. This book acts as a personal/professional inquiry that is guided by the following essential questions:

• What is it that educators should know and be able to do to narrow the racial achievement gap?
• How will educators know when they are experiencing success in their efforts to narrow the racial achievement gap? And...
• What do they do as they discover what they don’t yet know and are not yet able to do to eliminate the racial achievement gap?
• It is the third question that has preoccupied my thinking since I read the announcement for this new book a few weeks ago. It has set me to wondering about my responsibility as a white educator to break with not knowing, to interrupt the “ignorance is bliss” syndrome that allows me to check in and out of being aware about racist inequities in our schools and society. It means I have to seek out and hold spaces for the “courageous conversations” that these authors define as a conversation that:
  • engages those who won’t talk,
  • sustains the conversation when it gets uncomfortable and
  • deepens it to the point where the talk is linked to authentic changes in practice

The authors then go on to outline four norms or agreements and six conditions for courageous conversations that act as a protocol of sorts to help guide this next step, an uncomfortable journey of racial discovery. They present the process of total engagement in these conversations about race as a compass that embraces the components of emotional (feeling), moral (believing), intellectual (thinking) and social (doing) as equivalent parts of a foundational whole. The compass graphic is then revisited by participants as an ongoing self-reflective process that encourages self-monitoring and full participation.

If you purchase this book and are interested in developing an ongoing online conversation about the way you are using it, e-mail nsrf@nsrfharmony.org. We can start our online chat in January.
work. These relationships and alliances provide me with the support I need to maintain the strength to continue this work.

Tanisha, you mentioned CFEF and I know Kim is involved in that work as well. How is CFEF the same as or different from your work as facilitators of new coaches’ seminars?

Tanisha: The CFEF provides the tools, definitions, and support needed to lead for educational equity. Personally, I see this as differing from coaches’ seminars because it creates the space for the emotional, realistic and appropriate “self-work” needed to lead for educational equity.

When I am facilitating a traditional CFG Coaches Seminar, as opposed to a seminar focused on equity, I do not always have the support I need from my co-facilitators to be able to speak my truth. When I am involved in CFEF work, I know that my truth, and the truths of the participants, is needed and supported by my colleagues. In traditional seminars, I have been asked to lead the “equity day,” or the “equity exercise.” With CFEF, I know that equity is at the center of our work, and that we are ALL responsible for it; it’s no longer the special responsibility of colleagues of color.

Kim: For me the difference between a CFEF and a CFG seminar lies in its primary goal. Very briefly, a CFG seminar gives you the skills and tools to run a CFG—-with all that entails. The goal of a CFEF seminar is to come out prepared with tools and the disposition to use them to challenge, interrupt and transform the status quo. CFEF uses some CFG processes, but also many others. I have come out of CFEF with a heightened awareness of my privilege as a white woman and a deeper understanding of where I need to take my facilitation.

My greatest hope is that as an organization, we will be able to develop the processes we need to engage in dialogue and reflection to strategize where we are in our mission and what our next steps are so that we can have a decisive impact on the enormous gap that exists between who achieves and who does not.

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Students at the Center…

Amanda J. Stirling, CFEF's Living History...
(continued from page 11)

into our curricula and work.

Kim: My greatest fear for NSRF is that we will allow ourselves to be immobilized by the disconnect that comes with unpacking and addressing our own biases and assumptions around equity work, and that this will block our ability to hold ourselves accountable for moving forward in our work.

My greatest hope is that as an organization, we will be able to develop the processes we need to engage in dialogue and reflection to strategize where we are in our mission and what our next steps are so that we can have a decisive impact on the enormous gap that exists between who achieves and who does not.

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I must think that this book shows many parallels between the work of Critical Friends Groups and the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) because of the tremendous amount of post-it notes and underlining that was evident when I finished reading. Even after rereading to pull out significant quotes, I felt myself saying yes that is true and fits perfectly into what I am doing.

The book opens with a forward by Lee Shulman. He describes the work of CASTL as follows: “The scholarship of teaching and learning... views teaching as serious, intellectual work, ask good questions about their students’ learning, seek evidence in their classrooms that can be used to improve practice, and make this work public so that others can critique it, build on it, and contribute to the ‘wider teaching commons.” (p. xii). He points out the need for making the work public, which is often the missed step or a step not included in past CFG work. I recognize there is a very fine line between making work public and breaking the trust of the CFG, and this could be part of the reason for the lack of substantial literature about the work of CFGs. But as I reflect back, I wonder about the paths the work of the critical friends travels. As a first-year coach, I went to a portfolio evaluation of the work of second-year coaches in Pawling, N.Y. There, experienced coaches were required, as part of the process, to document evidence through portfolio-making and to publicly defend the work of their CFG. I am wondering now whether the dropping of this component of the work seven years ago has contributed to the lack of current longitudinal evidence to substantiate the powerful work that has been happening in CFGs over the past ten years. As I review the work of CASTL, I point out that “few reform efforts reach directly into the classroom to look carefully at what teachers do” (p. 3). The work of the National School Reform Faculty and the Houston A+ Challenge (formally Houston Annenberg Challenge) tried, and I think were very successful in, reaching into the classrooms to the teachers and the students. There is powerful anecdotal information on the impact the CFG work has had in schools. This journal’s archive contains stories after story about the positive impact of our collaborative, reflective work. The question is to what end. As a group of teachers and inquirers, we need to create the needed research and produce the literature of our own work.

Hatch illuminates some of the pitfalls of teachers doing research, “the fact that the demands of teaching must take precedence over the demands of research makes it particularly difficult for teachers to maintain a focus on a particular issue or question. For teachers, the object of study is like a moving target that refuses to stay still long enough to get a careful look...” (p. 18). Hatch continues throughout the book describing the successes and challenges that faced the teachers participating in the program. The book brings the teachers to life, using their writing, until their voices are heard loud and clear.

The conclusions that Hatch presents are on target and speak to the trials that I go through in maintaining my own work with CFGs. He states in one conclusion, “the current working conditions for teachers fail to provide adequate time and rewards for the careful examination of teaching and learning, but they also underscore how much can be done even under adverse conditions.” He continued, “what might be possible if we had a system of education that... embraced the idea that teachers’ expertise can be a critical resource in reshaping classroom practice and improving schools” (p. 101).

I recommend this book anyone in a CFG, working to develop CFGs, or interested in changing teaching and learning systems for the good of our students.

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