What if ... ?
Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

When Brian asked for the umpteenth time if the class could read instead of “doing English,” I put aside my plan for the day and decided to observe my students as they read. They settled quickly into their books with no fidgeting, no requests for bathroom breaks, no need for me to redirect the energies of my active group of fourteen year olds. Sprawled on the floor in front of me was every English teacher’s dream. As I drove home that day, I had a million questions. What made such a difference in their approach to their work? How did they choose their books? How could I manage a reading program based on a free-read approach? How could I monitor their growth? Was there a way to meet the needs of the ninth grade curriculum and still allow for a wide range of student choice? “What if...” questions filled my notebook. My commute wasn’t long enough for all the questions I needed to think about. A conversation with my students led to more questions. I had no easy answers to any of the questions I had written, but I did know that everything about my work suddenly felt new. I was eager to study my questions.

This is the nature of inquiry — we notice a problem or situation, we pose a question, we gather evidence, and we respond to the results. When we consciously focus on our questions as a means of improving student learning, we foster attention on the reflection and analysis that leads to effective practices. A spirit of inquiry is the foundation for sustained professional development.

When we consciously focus on our questions as a means of improving student learning, we foster attention on the reflection and analysis that leads to effective practices. A spirit of inquiry is the foundation for sustained professional development.

Inquiry-based professional development serves as the research and development arm of our school. Through our membership in Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), we have learned specific strategies to give and receive feedback, to share best practices, to grapple with dilemmas, to “tune” curriculum, and to collaborate across disciplines to enhance student learning. This culture of collaboration provides multiple perspectives on the ways students learn. We draw upon these tools as we engage in action research.

For Life Skills teacher Regina Sullivan, the possibility of collaboration was the key to her research question. She set out to learn how she could pursue new knowledge of her content area. Regina says, “It started out as such a little question. After attending a writing workshop to learn how to create a cookbook of my grandmother’s recipes, I began to explore how I might apply my new skills to my cooking course by allowing students to create a cookbook for their final assessment. I was amazed at what they produced, and sought help from our technology teacher to learn to use software that students needed to use to do their work. I also asked our photography teacher to assist students with instructions in digital photography and composition techniques to illustrate the students’ recipes. We jerry-rigged a studio complete with lighting, camera tripods, linens, props and plates of all different colors and shapes. My CFG helped me to craft a research question that was broad enough to encompass all the learning I was doing in order to help my students. They supported my work and donated their time to help me.

“The prevailing culture in my classroom prior to my research was ‘from pot to mouth’. All food prepared was consumed instantly, with no reflection of the process and little analysis, other than taste, of the work. Now, students must demonstrate writing, editing, and presentation skills in addition to the skills involved in following a recipe and cooking a meal. Creating a cookbook is an authentic task that builds a tremendous repertoire of skills.

NSRF endorsement provides work in a variety of positions supporting professional development in New York City for teachers and leaders in schools and school districts. These include conducting study groups, retreats, institutes, workshops and conferences. Through a process of training, application of new skills and demonstration of competence, New York City participants may apply for NSRF facilitator endorsement.

You can contact Nancy Mohr at <nmohr@rcn.com>
The comment about “how American it is to discuss equity as equal opportunity, but not equity of outcomes” was thought provoking...

Student, Eisenhower High School, Houston

812/330.2702 <kkelly@harmony.pvt.k12.in.us><dbambino@earthlink.net>

are interested in contributing to

I’m not sure how to create the conversation around equity that gives justice to the complexity, authenticity and emotions it raises for ourselves personally and with our children. Winter Meeting 2001, Houston

As far as equity. I keep seeing more instances of how it impacts not only on my profession but also on my life. I can’t believe that I have never examined this issue before.

Reflections from the Field

I’m not sure how to create the conversation around equity that gives justice to the complexity, authenticity and emotions it raises for ourselves personally and with our children. Winter Meeting 2001, Houston

The students choose to act in different ways in response to different types of treatment. It’s really not hard to see if we’re willing to look.

From the introduction, where she explains the metaphorical title that compares our new teachers to the “chosen as they cross over into the Promised Land,” I knew I was hooked.

We recently used chapter four in a text based discussion at the Winter Meeting in Houston, and hope that it will form the basis of ongoing discussions about cultural competency and its relationship to both what, and how, we teach and view our young people.

You can contact Deborah Bambino at <dbambino@earthlink.net>


The Rural Trust is the leading school change organization for rural schools. The Trust’s primary mission is to orga-
nization and community support and to ensure the issue of sustainability NSRF will be supporting the Rural Trust leadership along with teachers and community members from their four regions of the country in the development of facilitation skills to hold school/community conversations. These conversations will deal with a variety of “place-based learning” problems and possibilities.

VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project

The VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project is a project involving Indiana and Vermont. The purpose of this ground-breaking project is to “explore the nexus between school reform and anti-poverty work.” The VISTA participants will become school/community organizers and build alliances with students, teachers, and community members to help achieve their goals. CFGs are the vehicles being explored in order to develop and sustain these alliances. This project will be a catalyst in the effort to make sure that service learning results are integrated into our teaching memory bank.

You can contact Daniel Bonche at <dbonche@chamony.indiana.edu>, and Gene Thompson-Grove at <gthompsongrove@earthlink.net>.

Having read The Dreamkeepers, I was anxious for my copy of the new Gloria Ladson-Billings’ book, Crossing Over to Canaan, to arrive. From the introduction, where she explained her metaphorical title that compares our new teachers to the “chosen as they cross over into the Promised Land,” I knew I was hooked.

The entire book held my interest, with its questions about cultural competency and the ways our cultural baggage and bias impact on our teaching and learning in diverse classrooms. I enjoyed the easy back and forth, personal experiences to the vignettes about the new teachers, to the research based structure of the Teaching for Diversity Master’s Program that she helps to administer.

The fifth grade, a teacher named Ms Brown told me I wasn’t smart enough to do a science fair project. She later learned my mother and that was the end of that.

What if . . . (continued from page 6)

“I am proud of this work. My students’ performance has improved with every standard I have added. As colleagues became aware of my work, they offered to teach a variety of ethnic dishes to my students, as did our foreign exchange students. My work became far more public. I was able to arrange for my students to work with tuxedos by the art and production director of a national cooking magazine. I have been asked to present my work to a state conference this year.

“Did not think that a question could drive my work, but it has truly transformed my practice. My questions cause me to focus on my work in a new way every day. Sometimes I take a breath and realize that I am in way over my head, but my students’ excitement for our work together leads me to continue my exploration. I have begun to plan an interdisciplinary course with our photography teacher that would allow students to create displays in area restaurants. All of this started with a question, a little question, that kept growing. I have not simply pushed my comfortable limits, I have built them up. I have learned skills of creativity, writing, editing, revising, photography, formatting -- the list is long, and will undoubtedly grow as I apply this learning to my other courses.

Regina’s reflection reveals that our questions, like those of our students, are often messy and non-linear, and the end of each period of inquiry begins a new cycle of questions. Regina has begun to apply her new learning to her other courses, while I am at a far earlier stage in my own research. My entry point is the question of what I can learn from observing my students read. I want to know how I can improve their reading and writing skills by giving them more autonomy. My CFG will help me to tune my question and offer support during my research. They will also prepare me to present my work to my peers. After many, many years of teaching ninth grade, I am learning to work with fresh eyes, new excitement for the teaching and learning process.

You can contact Peggy Silva at psilva@sprise.com.

In the fifth grade, a teacher named Ms Brown told me I wasn’t smart enough to do a science fair project. She later learned my mother and that was the end of that.

The comment about “how American it is to discuss equity as equal opportunity, but not equity of outcomes” was thought provoking.