

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 out on the floor in front of me was every English teacher’s dream. As I drove home that day, I had

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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 strate-

wondered 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

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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. We all do this informally hundreds of times each day as we plan a lesson or an assessment, change seating plans, or administer discipline — questions govern our work.

gies 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 provide authentic learning experiences that incorporated both process skills and professional collaboration. She also

teachers to learn to use software that students needed to use to do their work. I also asked our photography teacher to assist students with instruction 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.

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Spring 2002

Directors' Report

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We have trained over 2000 new coaches and have established 25 regional centers (see article on page 10).

In addition, some of the most exciting news lies in the many projects NSRF has been supporting over the last year. Below is a brief description of many of them. Please visit our website to learn more about these initiatives (www.nsrffharmony.org).

Small School Coaches' Collaborative

This is a partnership between NSRF, the Coalition of Essential Schools North West Center, and the Small Schools Project at the University of Washington. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funds this collaboration. The project is designed to support educational reinvention in Washington State. This reinvention has the potential to create over 200 small high schools of less than 400 students each. An additional 200 elementary and middle schools will also be transformed as a result of this endeavor.

Cleveland Municipal School District

In Cleveland, Ohio NSRF is supporting the Cleveland Municipal School District (CMSD) as it attempts to start a new small high school as a part of the Model Secondary Schools Project. The school will have no more than 400 students and is scheduled to open in September of 2002. Fourteen NSRF national facilitators are also working with all 83 elementary and middle schools in CMSD. NSRF's role is to train two people as coaches in each of

the 83 schools in order to provide support for the teachers as they work to enhance student learning. The principals in these schools are exploring ways to support this collaborative work with NSRF.

Rural Schools and Community Trust (The Rural Trust)

The Rural Trust is the leading school change organization for rural schools. The Trust's primary mission is to organize school and community support around the issue of sustainability. NSRF will be supporting the Rural Trust leadership along with teachers and community members from their seven 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 vehicle 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 in

more than volunteering. The results we seek are for youth to experience making a contribution to meaningful change in both their schools and communities. VISTA also hopes to extend the NSRF project to additional states. NSRF has hired state coordinators for this project in both states.

Lucent Peer Collaboration Project

The Lucent Peer Collaboration Project is an innovative project designed to establish and institutionalize new strategies for teacher learning as members of Collaborative Learning Communities in four school districts: Albuquerque; Seattle; Broward County (Fort Lauderdale); and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The project, which began in June 2000 and initially involved twenty schools, now envisions steadily expanding work in school clusters within and beyond these four districts.

As you can see, there have been extraordinary opportunities for NSRF to live up to its new mission of supporting educational social equity for all. We could not have been in position to contribute to the national discourse without the tremendous contribution of our colleague, Faith Dunne. She inspired us to work toward equitable outcomes for every learner. This issue of *Connections* is dedicated to her honor and memory. □

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"I am proud of this work. My students' performance has improved with every new 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' work to be critiqued by the art and production director of a national cooking magazine. I have been asked to present my work to a state conference this spring.

"I did not think that a question could drive my work, but it has truly transformed my practice. My question causes 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 bulldozed them. 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 looking at my work with fresh eyes and new excitement for the teaching and learning process. □

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