established early on in the school year. This became the foundation for all of our learning.

Crucial to developing a sense of community in my English classroom was the story of the power of the circle. We became a community when we sat in a circle breaking the hierarchy of desks and rows; who is sitting in the back or the front of the room is no longer an issue. In our circle we are all equal.

We began to view the circle as a necessary format and platform for the establishment of an emotionally safe and nurturant learning environment. In our discussions we talked a lot about metacognition. We regularly debriefed and evaluated our learning experiences as a group. We focused on learning together. We learned to ask questions of ourselves, each other and the curriculum. Often these questions were similar to the ones used by Debbie Meier and the Central Park East learning environment. For Whom is this important? Who benefits? And on the metacognitive level we asked: How will I know when I know it? It was also crucial that my students learn how to give me feedback about my performances and interactions with them.

Early on I figured out that professional learning communities were not only valuable communities to establish with other educators, I also needed to establish a reciprocal learning community in my classroom before I could engage urban youth most of whom were reluctant readers and reluctant learners. My students and I established routines that centered on the circle. When we needed to establish, maintain and expand our learning community. In order for me to engage each student in learning, I had to help him or her find his or her voice in a supportive community of learners. In the learning situation we struggled with how we were going to treat each other and how we were going to be treated. We took time to resolve conflicts and learn from each conflict.

My students taught me how to challenge the genius within each one of them. They taught me how to channel their oftentimes negative energy into the positive energy we used to advance our learning community. Students began to resist the norm class because they felt their presence be an integral part of the learning environment. Students did not want to be late to class because something that mattered to them was going to occur. Students wanted to develop their genius. I taught myself and them how to ask essential questions, probing questions. We grappled with formulating high order thinking questions and used those questions to engage in Socratic Seminars, to do text based discussions, construct projects, and explore the world of possibilities and develop action plans for learning and for expanding our horizons.

I expected to find an expansion of horizons in the new schools I visited, but lately I have beendisheartened by the practices of discipline used by educators who have all the resources and opportunities to change their relationships with urban youth. Whether or not these educators are aware of it, they are practicing a discipline that grows out of oppression. The discipline is top down; handed down discipline not born of respect for the individual learner developing as a whole human being.

This journey is not for the faint of heart. But if we truly want to teach those for whom the current public system has not served, we must go to the places of discomfort. I realized in my journey with urban teens that it is possible to take the most hostile, beligerent, recalcitrant teens, and by giving individuals a voice, by teaching them how to speak their truth without fear of put-downs, ridicule, or retribution we could grow together as learners. That was the most important lesson for me as an educator of urban youth. I had to learn with their help and permission how to transform them from teens who would set fires in the bathrooms to teens who would use education as a means, a tool to confront, address and resolve their issues using nonviolent means.

Where does this leave us as we transform our urban high schools into autonomous small high schools? It leaves us with a choice. Either we unconsciously replicate discipline not born of respect for the individual learner developing as a whole human being.

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It is like the day before Christmas to me – I can’t sleep the night before because there is a lot of snow outside, I wake up with the same anticipation I did when I was seven and would run down the stairs to see what Santa had left for me under the tree. The same feelings of anticipation exist when I think about meeting my students for the first time. I am excited to bring them the gift of learning about art. I bubble with glee at the prospect of discovering new young talent and helping my students appreciate the aesthetics of art. For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important? For Whom is this important?

I have precious little time for themselves. The discovery was that they were the leaders, the innovators and the creative minds. I had the toys. The class talked about Edgar and I called roll and quickly realized the eyes in the back of the room belonged to Edgar, a sophomore. I knew the activities I had planned for the day were useless. If I didn’t make a connection with Edgar and the others quickly, I would never make that connection. It would be a long year.

My mind was racing a mile-a-minute and, faster than I can type the following paragraph, it all went through my mind. I thought about John Dewey (1938) and his philosophy of experience and education, specifically, “the transactions of practice lead to learning.” I had also received recently a book as a gift from a friend. The book talks about her philosophy of “teaching as curating” (Valenzuela, 1999). As a Critical Friends Group (CFG) Coach and National Facilitator of new CFG Coaches training, I knew that one of the keys to building a successful learning community was establishing relationships. How do we do that in CFG training? One way is to start by using team builders to learn about each other. I had the knowledge. I had the toys. I took the students outside to the hallway by the gym and we made a large circle. We did the group juggle.

Edgar

While tossing the toys and learning names, we laughed. Everyone participated, yet some like Edgar not very enthusiastically. When we had enough at 8:00am, we came in and debriefed. The students made immedi- ate connections to their lives and to their multiple roles as teenagers. Many students talked about being a good student, football player, band member, son or daughter, and some on even being employees – all the different roles they have and all the people they have to answer to. The discovery was that they have precious little time for themselves. I noticed during all of this Edgar was silent but attentive. That night I wrote in my journal about that class and those brown eyes in the back of the room that challenged me to think about the corporeal first day agenda and get to know him.

The next morning we started the morning by reading out the class syllabus, safety in the classroom, and the vocabulary of art. The students who love school, who love art, who have been passively attentive, those eyes still looking and waiting. I needed to continue what I had started the day before. Again, we all tracked out to the hallway by the gym and I had just one bull this time. I was about to reset the speed in warp drive as the day before, everyone, even Edgar, looked confused and lost. Then, I had a brilliant suggestion on how to rearrange the class to achieve a faster speed. I was delighted, and listened, but no one else did. The traditional high school leaders were present in control. Edgar wanted to his idea, but then after two more rounds of disappointing times, He again offered his suggestion. This time he was more forceful and physi- cally moved to the center of the group. This time the group, desperate for a solution, heard him and made the neces- sary changes. The group was successful. At first, during the debriefing of the activity, the students answered such as “It was too hot” or “This is not appropriate for art class.” I listened and then reflected on what I saw happening during the game and how not all voices were heard or equally valued. I asked the group to state who they thought were the leaders, the innovators and the followers. The conversation took on a whole different perspective. The class talked about Edgar and his situation and how if he had not tried again to be heard, the whole group would have been silent but helpful.

The Practice of Freedom (continued from page 3)
Doing Principals’ CFGs

Dave Lehman, New York

It is very rare that all of the Elementary Principals get together to share...if we could always work this way it would be incredible.

– An Elementary Principal

I enjoy this more than I ever thought I would. Strategies [pro- tects] are very helpful, and realizing that we have similar issues is reassuring. I look forward to having the consultation piece next time.

– A Secondary Associate Principal

I was very pleased with the way this meeting/training occurred today. I must admit, I was hesitant to become part of a CFG – time issues. However, after this session, I can clearly see the benefits of a CFG and how becoming part of a group can actually save me some time and help me complete my job responsibilities more effectively.

– A Director

Looking at student work is directly applicable to work with department heads and staff at staff meetings. Help with my issue expanded my thinking on it; and helped me to plan an action. I like this a lot.

– A Secondary Principal

These are a few quotes from some of the “Reflections” of the Principals’ CFGs I have been coaching in the Ithaca City School District in upstate New York. Public School Principals, Associate Principals, and central office Directors typically lead very lonely professional careers. There is only one Elementary Principal in any given elementary school and, although they may meet with their Associate Principals, Secondary Principals find themselves alone in making decisions. And certainly Directors at the middle management level in school districts - e.g. of Special Education, Staff Development, and Pre-K are in lonely positions. As the above quotes indicate, it is my strong belief that school district administrators are almost desperately in need of CFG professional learning communities. Thus, in this article I will briefly summarize how I got these groups started, support for them from the Central Administration, how often, when, and where, and what we met, worked what and didn’t.

Several years ago when a new Superintendent of Schools was hired, I was in the interim position of Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, K-12, while continuing to serve as the Principal of the Alternative Community School (6-12). It was in this capacity it was the first time the Superintendent consulted with me about activities for a summit workshop with the district’s “Administrative Team” (all Principals, Associate Principals, Directors, and Managers). She knew of my involvement with the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and thus I designed a series of text-based discussions, workshops, and an introduction to some other protocols as well. This culminated in my recommendation at the end of the summer workshop that we form several CFGs to continue this kind of professional collegial sharing. Thus, two Elementary Principals groups (four each), a Secondary Principals CFG (four), and a Secondary Associate Principals group (five) met, with support from the Superintendent, on the last morning of the workshop to engage in “consultancies” and decide on times to meet. Our Secondary Principals CFG, of which I was a member, met regularly for the next two years, either once or twice per month in the office of one of the Principals, on a rotating basis, after school from 3:30-5:00. Although the Superintendent continued to call on me to use CFG protocols (particu- larly text-based discussions) during our monthly Administrative Team meet- ings, and despite the other groups very much wanting to do their CFGs, after a meeting or two, all but the Secondary Principals’ CFG petered out and did not continue to meet. My guess is that it was too much to expect that they could carry on the CFG activities without the experience a facilitator/coach such as I provided our Secondary Principals.

In the summer of 2001-02, again at the Administrative Team summer workshop, and again with the full support of the Superintendent, I presented a new CFG proposal. This time I offered to facilitate/coach two administrator CFGs, each made up of a mix of Elementary and Secondary Principals, Associate Principals and Directors. Although there was unani- mous support for this proposal, it was modified to create three CFGs; one for the Elementary Principals (eight), one for the Secondary Principals and (continued on page 16)

I can’t say I have found the holy grail for all teachers, but what I have discovered in really looking at the needs of my students, working on building relationships with my students and continually reflecting on my thoughts, and actions helps me to be a better teacher tuned to my students’ needs.

I have been an active member for the past three years. In his second year at Eagle High School, he was invited to join the Science National Honor Society and has been an active member in that organization for the past two years. He made a critical choice that semester to focus on learning, a choice he continues to make.

I believe I had a small role to play in spurring Edgar’s decision. I also made a mindful choice that semester to focus on understanding the students in front of me and build relationships with them. I was especially determined to meet the challenge of the pair of brown eyes in the back of the room. The interaction I had with Edgar has made me look at my practice differently. Seservanov (2001) states, “Teachers analyze different situations and monitor how situations change as practice unfolds. They craft strategies that combine action with thinking” (p. 253). I still keep a journal and reflect on my teaching practice. I can’t say I have found the holy grail for all teachers, but what I have discovered in really looking at the needs of my students, working on building relationships with my students and continually reflecting on my and their thoughts and actions helps me to be a better teacher tuned to my students’ needs. I do get complaints all the time from past and current students, “Why didn’t we get to do that?” or “Why aren’t we doing what my sister did?” My answer is always, “I don’t have the same students as last year or when your sister took my class; why would I teach the same way or the same thing?” Over the past 12 years, teaching strategies, classroom management strategies and various standardized tests have come and gone. Through all of this, I have maintained the students at the center of my teaching. Striving to keep relationships as a teacher, having cared for them, laughed with them, and taught them something about themselves that they didn’t even know has always been my passion.

Edgar is now a senior and has enrolled in the United States Marine Corps. Recently, Edgar and I spent some time after school talking about those first days in art class and how I saw something in him beyond the façade he felt he was compelled to wear. He laughed and talked about comments that he doesn’t understand how they can throw away their lives – he pauses, then reflects and says “I almost did.”

References:
Dewey, J. (1958). Experience & Education. New York: Touchstone. Segoviano, T. (2001). The Principalship. Needham Heights, MA: A Pearson Education Company. Valenzuela, A. (1999). Why, what and how I saw something in him beyond the façade he felt he was compelled to wear - a Mexican-American teenage boy. He continued with how all his friends have since dropped out of school or are barely passing, remarking how that could have been him. He laughs and says, “Why didn’t we get to do that?” or “Why aren’t we doing what my sister did?” My answer is always, “I don’t have the same students as last year or when your sister took my class; why would I teach the same way or the same thing?” Over the past 12 years, teaching strategies, classroom management strategies and various standardized tests have come and gone. Through all of this, I have maintained the students at the center of my teaching. Striving to keep relationships as a teacher, having cared for them, laughed with them, and taught them something about themselves that they didn’t even know has always been my passion.

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