NSRF
National School Reform Faculty
Harmony Education Center

Connections

March 2015

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Why and when to ask "Why?"

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director

Recently, I was facilitating a CFG coaches training in Bloomington, IN, NSRF's homebase. We were in the process of learning about probing questions and had just finished reading the Understanding Probing Questions text. One of the participants (let's call her "Ann") commented that she had learned to be careful with "why?" questions. She had been told that they can sound accusatory and make people feel defensive. (In that article, we urge participants to make sure they're an advocate for the presenter with their language and inflection, rather than appearing to criticize especially when asking "why" questions.) "Ann" had been told that, instead of asking "why," to use words like, "How did you decide…" or "What are your feelings around…"

After a quick discussion about the necessity for being cautious when using "why," the group went into the Probing Questions Practice Activity. As an example within this activity, I shared a dilemma from when I was a young teacher with a student who had behavioral problems. My focusing question centered on just one aspect of her difficulties: "How do I help my student develop the social skills she needs to make and keep friends?"

After the group practiced creating and refining their probing questions for me, I decided to share with them one of the most powerful probing questions I received when I presented this dilemma to my CFG community so many years ago. I told them that when my colleague asked me the probing question I was about to reveal, it felt like he reached out and punched me in the gut. My reaction was immediate, strong, and emotional, consisting of hurt, anger, and defensiveness. That question was, "Why do you think that that's your job?"

In this particular training, after the group reflected about my revelation for a few moments, "Ann" pointed out that my intensely negative reaction was caused by a "why" question. This was clearly true and a few other people in the group chimed in to say that "why" questions would definitely make them feel spotlighted and judged. After some discussion, I asked the group to listen to the rest of my story.

When I heard this question from my critical friend, my immediate thoughts were something like, "What do you mean, 'why do I think it's my job?' Of course it's my job! I'm here to help that child in anyway I can and social/emotional learning (especially for first graders) is just as important as academics! Students need teachers that care for them!" and on and on in that vein. You get the picture. After a time, I managed to calm down a bit. (Good thing there is a rule against trying to

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answer probing questions!) The more I reflected, the more I realized that under my anger and defensiveness and my sadness for this little girl, I really was not being the best teacher to her I could be. Why not? I realized that a part of me was trying to fill the role of her absent mother.

When that truth hit me, it dramatically changed my perspective of all the dilemmas I had around this student. In truth, the suggestions that my group gave me back then may or may not have helped me. But the radical change of perspective brought to me by that "why" question absolutely did. Because of that single probing question I was much more able to think clearly about what was best for that student, the other students in my class, and myself as their teacher. Although the protocol did not give me a magic wand to make all this student's struggles disappear, I was able to let go of a lot of the anxiety and stress that this student's history and behavior created for me. The clarity that this "why?" question brought me allowed me to make better choices around how I reacted and tried to help my student.

Why do you think that's your job?

After I had finished my story, another of the participants (who had actually been a CFG coach for many years and was taking the training again as a "refresher") also shared a "why" story. He was once asked several "why" questions in a row when he brought a dilemma to his CFG community. He also had an uncomfortable initial reaction, but similar to my experience, he truly had an epiphany around his dilemma because of the multiple "why?" questioning.

"Ann" now wondered if the "why" was one of the first or last questions I was asked. "In my case," I said, "it was one of the last questions I was asked." This training group then discussed how a "why" question early in a round of probing questions might be too powerful or too provocative, and might best be shared late in the round. I also pointed out that I shared my dilemma in my CFG community—one that had already built the needed foundation of safely and trust.

This discussion highlighted the cautions that should be taken when using a powerful probing question such as "why?" Using "why" unskillfully can quickly shut down learning by creating defensiveness and irritation or anger. However, when used correctly, "why" can be a powerful tool to surface one's beliefs and values. To make use of "why" in the most productive manner possible, use it:

» As an advocate for the presenter—be intentionally curious and open, and avoid using a tone, inflection and/or body language that is judging,

» In a group that already has built a culture of safety and trust, and

» At the end of a probing question session, rather than the beginning.

Without these proper conditions in place, you would probably be wise to stick with "what" or "how" questions instead. For other examples of probing questions, please rerview the Probing Questions Cheat Sheet or Probing Questions Approaches.

Big news!

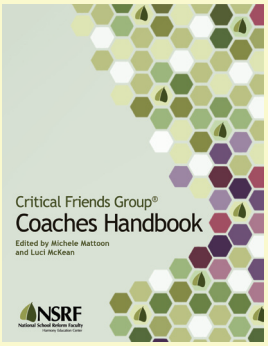
Coaches Handbook coming soon

In addition to prepping this month's edition of Connections, we've been working like mad preparing the new Coaches Handbook, which will be used in all the new coaches trainings this summer and which will be available for purchase on our website in the autumn. This new book, because it includes the protocols and materials that are only available on our website for trained coaches, will ONLY be available for NSRF-certified coaches and NSRF National Facilitators to purchase.

Brand-new content includes not only updated and new protocols and activities, some never-before seen on our website, but also an entire section dedicated to tools for coaches, including:

- Tips and pointers around how to form CFG communities, the facilitation of protocols, and more
- Helpful information about how to structure and run your CFG community
- Activities to hone your CFG coaching skills including a cheat sheet for matching protocols to the work at hand
- Information to share with colleagues and administrators to promote your new CFG communities
- More tools and techniques for CFG coaches

Once the artwork for the handbook goes to the printer, we'll also begin adding the new materials to our website, available to our coach members. Watch for an announcement about new materials on the website in the next issue of *Connections* ... or just keep an eye on the website for new content!



NSRF LOVES OUR BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA HOME ... BUT

We do NOT support the Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act, nor do most Bloomington businesses.
NSRF welcomes everyone, and everyone attending trainings in Bloomington will be welcomed throughout the city.

Sharpen your facilitation skills,
improve student achievement AND
positively shift school culture through CFG training!

Sign up for spring or summer Critical Friends Group® New Coaches Open Trainings

Current options:

May 6-8 + two more days TBA in Athens, Greece
June 22-26 in Nashville, TN
June 22-26 in Orange County, CA
July 6-10 in Los Angeles, CA
July 13-17 in Bloomington, IN

Open trainings this summer will use our brand-new Coaches Handbook as the training manual, with expanded content and updated materials!

Rave reviews:

"Best PD EVER!"

"Informative! Educational! Protocols I can use frequently in my work."

"...the protocols are really useful in bringing out our 'best selves.' They drew me into the activities in a way that nudged me towards being fully present. I developed a greater awareness of the effect of my behavior and how it might benefit or hurt the rest of the participants."

To enroll or learn more, visit the NSRF website or call 812-330-2702!

Communities of Practice support Early Care education leadership and professional development in Palm Beach County

By Monique Wilkinson NSRF National Facilitator and CFG Coach in Florida, and Mary Sibley, CFG Coach in Florida

Note: Palm Beach County uses the term "Communities of Practice" (CoPs) rather than Critical Friends Group to emphasize the concept of community which reflects our holistic approach to early care and education (ECE); working with children, families, and colleagues in "a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic, and who come together for discussion, in search of resolution, or perhaps just to share best practices." Despite the difference in terminology, the purposes and processes are the same as one would find in a Critical Friends Group community.

Palm Beach County, Florida's Early Care and Education community is nationally known for being on the cutting edge of quality improvement to support outcomes for children. In a movement dominated by state initiatives, Palm Beach has been one of only a few counties in the United States to create and maintain a quality rating improvement system (QRIS) for early care and education programs, including classroom assessments, technical assistance, and professional development supports. The QRIS has recently evolved into the Strong Minds Network and is funded by the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, a voter-approved, independent special district supported by local tax dollars.

> *"This wonderful group of leaders has been invaluable to me as an administrator. We meet together monthly and tackle some of the biggest challenges that we face as directors and as advocates for the field of education. It has been a great source of strength that I can call upon. And, it has helped me share my passion and vision with my own staff."*

Since 2012, Palm Beach State College's Institute of Excellence in Early Care and Education (IEECE), a partner in the County's ECE system, has taken the lead in developing and co-facilitating communities of practice at all levels. Of particular interest is supporting child care center leaders to be successful in the new Strong Minds system. Two Center Leader CoPs have been established, including directors, curriculum specialists and lead teachers, who are charged with not only day-to-day management of the centers, but also mentoring the implementation of evidence-based curriculum and assessments, and guiding staff professional development that meets program and personal goals.

Palm Beach County's Founding Center Leaders Community of Practice: Nancy Tirado, Kiddie Haven; Shannon Vasquez, Palm Beach Preschool; Deirdre Phillips, Opportunity, Inc.; Mary Sibley, facilitator; Catherine Stefano, Center for Early Learning; Ali Eger, Opportunity, Inc.; Kathleen Wininger, The Appleseed.

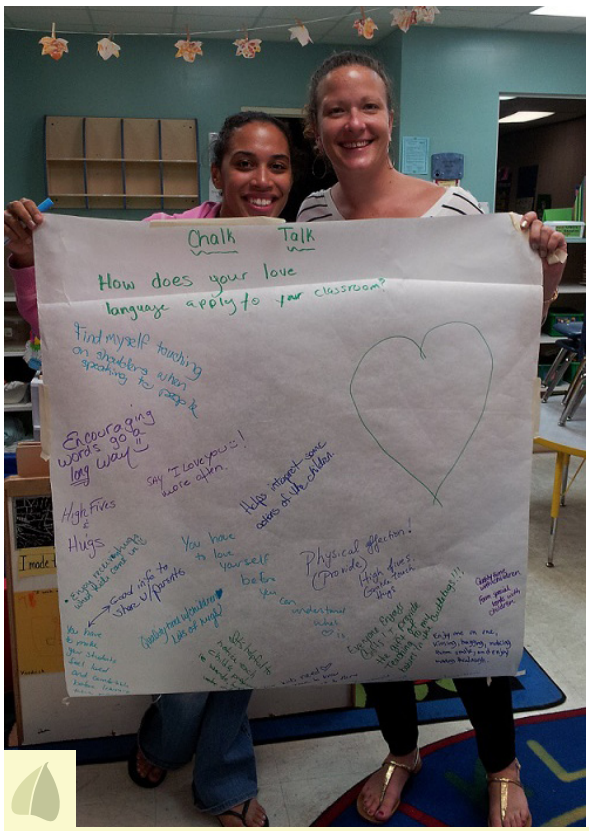
Currently, Palm Beach County's Strong Minds system is emphasizing two data-driven assessment tools that will lead to more positive outcomes for children. The first is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), an observational tool measuring the quality of teacher-child interactions. The second is Teaching Strategies GOLD, an authentic assessment measure designed to assess the ongoing development and learning of children from birth through kindergarten. Early childhood practitioners attend courses to learn the "why and how" of these assessments and can request on-the-job technical assistance to address any challenges they encounter.

To scaffold the success of these initiatives, the Institute of Excellence has sponsored two New Coaches Trainings, with a third planned for summer 2015. The New Coaches Training provides center leaders with the skills and confidence to build their own Leader Community of Practice, as well as grow CoPs at their centers. With mentoring from colleagues and other NSRF-trained coaches and

national facilitators, these leaders create a trust-based, learning organization within which teachers and leaders share different approaches to similar issues, gather new ideas from one another to ease frustrations and dilemmas, and enjoy personal support, creative collaboration and innovation. In other words, Palm Beach County's ECE community is becoming a valuable professional source for new and relevant learning and support.

Members look forward to the regular meetings. Says one director, "I am so excited to be a part of the Palm Beach County Center Leaders [Community of Practice] group . . . This wonderful group of leaders has been invaluable to me as an administrator. We meet together monthly and tackle some of the biggest challenges that we face as directors and as advocates for the field of education. It has been a great source of strength that I can call upon. And, it has helped me share my passion and vision with my own staff."

An owner/director states that the Center Leader CoP "has brought friendship, bonding, and trust with local colleagues. It allows us to see that we're not in it alone. And another member in the community shows her enthusiasm by saying "... I am excited to see the improvements for children that I know are on the way. I believe those changes will be child outcomes and teacher team building within my school. I feel prepared to facilitate while also looking forward to gaining more experience."



Early Childhood leaders, Cyndy Sanders and Deirdre Phillips, proudly share Chalk Talk results from the group of early educators they facilitate at Opportunity, Inc. Early Learning Center, Palm Beach County.

No doubt, communities of practice are making positive differences in the lives of center leaders and their staff. It is helping them connect "what they know" with "what they do" (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). They are experiencing the benefits of collaboration, sharing ideas, networking and much more. And from this shared experience, the young children in their care will have greater opportunities to grow and flourish.

http://www.palmbeachstate.edu/ieece/

http://www.cscpbc.org

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Certified CFG Coach for the National School Reform Faculty. She has been facilitating CFG work as a coach with colleagues, community partners and child care center directors since completing her CFG training, as well as using protocols in her A.S. degree courses. Monique is also an early childhood Instructional Designer with the Institute of Excellence in Early Care and Education, and an adjunct professor in early childhood education, both at Palm Beach State College. Email her at wilkinsm@palmbeachstate.edu

Mary Sibley is a CFG coach in Florida and Instructional Designer and ESOL professor at Palm Beach State College. Since completing the Five-Day CFG New Coaches Training two years ago, Mary has applied what she learned across her work. Most rewarding has been facilitating monthly CFG meetings with Early Childhood leaders, some of whom are pictured in this article. Email her at sibleym@palmbeachstate.edu

Book review

Building a Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It To Everyone)

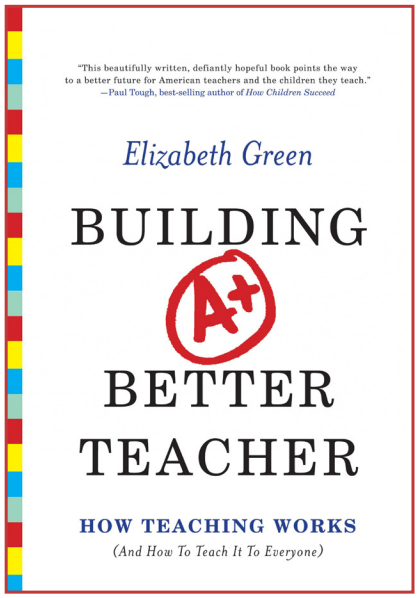
Reviewed by Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor

Building a Better Teacher
by Elizabeth Green
New York:
W.W. Norton & Company, 2014

Building A Better Teacher was recommended to me by a colleague who uses the book in his introductory undergraduate course for teacher education candidates. The book also has a subtitle, "How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It To Everyone)." This may lead the reader to believe that the book will tell one how to become a teacher, and not just an "A" teacher, but an "A+" teacher. (The "A+" is encircled and in red, like a grade on a student paper.)

Initially, I found the book interesting, and a helpful overview of many of the most recent efforts to improve teaching and to develop methods and programs to train classroom teachers. But readers may initially be disappointed that it does not seem to live up to its title and subtitles. An undergraduate interested in becoming an elementary or secondary school teacher, hoping to learn how actually to teach will be disappointed.

But then again, for anyone who teaches, or who has tried to teach, that is perhaps an unrealistic expectation. Teaching, as the author indicates, is a complex and difficult profession. Yes, there are "skills" involved which can be described to a neophyte, and even shown in a videotape of a teacher with a classroom of students. But, like other professions, it is largely learned by doing. As Millard Fuller, Founder of Habitat for Humanity once said, "It is generally easier to get people to act their way into a new way of thinking than it is to get them to think their way into a new way of acting." Learning to teach involves more than knowledge about what is involved in teaching. As in learning how to play a sport, at some



point you have to actually get out on the court and shoot the basketball at the basket! Then you must do it again, and again, and again, until you develop at least the beginning skill of a basketball player.

There are some great examples of truly effective teaching in this book, particularly in the prologue, "How to Be A Teacher (Part One), chapter 2, "A Teacher is Born," and the epilogue, "How To Be A Teacher (Part Two)." In those first two chapters the author draws on several interviews between with Magdalene Lampert, then a Professor at Michigan State University.

During the 1989-90 school year, Professor Lampert taught the standard, district-mandated, mathematics curriculum to a fifth grade class (children ten and eleven years old) at the Spartan Village Elementary School in East Lansing, Michigan. (This was a lab school of the University that closed in 2003 due to state budget cuts to education, and now houses a post office, community police office, and other administrative offices).

Elizabeth Green also draws on videotapes of Lampert's teaching as well as material from Lampert's book, ***Teaching Problems and the Problems of Teaching*** (Yale University Press, 2001), about teaching mathematics. This excerpt from Green's book demonstrates Lampert's approach of developing generalities about teaching by zeroing-in on a single subject in depth:

"[Students have] been working on a math problem you wrote on the chalkboard while they were out at recess.

Condition: A car is going 55 mph. Make a diagram to show where it will be

A. after an hour
B. after 2 hours
C. after half an hour
D. after 15 minutes

Consider how to get everyone to quiet down. Next to you, on a table, is a small bell. Do you ring it? Perhaps you should raise one hand and put the other hand over your mouth. Or what about that old line? When my hand goes up, your mouths go shut. You go for the bell. Thankfully, it works, and you launch a discussion.

Soon, fifteen minutes have passed, and class is almost over. So far, the students have worked on the problem in small groups of four to six. You have circulated around, peer-

ing over shoulders at their varying degrees of success, deciding when to talk and when to not and when to hold in a laugh…. All of you, together, have reasoned your way through A, B, and C.

On the chalkboard, you've drawn a straight horizontal line, with distance represented on top and time underneath…..

Point to the board. Ask: Can anyone show where the solution to part D should go on the diagram?

Hands shoot up. Then, right in front of you, Richard adds his. You know enough about the others to have an idea of how they understand 'rate,' or at least an idea of what they will be able to do with the problem. Richard, though is something of a mystery…. Now he's volunteering to answer the most difficult part of the question - and you have no idea what he'll say.

What do you do?

Look at the clock; only 10 minutes left. Do you have time to risk a wrong answer? What about Richard. What if he isn't even close? If he's wrong, will he, an African American boy in a racially diverse classroom, shut down and hesitate to participate again? On the other hand, what message does it send to the others not to call on him?

'Richard,' you say. He stands up, turning his notebook so he can see it from the board, and walks slowly to the front. Everyone waits, silent……."

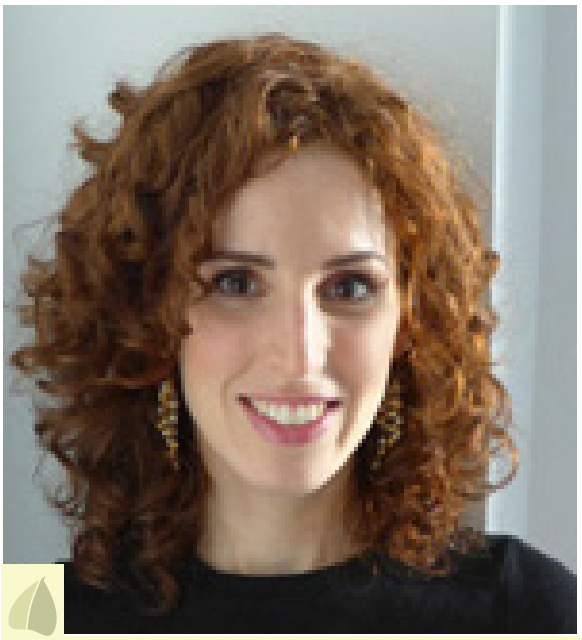
Several things are happening simultaneously in this excerpt from Magdalene Lampert's mathematics class with her fifth graders. She is thinking and rethinking her teaching strategies in the moment; asking herself questions about how to respond next, how to modify the activity, how to include all students in the work, how to make the work rigorous and relevant while continuing to build her relationships with each individual student and the class as a whole, etc., etc. This is why it is so difficult to give teachers a simple set of things to master in order to be a successful teacher: context matters.

Dave Lehman is the former founding principal/ teacher of the Lehman Alternative Comunity School in Ithaca,NY. This public middle-high school was named for Dave and his wife Judy by the Ithaca, New York Board of Education upon their retirement after 30 years. Dave was a member of the very first "Principals Seminar" leadership group at the beginning of the NSRF, under the umbrella for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Soon thereafter he was trained as a CFG coach and then an NSRF National Facilitator. His email is davelehman@mac.com

In this book Elizabeth Green (cofounder, CEO, and editor-in-chief of "Chalkbeat," a nonprofit education news organization) provides an overview of a number of different efforts to improve teacher education. Working on the book over five years, Green visited schools, interviewed educators, and analyzed the research. She includes "Teach for America," Doug Lemov's "Teach Like a Champion," the KIPP schools, No Child Left Behind, the Race to the Top, Common Core Standards, and others, noting not only their successes but their failures and disappointing results as well.

I found Chapter 4, "Knead and Rise," particularly insightful. It's about the dramatic reforms in Japanese schools which actually were based on three American sources: John Dewey's progressive education ideas; George Polya, a Stanford mathematician whose writing about problem solving had influenced Magdalene Lampert; and "NCTM," the mathematics standards produced by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Referring to a study done comparing American, German, and Japanese approaches to teaching elementary mathematics, Green summarizes the key differences:



Elizabeth Green

"Japanese math teachers led class with a different pace, structure, and tone than did other countries' teachers [Germany and the US]. Instead of a series of problems, the teacher used just one, and instead of leading students through procedures, they let students do much more talking and thinking…. The American and Japanese scripts were the most different from each other….some American teachers called their pattern 'I, We, You': after checking homework, teachers announced the day's topic, demonstrating a new procedure: 'Today we're going to talk about dividing a two-digit number by a one-digit number' (I). Then they led the class in trying out a sample problem together: 'Let's try out the steps for 24 divided by 6.' (We). Finally, they let students work through similar problems on their own, usually by silently making their way through a worksheet: 'Keep your eyes on your own paper. If you have a question, raise your hand.' (You)

"The Japanese teachers meanwhile, turned 'I, We, You' inside out. You might call their version 'You, Y'all, We.' They began with an introduction, but a single problem [like Magdalene Lampert] that students spent ten or twenty minutes working through alone: 'Come up with as many

solutions as you can.' (You). While the students worked, the teacher wove through the students' desks, studying what they came up with and taking notes to remember who had which idea. Sometimes the teacher then deployed the students to discuss the problem in small groups (Y'all). Next, the teacher brought them back to the whole group, asking students to present their different ideas for how to solve the problem on the chalkboard. Give the answer and the reason for your answer. Finally, the teacher led a discussion, guiding students to a shared conclusion: 'What did you learn from today's problem, or what new questions do you have, if any?' (We)

"Americans asked a lot of simple questions and sought quick answers. '1 - 4: What does it equal?' Japanese teachers, working at the slower pace provided by a single focused problem, used questions not simply to understand whether the child had the right answer, but to peek into her mind, discerning what she understood and what she didn't: Who had the same thinking? Anything to add to this way of thinking? Did anybody else use another way?"

> *"Mathematicians need to understand a problem only for themselves; math teachers need both to know the math and to know how 30 different minds might understand (or misunderstand) it. Then they need to take each mind from not getting it to mastery. And they need to do this in 45 minutes or less." —Elizabeth Green*

Additionally—of particular interest to those of us involved with NSRF and CFG work—the Japanese teachers regularly and consistently observed each others' classrooms (but by standing quietly in the back of the room to avoid disrupting the teacher whom they were observing). They regularly and consistently discussed the lessons after such observations and studied the curriculum materials with their colleagues, fine-tuning their teaching.

In the epilogue, Elizabeth Green ends **Building A Better Teacher** with her own effort to teach several sections of a high school social studies class of a teacher friend at the School of the Future in New York City. [It is interesting, particularly given her critique of the misuse of standardized tests, that Green doesn't mention that the School of the Future is a member of the "New York Performance Standards Consortium" which uses performance-based assessments, portfolios, and demonstrations in assessing student learning.]

Green discovers for herself how hard it is to plan even one lesson for one day that will have rigor, be relevant, and be effective; how learning doesn't happen in sixty-minute periods, but over weeks and months; how a teacher needs to know her students well, building caring relationships with each of them. And she ends her book with these words: "No amount of reading and watching and interviewing could substitute for real practice working with students."

So you won't necessarily take away from reading her book that you'll need to master Doug Lemov's list of 62 "techniques that put students on the path to college," or start using the 19 "high-leverage practices" of Deborah Ball. However, you may gain some new insight into just how complex teaching truly is, with a renewed appreciation of not only the craft and skill involved, but the deep thinking and caring inherent in our profession, as well as the essentiality of a supportive, critically thinking group of colleagues meeting regularly to work on being "A Better Teacher."

REVIEWS AND TESTIMONIALS from other sources:

"Great education is the foundation of a flourishing society, and it depends on great teachers. ***Building a Better Teacher*** illuminates how we can develop gifted educators who prepare children for a brighter future. With strong evidence and compelling cases, Elizabeth Green has written an important book that every educator ought to read." — Adam Grant, Wharton professor and best-selling author of ***Give and Take***

"Elizabeth Green draws upon years of interviews and research as an education writer and CEO of Chalkbeat to make the case for why teaching is a craft and that it can be taught to anyone. Her excellent book should be read for a detailed account of the history of teacher education, an international context, and an entertaining narrative." — Jonathan Wai, ***Psychology Today***

"At the heart of Green's exploration is a powerfully simple idea: that teaching is not some mystical talent but a set of best practices that can be codified and learned through extensive hands-on coaching, self-scrutiny, and collaboration." — Sara Mosle, ***The Atlantic***

"Everyone who cares about teaching should read [Building a Better Teacher]. Right away." — Judith Shulevitz

SEND US YOUR FAVORITE QUOTE AND YOU MAY WIN A PRIZE!

From time to time, we'll create mini-posters inside Connections featuring some of our favorite quotes. Submit your own favorite, and if we use yours in an upcoming issue, you'll win a prize from NSRF! email luci@nsrfharmony.org

In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.

– Albert Camus

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NSRF is a non-profit, professional development initiative that focuses on increasing student achievement through a specific variety of professional learning communities. Part of Harmony Education Center, we train educators to coach Critical Friends Group® communities. CFG communities use NSRF protocols and activities to facilitate meaningful, efficient communication, problem solving, and learning.

Paid membership helps us continue to provide materials via our website, and supports our mission to offer training worldwide. We encourage you to support the Lois Butler Scholarship fund so that any teacher could participate in a training regardless of ability to pay our fee.

Shout-out to researchers

Have you written a thesis or dissertation on a topic associated with Critical Friends Group® work or NSRF® protocols?

Now and then, we hear from someone seeking published research on the efficacy of Critical Friends Group® work, or the use of protocols in the classrooms. We're happy to share research we have on file, but realize that it's a bit dated. We expect some of you can point us to fresher research. If you know of any studies we should know about, too, please contact luci@nsrfharmony.org. Thanks so much!

Shout-out to EVERYONE!

What do you think? How are we doing with the new design and content of Connections, and with the new website?

We're working hard to eliminate bugs and add all current members and member-coaches to the new website. We really want to hear feedback from you, whether you have warm or cool feedback to share ... especially if you're having a problem finding something you need!

Please send comments of any variety to luci@nsrfharmony.org. We appreciate it!

Want to write for Connections?

Submit your ideas to luci@nsrfharmony.org and let's talk. Authors of published articles receive one year's subscription to NSRF for free, with our appreciation.

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We're just starting to learn about LinkedIn, but we'll be here soon, too.

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