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.

As why turned to what and how, I began to examine the differences that existed between my students and myself. I am a white woman; more than 85% of my students were children of color. While I had become relatively comfortable financially, most of my students and their families were struggling to make ends meet. I am a woman with strong views about gender issues in her fifth grade class, which many of my students came from homes where women were expected to “know their place,” a place determined by their families.

Given these differences, I began to wonder about my underlying assumptions and how I was playing them out in my classroom. What assumptions did I have about my kids and their families? Were my assumptions being played out in my expectations, my instruction, my behavior? Along the same lines, what were my assumptions about my colleagues and their resistance to change?

During this same period of time, the periodic press was crankng out regular reports about our failure to educate our children. Reports of a widening achievement gap between students like me and their white counterparts were being published with alarming regularity.

I didn’t need statistical reports to tell me what I already knew. Lots of my kids were disengaged, disenfranchised and on the fast track to ninth grade failure. I needed to understand my role and my responsibility in this crisis.

For me, Looking At Student Work has meant looking at the assumptions and unspoken agreements in my classrooms. Understanding my kids’ response or their refusal to respond meant examining the ways my classroom had remained mine and not theirs.

Most importantly, it has meant trying to understand my privileged role as a white teacher and my privilege in the classroom. For me, my kids have become skilled in forming opinions based on their own experiences. Others are free to disagree with the opinions that I have formed and put forward in my classroom. What assumptions do I have about my behavior? Along the same lines, what were my assumptions about my colleagues and their resistance to change?

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While I was wrestling with these questions, I had an experience that underscored the weight of our assumptions on our students. I was waiting in line at an Italian cheese shop and overheard the teacher in front of me complaining loudly about the “white trash” she was stuck teaching.

The reflective tools I learned pushed my thinking and my practice as an urban middle school teacher. I began to question my assumptions in my classroom and my practice in my classroom. For me, “tear the silence” and have the hard discussions on the listserve, or in our Critical Friends Group, peer visits, refreshments for meetings etc., I began to wonder about using the internal processes and protocols we valued in our CFGs in my classroom community. As it turns out, I wasn’t alone. Other teacher coaches across the country were taking the same journey…

Editors Note: This is the first installment of a regular feature in our journal. A place where teachers like you can spread the word about our work for and with kids!

Why do other teachers keep coming in to visit us? What’s all that food for on Monday afternoons? As my students began to notice the outward signs of my involvement in a Critical Friends Group, peer visits, refreshments for meetings etc., I began to wonder about using the internal processes and protocols we valued in our CFGs in my classroom community. As it turns out, I wasn’t alone. Other teacher coaches across the country were taking the same journey…

In a fifth grade class in Lancaster County, PA, Keeley Potter, a new coach, has introduced the use of Connections in her fifth grade classroom. Students take responsibility for circles, they share their experiences and are ready to share within minutes each morning. Keeley has noticed that the tone in her class has become more purposeful and supportive since she’s used this practice. All student voices are heard and respected, and there no longer seems to be a need for the kinds of off time attention getting that kids so often crave when they feel left out of the conversation. Students are also using Text–Based protocols in their Literature Circles.

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Another coach, Sandra Richardson, shared her fifth grade students’ excitement and interest when they heard that she was still a student, and that they could get in on the “it” that she was learning. Sandra’s students learned how and when to use protocols and activities from Connections to Chalk Talk. When the word spread that Sandra was able to share their experiences with their high school teacher, other teachers throughout the school were moved to incorporate the same practices in their classrooms, and using the Consultancy protocols, they decided to move forward with their work on film, since a live performance wasn’t possible.

In Rhode Island, another coach, Jan Grant, shared experiences where students have been trained in a process called Coming From Our Own Truth, a risk taking process where students are free to disagree with the opinions that the teacher has formed and put forward in their classroom.

Students have been trained in the use of I–Messages and have become skilled in forming opinions based on their own experiences. Others are free to disagree with the opinions that I have formed and put forward in my classroom. What assumptions do I have about my behavior? Along the same lines, what were my assumptions about my colleagues and their resistance to change?

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