

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Camilla Greene

Mary Hastings, Maine

Camilla Greene believes in “speaking our truth...staying in Discourse II” in all her work (for *Changing the Discourse in Schools* by Parish, Eubanks and Smith, which provides a definition of *Discourse I and II*, and the *Discourse I and II T-Chart*, go to www.nsrffharmony.org/protocol.equity.html). As an African American woman educator, she has been an inspiration and brought perspiration to the many and varied groups she has worked with over her years in NSRF. Here is a glimpse into her story.

How did you first become involved in NSRF?

My NSRF work really evolved from CES (Coalition of Essential Schools) work. I taught at a CES high school (Rippowam High School in Stamford, CT) from 1984 to 2002. I was drawn to the (then) Nine Common Principles, especially “Student as Worker” (see www.essentialschools.org). I wanted to “de-teacherize” my classroom and be seen as more of a resource to my students. Two teachers from Walbrook High School in Baltimore, Marion Finney and Dot Turner, did a workshop at my school and that was the first time I’d ever seen African American women doing professional development. Their presence grew out of a Casey Foundation grant to assist schools in exploring the Common Principles towards CES membership.

As a result of this experience I applied to become a Citibank teacher in 1992. My superintendent and principal were very supportive of releasing me to work with other teachers. The focus of Citibank work was to professionalize teaching without having to leave the classroom. It was a cerebral experience. I tried to raise equity issues during my Citibank time but they were pushed under the rug.

Can you say more about how the discussion of equity issues was “pushed under the rug”?

We (myself and about 25 Citibank teachers) were pulled together in Chicago in 1995 by Paula Evans and Gene Thompson-Grove and asked what we talked about in substantive conversations. I believe this (conversation) grew into CFG work eventually.

Later, Jim Culbertson from Philadelphia wanted

to form a regional faculty with Philadelphia teachers, modeled after the Citibank program. He called it the Philadelphia Public Schools Regional Faculty. He offered to pay to have me and others come to work with these teachers. It was of interest to me that the idea of Student as Worker was seen by working-class parents in Philadelphia as a low objective for their children. They wanted their kids to be more than “workers.” This was an early example of how good intentions can go awry if multiple voices across difference are not present when a program is being designed.



Camilla Greene

So what happened?

Nothing. In hindsight, we should have included parents in the conversation, but we did not. Parents in general, but especially working-class parents and parents of color, are still missing from most design-level conversations. The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) and some other small school design teams are beginning to open up the process to family members.

In what capacities have you found yourself using CFG work over the years?

My high school evolved under the leadership of a female principal, Karley Meltzer. The Stamford school district was about 48% African American and Latino and 52% white. Dr. Meltzer, the principal at our CES high school, had a vision for educating each student regardless of race, class or gender. Under her leadership we dealt with our own equity issues as a staff. We had many tough and courageous conversations about race. We had intentionally provocative conversations as a whole staff based on texts like *Other People's Children*, by Lisa Delpit, *I Won't Learn from You*, by Herbert Kohl, and *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* by Peggy McIntosh. These conversations were given the time and space to develop every other month. We also incorporated block scheduling, and teaming across disciplines with planning time every day. Rippowam High School had 300 to 400 students. We visited other schools practicing CES principles.

I began using CFG practices with my team

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every day. We practiced distributive leadership: we changed team leaders every two months. I began to teach and use Looking at Student Work (LASW) protocols with my team. I used a Collaborative Assessment Conference (CAC) protocol with my teaching team and the students after I experienced it at a conference where my student's work was used. I began to use a variety of protocols in my classroom and I taught the students the Connections protocol as a process for beginning our classes. We did not do Connections everyday, but the students learned to ask for Connections and they learned to facilitate it as well. I also took Socratic Seminar training and began to use this process too. My classes met in a circle with lots of open space and conference tables instead of desks. I had lots of visitors coming to see what we were doing.

I began working with teachers in Philadelphia in the summer. Jackie Simmons hired me to go to Paul Robeson High School in Chicago to train teachers in CFG work. It was usually Faith Dunne, Gene Thompson-Grove, Carol LaCerenza and me. Race became an issue in Philadelphia because two black female teachers felt they weren't willing to do this work in the summer if race was not an issue. I spoke up at that point and reassured them that race would be part of the conversation. This was in 1993-94. We read articles I was familiar with, and had courageous conversations about race.

I realized that the programs and materials we used were designed by suburban white women to use in urban, black schools.

The disconnect...

I was at the reception in Washington announcing the Annenberg Foundation's award of \$500 million for high school reform. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) at Brown included NSRF. At this time I was a senior associate at the Annenberg Institute. AISR was mainly white, so some of us formed the Collaborative for Urban Excellence and developed our own urban agenda with Michael Alexander from Chicago. We worked together for about three years. During my two years at Annenberg, we pulled together fifty educators of color and met in Chicago, paid for by Annenberg. We had a transcription of these teachers' comments, questioning why white people had all the money to work in urban schools. There were prominent black educators there like Lisa Delpit and Asa Hilliard. As a result of this meeting of black educators, Annenberg decided to establish an ad hoc panel of

educators of color to give them feedback about what they would do in urban schools.

Somewhere around that time, CES moved to California. Ted Sizer asked me to serve on the New Futures committee, which pushed for the tenth Common Principle and planned for the next ten years. The tenth Common Principle ("The school should demonstrate non-discriminatory and inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogies. It should model democratic practices that involve all who are directly affected by the school. The school should honor diversity and build on the strength of its communities, deliberately and explicitly challenging all forms of inequity.") was a compromise because the word "democracy" was added instead of focusing just on equity.

What have been the most meaningful experiences you've had with NSRF work?

NSRF owned that it grew out of CES. I was asked to step up and become the NSRF presence at the CES center at Rutgers, as the director of CFG training, since I was then a National Facilitator. I went to the CES Equity Conference at Westerbeke Ranch in 1999. When I left Rutgers, I went back to the classroom.

I retired from the classroom in 2002, but I had always done work outside the classroom. I had always admired the work of BayCES, and was excited to be part of a collaboration between them and NSRF for CFEE.

I also became involved with the NSRF contracts with Knowledge Works in Ohio, CELL (The Center for Excellence in Leadership for Learning) in Indianapolis, and was doing different CFG trainings around the country.

I was asked to be on the Accountability Council (2001-2005). I accepted the position in order to continue speaking up and speaking out on issues of equity but I often felt disliked, like I was being tolerated...as if they didn't really want to hear what I was raising.

Being part of the development and ongoing co-facilitation CFEE work across difference was and is a great highlight of my work.

What have been the biggest challenges?

CFEE started in a promising way, with a laser focus on equity, but it has not taken hold. I sometimes think we're afraid to identify the differences between National

Facilitators of color and *(continued on page 16)*



white facilitators- afraid to dig down and experience the dissonance that will allow us to truly grow as allies. In my opinion, NSRF as an organization is not yet willing to be in Discourse II.

How does who you are inform what you do within this work?

My voice developed all through this work. I had a sense of voice from my own private school educational experience, and was convinced that public schools didn't work for kids, and everything since has confirmed this. It's a systemic failure, not a "kid" failure.

My focus is to be in Discourse II and to be a National Facilitator who is African American. I take pride in who I am and how I enter a room. Some black people feel they have to protect white people. I'm not in this work to scare people, but I'm not here to protect myself or others either. I feel that we each (dominant-culture people and non-dominant-culture people) have our own work to do in order to form alliances across our difference to more effectively bring about change for the least successful high school students caught in a hegemonic system of education.

How do you feel NSRF can best "live" its mission and vision?

Every time race is mentioned, people on the (NSRF) listserv rush to make each other feel comfortable. In my opinion, the listserv is not a space for courageous conversation around race, class or gender issues. It is more a space to exchange cognitive ideas about protocols.

I think we need to focus on ways to build alliances across differences in intentional ways. We are still not an unapologetically equity-based organization. We need to be able to hold a space in which divergent and multiple lenses can coexist.

For instance, time and time again NSRF is invited by a district to do CFG training. Even when the district asks for equity to be at the center of the CFG, there is a lot of conversation among National Facilitators about how to proceed, and I often wonder if our own individual discomfort about holding the space for tough conversations about equity determines our assessment of what the participants want or need in their trainings.

All I know is that there is a clear pathway from high school to prison for black boys in urban high schools. I do not think we have the luxury of considering my/our own comfort. I choose to stand in the

risk and danger zone with those who are dying.

The answers to the question of what a National Facilitator should know and be able to do should be written in Discourse II. Too often in national NSRF work, I've felt alone in my efforts to hold the space for discussions on equity, even when I am paired with another NSRF facilitator. All facilitators should be "trained" to have discussions in Discourse II and trained to hold a space for Discourse II discussions. How do we frame this work to work across difference in Discourse II? How do we have folks understand they have to work from the inside out, know their own prejudices, be able to interrupt when it's called for? We need people who can build alliances across difference and hold space for difficult conversations. I would like to see that language in what it means to be a National Facilitator.

What are the obstacles to this?

Historically, NSRF is an organization comprised of mostly dominant-culture folks. In my opinion, most dominant-culture folks have a big fear of being called racist and they need to get over it. There is a fear of Discourse II. Most people like sanitized, Discourse I language, the language that makes everyone feel comfortable. Discourse II is about being uncomfortable. When most white people begin to feel uncomfortable, most are struggling with their own guilt. White people who feel guilty or who are stuck in guilt are useless in equity-based work. Uncomfortable conversations about race often lead to feelings of guilt, feelings we all need to work through, otherwise the guilt immobilizes us... we can't do anything if we don't work past the guilt. I know I have work to do. I have guilt and I possess biases. I need to continue to publicly declare my biases and guilt and invite others to do the same. If we as adults cannot take the bold and courageous steps necessary to interrupt inequitable practices, how will each child thrive?

What's your greatest hope for NSRF in the next period?

I hope that NSRF becomes the "go-to" organization, the people who make room at the table for each underserved student and the families and staff members who advocate for them. ■

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