Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Kim Feicke, Oregon

When we talk about that which will sustain and nurture our spiritual growth as a people, we must once again talk about the importance of community. For one of the most vital ways that we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone.

- bell hooks, Teaching Transgress

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here is an endless list of skills, tools, and knowledge that a small schools coach uses on a daily basis in his or her work. But if the focus and purpose of that work is not to interrupt and transform inequitable practices in schools, and to put in their place a more equitable system where a student’s achievement is not predicted by any demographic, then ultimately our skills, tools, and knowledge are for naught.

I am a small schools coach and an NSRF national facilitator. In the six years that I have been doing this work, and my previous ten years in the classroom, I have struggled with what it means to be a white woman working for social justice and equity in public education. I have struggled with understanding, and revoking the privilege I was born into to address and interrupt inequities in American society. I have struggled to develop a deeper understanding of systemic institutionalized oppression and how it operates in our schools and with our children.

It’s a challenge to accept that I/we could actually contribute to the ongoing oppression of our students, but it is an even bigger challenge to take the next step to interrupt inequitable practices when we see them. Beyond recognizing the baggage we carry, we also need to have a clear sense of what we will replace oppression with, tools and knowledge are for naught.

Our school in Sonoma helped us to look inside and at each other in order to see further ahead on our journey toward intentionally equitable schools. Our experience clarified how deeply issues such as race and class are intricately woven into the fabric and structure of our schools and society, and how intricate and complicated our work of interrupting those structures has to be.

In creating the seminar, we were intent on creating a safe and provocative space for participants to explore and share their personal stories. In that process, we were very explicit from the beginning about our expectations and goals (see insert). We began the week with safer, foundational questions about our own experiences and built throughout the week to deeper, more personal inquiry questions and activities that addressed our own experiences in our work around issues of equity. We believe that this inside-outside work is a pre-requisite for coaches committed to facilitating transformative work in schools.

Within our theory of action, we had four goals for the week that we hoped participants would accomplish.

1. Develop awareness of and reflect upon who and how they are in their work (in relation to oppression, privilege, accommodation and transformation).

The seminar was designed to connect the personal and the political, the emotional and the intellectual, in ways that allowed participants to acknowledge and assess where they were in their own journeys and connect that understanding with their work in schools.

We intentionally assembled our diverse (continued on page 14) participants to step into a child’s shoes and see school from that perspective.

At the end of our first year, we had three members shadow students all day and then report back to the CGT. That was an incredibly enlightening experience. We continued to push the notion of keeping students at the center of the work and a couple of years later invited a group of students to participate in our CGT. The students attended several meetings throughout the year and became co-inquirers in a way, helping us to discover new insights to our age-old question of how to become more effective teachers. I learned so much from those experiences, not about concrete strategies really but about how “to be” in the classroom. From them on, I tried harder to listen to and to understand each individual student.

How did you get involved with NSRF on a national level?

I just jumped in and volunteered to facilitate workshops at winter meetings, I was eager to be connected to others doing this work around the country. My participation in NSRF on a national level helped to keep me excited in the work I was doing back at my school. It provided a way for me to channel my energy and keep me committed to a profession that can be very frustrating.

Who are your mentors in NSRF?

Many people in NSRF inspire me. I have learned a tremendous amount about facilitation and leadership from working with Gene Thompson-Grove. Every time I lead a coaches’ training, I learn so much from those I co-facilitate with – Pete Bermudez, Beth Graham, JoAnn Groh, to name a few. Everyone in NSRF is committed, thoughtful. The stories of school leaders in NSRF who started new small schools and stayed with those schools for decades helped lead me to the path I’m on now. Dave Lehman, Steve Brozhek, Nancy Mohr – what incredible role models for a new principal.

What served as a catalyst for forming your own small school?

I am now the principal of a new charter school, City High School, in Tucson, Arizona. We’re currently in our second year and have 130 students in grades 9-12. Certainly one catalyst to starting a new school was my desire to create a place for students and staff that embolded the goals of NSRF – to become a place of learning where adults collaborate and inquire and are responsive to students’ needs. I took to heart comments by Ted Sizer and Debbie Meier that progressive educators shouldn’t let charter schools be the province of the conservatives in our field. All of us must strive to have good educational opportunities, and charter schools provide one way to create public schools of choice. When I looked around and saw colleagues like Peter Garbus making the effort in Massachusetts, I figured I should do the same to create that kind of environment for young people in Tucson.

We had a lot of encouragement locally as well – community members who wanted to see a different kind of high school. It then ultimately led to downtown revitalization who saw the potential to get teenagers involved in downtown projects. Parents looking for more engaged and personalized alternative for their child. There were many forces.

We’ve brought together an incredibly diverse student body at City High School. We’re at the epicenter of Tucson, downtown, a block from the main transit center. Practically every zip code in the city is represented. Students take the bus, bike, carpool with parents, and walk to school each day. The school has a “place-based” emphasis and the downtown area – and the whole region really – serve as resources for teaching and learning. The teachers work with a number of community partner organizations to create curriculum that is authentic and engaging and not confined to the school walls.

Your school is so new, Carrie. Are you able to share any lessons with us as a small school leader?

It is a challenging dance to be the leader of a brand-new school, especially one designed to be democratic in nature. How does one participate fully as a staff member and, at the same time, lead the staff? How does a principal of a small school serve as an advisor, along with all of the certified staff members, and still play the role of disciplinarian? What does it look like when the principal of a staff of ten is in the CGT? I have many questions about how to practice “facilitative leadership” as a principal. Those of us in NSRF are establishing new norms for effective leadership. It’s exciting and it’s hard, and we have a lot of learning to share with one another.

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NSRF’s Living History...

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group, which represented 11 different organizations doing small schools work from all geographic areas of the country (northeast, west, midwest, east, northeast, south). We had an almost equal gender balance, a representation of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals, and represented Asian, Latin, African-American, and Caucasian ethnicities. As a part of the seminar, we held a cultural sharing one evening. Everyone participated was invited to bring an artifact that represented their culture and on Tuesday evening we gathered in a circle and shared these artifacts and what they represented for us with each other. Through this experience we learned more about how both our own cultures impact us and about each other.

2. Collaborate with diverse people and divergent ideas as resources.

As facilitators, we were explicit about inviting and supporting a diverse group of small schools coaches from around the country. Our diversity gave us an opportunity to find new places both within our comfort zone and in our risk zones throughout the week. We shared personal and painful experiences, read and discussed research and theory, developed theories of action, and bonded around a collective responsibility to take on the work of interrupting inequities in our lives and in our work.

We unpacked the ways in which the way we talk impacts how we act using the text “Changing the Discourse in Schools” (by Eugene Eubanks, Ralph Parish and Dianne Smith) and the language of Discourse I and Discourse II. We explored how the language we use in schools too often reproduces inequity and keeps us from transforming both our thinking and our schools. Through our exploration we became more aware of how we too often talk about symptoms rather than causes, rely on single truths rather than multiple stories, and focus on ability and supposed merit rather than privilege and oppression. By breaking open this paradigm and beginning to provide the language to discuss the difference between these two types of discourse, we made progress in recognizing and using Discourse II to transform our thinking and action in our schools.

The idea that I cannot separate the mind from the heart and soul of this work toward equity was reinforced for me this week. I know that change is hard. I saw a community transformation where we said the words—vicious cycle—and the issues of oppression, systemic oppression, reproducing classism and the feelings attached—anger, frustration, isolation. We tried to find a balance: We will have a long way to go.

Bobbi Aguree
TALC New Vision, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

3. Leave with tools, skills, knowledge and life experiences that help identify multiple entry points for the work.

As a part of the personal transformation work

What is the connection between small schools and NSRF?

Over the last 5 years as the movement to break down the size of high schools has grown, NSRF has been involved in the practice of small schools coaching, beginning in 2000 with the formation of the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative (SSCC) in partnership with the Small Schools Project (SSP) and Coalition of Essential Schools NW (CESNW) to support the professional development of small schools coaches working with Bill & Melinda Gates schools in Washington. A part of the grant received by SSCC to coach towards small schools was a piece known as “And Beyond” which was designed to capture learning on the development and practice of small schools coaches in order to transfer that learning to other settings around the country. This seminar is a direct result of the work of “And Beyond.”

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The students of City High School. City High School was founded by Horace’s Compromise, an attempt by the city to create a “new, equal opportunity” school. The idea is that every child deserves a quality education and the school should be a reflection of the diverse population it serves. The school’s involvement with Critical Friends Groups followed a common progression in the early days of NSRF. Teachers in the first CFG told colleagues that it was helpful and word spread. Each year another CFG or two was created, and eventually, over three-quarters of the staff was voluntarily involved. Meanwhile, the school pushed for weekly late-start meetings for professional development and won approval from the district. Over time, the idea of professional learning communities became part of the school culture and the late-start structure supported it.

How has membership in a CFG impacted your career?

Being a member of the same CFG for seven years had a profound impact on my teaching. We developed a lot of trust as a group and went quite deep with our inquiries. One thing my CFG helped me do was to look at teaching from the “heart level” of the work. It was really a paradigm shift for me and it came, in part, from using protocols that focus on looking at student work free of any judgment. Protocols like the Collaborative Assessment and Descriptive Review force the par-

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For 29 rural school districts in Northern New Mexico, Critical Friends Groups were unheard-of until 2004, when LeadNM began to travel, bringing CFGs to northern New Mexico.

Traditionally, professional development in these districts has consisted of presenting principals and teachers with strategies in a workshop format in an effort to "train" them how to do something “better” – interpret data, create standards, increase math and reading scores on standardized tests – all with the idea that somehow this “training” would translate into action in the classroom.

As in other areas across the country, the idea of authentic collaboration was unheard-of in these rural districts. Funded through a No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Leadership Grant in 2003, the University of New Mexico, in partnership with the Northern New Mexico Network (a consortium of rural school districts), created LeadNM as part of a concentrated effort to bring principals, leaders together in professional learning communities. For the next two years, preconceived ideas of professional development were challenged at every level – from superintendents to school staff – as new perspectives of professional learning communities began to shape adult and student learning alike. One of the principals spoke forcefully during the early days of the grant, “After you’ve been out in the real world evaluating it and you’ve been sued by the ACLU and you’ve had to restrain parents and you’re restraining children and you’re facing all these other things, I don’t want somebody telling me how it should be.”

Over the past two school years, six principal cohort CFGs totaling approximately 76 principals have been served by LeadNM. Each cohort meets for a full day once a month as a Critical Friends Group. As the participants become more familiar with the components of learning communities, e.g. norms, Connections, protocols, more and more are beginning to implement these components at their school sites. Many have reported great success with the use of norms for staff meetings. One principal has gone so far as to suggest to her staff a norm whereby the only focus of their staff meetings will be student learning. Thus, she reports, all other matters pertaining to “management” will be handled in a different manner at different times. She reports that administrative issues no longer consume time during staff meetings. Others have adapted Connections to share success stories, and one principal has even reported to principals, as is being used every morning in a kindergarten class – reporting that Connections has allowed the teacher a productive way to allow kids to say whatever is on their minds and to then focus better on the work at hand.

In their monthly Critical Friends Group, the principals are looking at student work, using protocols to face dilemmas, using text to grow new knowledge together around issues of leadership, equity and poverty, NCLB and teacher quality. Throughout the year, cohort participants have worked on the theory of shared, lateral accountability and how these CFGs are creating structures to help each district respond to students’ needs.

As the work with the principal cohorts of LeadNM began in fall 2004, we asked our participants to consider how their individual school sites respond to the assumption that all kids can learn. We spent 6 months using the book, How the Way We Talk can Change the Way We Work, with the purpose of helping our participants understand and reflect on where they might be stuck NOT changing. Since leadership is very personal, the Kegan and Lahey book helps leaders start with themselves. We thus spent a large amount of our time in small feedback groups, using the process the authors offer for reflection. One of our focus areas grew to “How can we as leaders help change the conversation in our schools so that the talk is about what matters most, student and adult learning?”

We then moved into the model created by Richard DuFour in the 2004 book Whatever It Takes, Principals and the interest that they “go deeper.” Each participant has been asked to pick at least one category for success which they will attempt to focus on during the next school year. Combining this with the Kegan and Lahey model of moving from “New Year’s (continued on page 16)

in which we engaged throughout the week, we explored a myriad of tools, activities, and resources for taking this work back to our schools and organizations. We practiced various protocols, read provocative texts, used BayCES’ work on assessment of practices and efforts through different lenses, and explored different entry points in the work with our schools. We also attempted to write Theories of Action to guide us in our work. A “theory of action” is a hypothesis about what will happen when a set of deliberate strategies are employed. Developing a theory of action requires making an educated guess - using critical judgment – about which strategic actions will lead to what desired results. It is the process of explicitly connecting what you plan to do with what you hope to get. Having a theory of action and making it public allows for greater reflection and collaboration as well as deeper accountability.

By the end of the week, we were all inspired and tired. We turned toward home with heads full of new ideas, new perceptions, and much unpacking still to be done. We left committed to taking our learning back with us to engage in our work in a different way. We formed strong bonds throughout the week (our community of resistance) and are hopeful that we can come together again as a group sometime soon to reflect on our experiences, support each other in our local work, as we continue to grow in our understanding and practice.

Sometimes when we attend a transformative seminar or training it can be difficult to share it with anyone who didn’t experience it with us. And often, at such times, we turn to poetry to bridge the gap between inner thoughts and language. Below is a reflection on the week from one of our participants, which resonated with many of us who were there.

4. Commit to interrupt and transform inequities in their local context and engage others in this process.

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For more information on future Coaching for Educational Equity Seminars please contact Kim Feicke at feicke@lclark.edu