

CONNECTIONS

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Report from the Directors

Gene Thompson-Grove, Co-Director

I just finished perusing my most recent educational journals and newspapers. Every one of them—from Kappan, to the newsletter from the New England Middle School Association, to the MASS ASCD publication, to the Journal of Staff Development's fastback, Tools for Schools—includes articles about collaboration, or about looking at student work, or about reflective practice and facilitative leadership. My reading leaves me wondering what makes our work in NSRF different from the practices described in these publications. If educators were looking for resources to help them begin working on collaborative practices in their schools, why would they call NSRF? More personally, why do I first look to colleagues in NSRF to expand my thinking? Why do I call on NSRF? What makes us different? Let me try out a few ideas.

We believe that we need to hold each other accountable for good work that makes a difference for all students. I think back to the first week of the first year of NSRF's CFG Coaches Seminar in Providence, RI, when twenty-five of us struggled to figure out what it would look like if we shaped the professional development in our schools around the concept of creating learning communities. On the last day of our seminar, Barb Bleyaert from Michigan said, "It is simple. If I am in a CFG with you, it means that I am as committed to your practice, and to your students, as I am to mine." Alan Dichter from NYC recently echoed that sentiment at a national NSRF meeting. He said, "What NSRF is about—from our governance structure to the way we work in schools and in CFGs—can



be expressed by this statement: I am not here to tell you what to do – but what you do is not 'none of my business.'" Unlike others who believe that the only viable accountability measures are top down and must include sanctions, we believe that educators can, through critical friendship, hold each other accountable for high quality work. Furthermore, we believe that this is important to do at all levels of the educational system, as well as in all parts of our own organization. It is, I believe, the only way we can truly live our mission statement, and work for educational equity.

We believe that our work is about changing the culture and norms of schools. While others stress using protocols almost as an end in themselves, we know that protocols are only a means to an end. Protocols and the agreements they imply create opportunities for people to develop the norms, habits and skills necessary for creating and sustaining collegial conversations and strong learning communities—communities that are focused on student learning and are characterized by shared values and expectations, joint work, and reflective dialogue. We know that the protocols help us to do authentic work together, no matter what our previous relationship. And in trusting the work, we lay

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In an article that appeared in the September 1988 edition of Phi Delta Kappan, Mano Singham, Associate Director of the University Center for Innovations in Teaching and Education, Case Western Reserve University, reminded us of an early warning system used by coal miners to detect the presence of deadly fumes in their working environment. The system was quite simple: miners went into the mine with a canary in a cage. If the air in the mine killed the canary, it would soon kill the miners.

Singham uses this metaphor to suggest that the persistent achievement gap between students of color and White students may really be a sign of “fundamental problems with the way education is delivered to all students.”

As a group, Black and Hispanic children continue to be disproportionately poor—a rate that is three times higher than that of White children. In addition to the persistence of poverty, the main deterrent to raising achievement stems from low expectations and a lack of academic rigor in the classroom.

A recent report by CNN indicates that Hispanics have a dropout rate of 21%. Among Blacks and Whites, the numbers were 12% and 7% respectively.

One of the premier organizations fervently struggling to close the achievement gap is the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). Founded in 1968, NCLR is the largest constituency-based national Latino civil rights organization. NCLR is a private, non-profit, non-partisan organization that works to cultivate support and strengthen its affiliates and conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy at the national level.

This summer, NSRF began an inspiring partnership with NCLR’s Center for Community Educational Excellence (C2E2). The primary mission of C2E2 is to build education collaboratives, to strengthen the quality of education for Hispanic students, and to

more effectively involve Hispanic families in the education of their children.

C2E2 held its first annual New Teacher Professional Development Institute (NTPDI) on August 5-9, in San Antonio, Texas. This venture brought together 43 new teachers from affiliate and grantee schools throughout the nation for a week of cohesive, intensive work. The institute focused on four areas: curriculum and instruction, classroom climate, the Latino learner, and learning communities.

Its design sprang from a truly collaborative effort by a passionate, dynamic and committed staff, school-based instructors, and the NSRF.

The NTPDI was a “24/7” event immersed in the multi-layered issues of classroom practice and curriculum. Sessions began at 8:00 a.m. and usually lasted until 9:00 p.m. with facilitator debriefings that usually concluded at 11:00 p.m.

Curriculum and Instruction: Teaching with the Head

These sessions involved helping participants understand that good teaching is about love, commitment, setting clear, measurable and purposeful expectations, and knowing how to craft instruction that will make students successful.

Participants explored ways to establish where students were headed, how they could “hook” them into meaningful learning through exploration, rehearsing complex performances, and challenging demonstrations of content mastery.

Classroom Climate: Teaching with the Heart

This component of the NTPDI emphasized that good teachers know themselves and their students well enough to create interdependent, respectful classroom learning communities. Participants examined their own life journeys and reflected on how these had shaped their perception



of students and their expectations of student “behavior” in the classroom. All participants developed philosophies for classroom climate to be used as a catalyst for the work they would begin back at their schools.

Knowing Students Well: Latino Learners

Each day began with a Wake-Up session that addressed issues of equity, diversity, and racism and explored characteristics of Latino learners from various scholarly perspectives. Presenters included: Monica Palacio and Ruth Rubio of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), Dr. Blandina Cardenas, Dean of the School of Education and Human Development, University of Texas-San Antonio, Dr. Sonia Nieto, Professor of Education, University of Massachusetts, Dr. Marta Sanchez, Professor of Education, Pepperdine University, and Elva Traviño, author of *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*.

Professional Learning Communities: Working Together

During the week, we designed and facilitated Nightly Learning Team sessions, which served as a context for collaboration around issues of teaching and learning. NCLR staffers who had attended a two-day training held

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the foundation for building the kind of trust in each other that allows us to take risks, to say what we really believe, and to challenge each other’s assumptions. We also use these practices in our organizational work, and in so doing, continually work to create a more honest, open, and collaborative culture in our national organization as well.

We believe that no one in a school community should be anonymous—that all should be known well. Furthermore, we believe that everyone’s work should be public—even transparent. We value multiple perspectives, and we know the power of feedback as we strive to improve our practice. Our ability to learn from each other, and to be accountable to and for each other, depends on us de-privatizing our practice. We ask this of our leaders and colleagues in NSRF as well. We can’t work together to close the achievement gap if we allow ourselves to stay isolated from one another, and we can’t work for those students who are not learning if they remain invisible to us. Most importantly, we can’t benefit from our collective wisdom if we allow ourselves to remain anonymous to one another.

We believe that there is an enormous amount of untapped expertise in our schools, and that it is important to view all of the people in a school’s

community—adults and students alike—as having important knowledge that must be brought to the table. Furthermore, not only do we believe that everyone has worthwhile knowledge and expertise, we also value each other as learners. Not all school reform organizations view educators in this way, preferring to think that people in schools don’t know enough and can’t learn if left to their own devices, and thus need scripts, didactic models of professional development, and ‘training’ that is ‘delivered’ by outside experts.

In NSRF, we trust educators to shape their own professional development in collaboration with each other, and we trust that we will know when we need to call in outside resources. We believe that if we are going to effectively adapt our practice to meet the needs of all our students without lowering standards, we can’t do it alone. Instead, the ‘answers’ lie in the collective knowing of the people who are closest to the students. We believe that powerful learning is reciprocal in nature, and we try to live by this tenet in all facets of NSRF’s organizational and program work as well.

Finally, we believe that the values and beliefs we hold should extend to all aspects of our work. It is not a coincidence that all of the beliefs I have discussed above are described not

only in terms of our work in schools, but also in terms of our own organizational practices. This has its roots, I think, in an early organizational decision that all NSRF facilitators would be people who did the work they taught others to do. This has meant, through the years, that the majority of NSRF’s facilitators come from schools and districts that are part of NSRF, and that NSRF staff coach CFGs as part of their work. That practice has continued to this day.

Some years ago, Carl Glickman, who was on our Advisory Committee when we were still at Annenberg, asked us during a strategic planning meeting, “Will you work in the mainstream, or will you be the people who say otherwise?” It seems that, as an organization, we have evolved to the point where we are both—part of the mainstream, as my educational journals will attest to, while continuing to be the ones “who say otherwise.” ■

Gene Thompson-Grove, Daniel Baron and Steve Bonchek, the three co-directors of NSRF, will take turns reporting out to us in Connections. Contact Gene Thompson-Grove at gthompsongrove@earthlink.net Contact Daniel Baron at dbaron@bloomington.in.us Contact Steve Bonchek at harmony@indiana.edu

Research • Data • Evidence

As the National School Reform Faculty develops a research agenda we are actively soliciting research that you have done around your work. In an effort not to recreate the wheel we would like to study what research has already been done, make better use of that, and then determine what future studies might be useful to inform our practice. We suspect that there is a wealth of data about the effects of CFGs and CFG-related activities in our schools within the cover of dissertations, filed away as class papers on hard drives, or stacked in milk crates next to desks. Some of you have contacted us. We hope more of you will. If you have done research, collected data, or have documented evidence about your work, and you have not already done so, please contact us at nsrf@harmonyschool.org ■

