The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) has been building communities of practice for nearly a decade. Initially, these communities were called Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and later they were renamed Community Facilitated Groups (CFGs). The purpose of these communities is to foster transformational change in schools through collaborative learning and practice. The NSRF has been working with these communities to develop a national network of educators who are committed to improving the quality of education for all students.

In this article, we explore the challenges and opportunities of building a national network of educators. We discuss the importance of diversity in these communities and the need for a more inclusive approach to education reform. We also examine the role of the NSRF in supporting these communities and the potential impact of their work on student learning.

1. The Importance of Diversity

Diversity is a key component of effective education reform. In order to create meaningful change, educators must work together to identify and address the needs of all students. This requires a commitment to equity and inclusion, as well as a willingness to challenge traditional power structures.

2. The Potential Impact of Community Facilitated Groups

CFGs are at the heart of the work of the National School Reform Faculty. These communities are made up of educators who are committed to creating a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. CFGs are built on a foundation of trust and collaboration, and they provide a space for educators to share their experiences and learn from each other.

3. Conclusion

The NSRF is committed to continuing its work with these communities and supporting educators as they work to create meaningful change in their schools. With your support, we can make a difference in the lives of all students.
Forming Learning Communities... (continued from page 5)

around the iceberg of racial and socioeconomic inequity, there has to be some diversity and dissonance present among the adults. It's hard to take the risks needed to reframe and reframe in an atmosphere of sameness. Where's the provocation, the influx of multiple perspectives and divergent experiences, the disturbance? Where's the willingness to engage in the inside-outside work called for by our colleague, Victor Cary of the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools (BayCES)? Cary (2005) states that, “The work of creating equitable and excellent schools is fundamentally about changing ourselves, and thereby our relationships with others.” He goes on to say that doing this work means being able to reflect on our inner lives while also focusing on our assumptions about oppression, power and hegemony. I’m not saying white teachers can’t do this transformational work, but as a white teacher myself, I am saying we cannot do it in isolation. Our learning must be by alliances with colleagues and stakeholders across difference, and it requires a conscious decision to change the way we frame the discourse.

Changing the Discourse

Working in alliance and changing our discourse opens up possibilities for the transformation of our practice and our vision, with and for our students. Zubanks, Parish and Smith (1997) define Discourse I as the way we think, talk and plan in order to maintain or reproduce the status quo in schools. They assert that, “The work of creating equitable and excellent schools is fundamentally about changing ourselves, and thereby our relationships with others.” He goes on to say that doing this work means being able to reflect on our inner lives while also focusing on our assumptions about oppression, power and hegemony. I’m not saying white teachers can’t do this transformational work, but as a white teacher myself, I am saying we cannot do it in isolation. Our learning must be by alliances with colleagues and stakeholders across difference, and it requires a conscious decision to change the way we frame the discourse.

For David Allen and his colleagues have done much to demystify the concept of school coaching with their new book, Coaching Whole School Change: Lessons in Practice from a Small High School (2009). This book evolved from a pilot study of school coaching at New York City’s Park East High School as it transitioned from an alternative school to a four-year college and career high school. The early stages of this transition focused on school safety and shifting roles within the school, but it also became apparent that there was little consistency of instruction and insufficient focus on complex thinking and/or extended reading and writing. A new principal built on an already-existing relationship with the staff to create a Student Achievement (SA) team. This framework was a simple solution to complex problems that were often systemic in nature. The opportunity to discuss issues of oppression, power and hegemony was present, but the opportunity was not addressed. Instead, our CFT was energizing and as Ellen said, “we felt affirmed...” after each meeting, but as Camilla indicated, it was unclear what, if anything, was changing for the bulk of our students.

At one CFT meeting, I presented a videotape of my science lab activity and shared concerns about my students’ lack of reflection. I wondered aloud what I could do differently to support greater student reflection and the transfer of knowledge from a lab activity to a pencil and paper test and on to their future studies. However, I never acknowledged the skin I was in and in the ways it shaped my perspective. I was concerned that my kids had not developed lab experiments, enjoyed the hands-on activities, and then moved on to the next lab without grasping the real science content involved. I got some good, concrete ideas from my colleagues, ideas about slowing down and using our science journals more. But my CFT’s feedback was too general for me to use the very next day and the lab was much more successful, at least on the surface.

However, I didn’t seek or receive feedback about the nature of student-centered conversations in my class, where all the discussion and all power flowed through me. As the presenter, I did not address my role as a white teacher working with students of color, and no one else identified these differences as a fundamental feature of my classroom instruction. My limited frame set the boundaries, and no one mentioned my failure to differentiate supports for my students with limited literacy skill or English language fluency. Instead there was an unspoken acceptance that I was doing the best I could as a teacher who only spoke English in a linguistically diverse class of 35 adolescents. We stayed focused primarily on our successes, the work of adults, and we missed the chance to truly explore what we could do to reframe my focus on the learning and experience of my students.

For about a year of working with a CFT member, it finally dawned on me that I needed to directly engage my students in these teaching and learning communities in a relatively comfortable Discourse II exchange of feedback, in which the presenting teacher framed the examination of student work with a question, and no one ever questioned or pushed back on the “frame” or focus. We did not discuss the foundations of our individual or collective dilemmas. We were stuck evolving to simple solutions to complex problems that were often systemic in nature. The opportunity to discuss issues of oppression, power and hegemony was present, but the opportunity was not addressed. Instead, our CFT was energizing and as Ellen said, “we felt affirmed...” after each meeting, but as Camilla indicated, it was unclear what, if anything, was changing for the bulk of our students.

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The 13th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting was held January 14–17th, 2009, in Houston, Texas, and was attended by 100 people, including facilitators and critical friends. For three-and-a-half days, teachers, administrators and educational leaders worked together on the issues that matter most to them. Many sought to improve their coaching skills and to learn more protocols. Others needed the vital feedback of peers on difficult dilemmas. Some were just getting started and needed to build strong foundations for bringing CFGs into their workplaces. Opportunities to meet all these needs, and more were offered this past January in Houston.

Our post-event evaluations showed high levels of attendance satisfaction with the Winter Meeting experience. In fact, when asked if they agreed with the statement “Overall, I would rate this meeting as outstanding,” 93 percent of respondents answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree,” resulting in an average score of 4.7 out of 5. When asked if they agreed with the statement “My home group became a place for professional interactions that embody the characteristics of a CFG,” 90 percent of respondents answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.” That question had our highest average score of any question, 4.8 out of 5.

The NSRF National Center and Winter Meeting planning team want to thank everyone who helped to make the 13th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting such a huge success. The participants, facilitators, critical friends, students and planning team all made this event happen. In particular, our gratitude goes out to colleagues in the Texas Centers of Activity: Houston A+ Challenge, Houston Independent School District and San Antonio. We hope to meet all these needs, and more were offered this past January in Houston.

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The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone. - Adopted June 2001

learning conversations. Like the V-8 commercials in which people slap themselves in the heads, I realized that my diverse group of students had critical information to share with me, their white teacher, about what they didn’t understand about my content, and where whether my directions, which were clear to me and to my similarly educated colleagues, were in fact clear as mud to them. Looking back this seems like an obvious step, but in my experience, sharing power with students was relatively unusual, especially between white teachers and their students of color, who were generally treated as disinterested parties in their own education.

Along similar lines, I have been involved with teams of urban educators in CFGs across the country, teams in which predominantly white teachers describe their problems with “hard to reach parents.” Recently, a CFG in Oregon recognized this framing of parents as the problem in Discourse I and flipped the script to Discourse II, reframing the problem as one of “hard to access schools.” Changing the discourse led to a host of new possibilities and responsibilities for welcoming parents into the schools. Discourse II challenges mostly white, middle-class participants to surface and examine both their assumptions and the power dynamics parents and families face in meetings and spaces that we organize and control. Reframing the problem challenges us to ensure that invitations to parents and other family members are more than one-sided requests for homework support, or disciplinary backup. Discourse II calls for “The Essential Conversations(s)” (2003) that Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot describes where both parents’ ghosts of former experiences with schooling and the inherent power of home and school partnerships are acknowledged, allowing alliances based on mutual respect to be forged on behalf of students. Conversely, staying stuck in Discourse I means more of the status quo, an ongoing search for the right prize or trifle to get bodies into the schools at the next parent or family night, without launching or sustaining a partnership in any true sense of the word.

As our experiences with CFGs evolve, many of us, both white teachers and teachers of color, are struggling to reframe the process and our conversations into Discourse II. Working together as a Consortium for Educational Equity (CFEE), some of us are embracing the fact that we, either as educators in isolation, or as CFG members stuck in Discourse I, especially in schools where we teach across differences of race and class, don’t have all the answers, and that we often aren’t asking the right questions. We are working in alliances across difference to extend the collaborative process to include the voices of students and their families. In our individual practice and in our schools and systems, we are moving beyond the shallow Discourse I, the familiar, surface level of school reform into the deeper Discourse II, where the unforturable, waters of transformation. While we are still committed to educating other people’s children, we recognize the importance of naming and reframing the culture of power (Delphi 1995) in order to support the access of each student, regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, national origin or special needs, to academic and social success in our schools and communities. We are no longer content to simply revise our practice, or restructure our schools, the critical outside work of school reform; instead we are committed to doing the inside work as well, in order to transform our relationships and our teaching to meet the needs of each student in our care.

References:

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Coaching Whole School Change... (continued from page 3)

into a professional learning community. Allen ends
this study with the statement that, “Extraordinary
coaches come in all kinds of ‘personality packages’
but will be unified by their tenacious commitment
to the individual growth of the individual teachers
and administrators with whom they work, as well as
the development of the professional community
and school community that those people create and re-
create every day.”

The Appendix of this text outlines the structure of
the ISA, a model that many schools will seek to emu-
late in their own change processes.

I will recommend this text to my school and dis-
trict administrators. The study of the complexities
of the coaching model will both alleviate tensions and
offer a new lens through which to view the many
strands of human interactions that contribute to build-
ing a positive school climate.

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Correction

In the Winter 2009 issue of Connections, we mistakenly credited the article “Center of Activity Report: San Antonio” to Ileana Liberatore. The author, in fact, was Patricia Norman. We apologize for the error.

Center of Activity Report... (continued from page 7)

made to offer a new coaches institute this sum-
mer and possibly another retreat for the leaders in
the area. The local support groups for the CGI’s in
the region’s schools continue, and we hope they
will expand to more schools as other institutions
observe our successes.

Reference:

William J. Pollock Ed.D. can be reached at w.pollock@verizon.net.

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NSRF has been making rapid progress on
our restructuring. After all the struggle
and advancement we have made and
continue to make, I decided to turn my attention
to our future - not our present. I began to imagine
NSRF’s future using the Futures Protocol. In doing
so, I was able to let go of the present and remem-
ber that, together, we can do anything we imag-
ine to be possible. Below are my thoughts from
my personal Futures Protocol.

Eighteen months from now

NSRF has maintained a small national cen-
ter that continues to learn how to best serve our
membership. Whether a coach, facilitative leader,
National Facilitator and/or Center of Activity, we
are all members of NSRF. Our National Center
continues to take responsibility for convening and
connecting NSRF through our membership, our
annual meetings, our communication avenues and
our protocols, linking with work in the field in col-
laboration with our Centers of Activity, research
and documentation and the ongoing publication of
Connections.

NSRF Centers of Activity have expanded
our work in ways big and small that a National
Center never could do. With and among National
Facilitators, our Centers have the capacity to trans-
form learning and teaching within their local con-
texts. Whether situated inside a school district, a
school, an independent organization and/or a col-
lection of NSRF members, local Centers are crucial
to the continuing success of our mission.

NSRF has a membership council that is demo-
cratic and representative of our membership and
serves as an advisory structure for our re-imagined
governance council. Our membership council rep-
resents our mission statement and helps us answer
the perennial questions of attributes and standards
for National Facilitators and Centers of Activity that
seem to vex our organization. Our membership
council is the heart of our organization and the
guardian of our mission and vision as referenced
below.

We have a strong governance council that
serves as a board of directors to our organization.
We have codified some of our understandings
of how we operate and re-affirmed that we are
accountable to one another. We have an able and
healthy structure that provides for checks and bal-
ances, as is appropriate for an organization based
on democratic principals of equity and participa-
tion, and we experience a strong, more formal
governance structure that serves us well.

Our membership has discretionary resources
to seed work in the field and research and docu-
ment what we learn together – working in local
contexts alongside Centers of Activity. Our
membership is well on its way to amassing those
resources through what we have dubbed “Ten in
Ten.” We have thought deeply and made commit-
ments about what we will accomplish if we are
able to achieve the goal of 10,000 dues-paying
members in 10 years – we, the membership, have
imagined our future.

Back to the present

I am quite optimistic that some version of my
musings above, once tuned and re-tuned using
the tools and processes at our disposal, will be
accomplished. We will get to our future with
deliberation and by accessing our stakeholders;
by imagining what we want to be and what we
want to stand for; and then by practicing locally,
regionally and

nationally, in person (continued on page 11)