

Establishing Professional Learning Communities Through Collegial Inquiry

Imagine a scenario similar to the one below occurring in your school. Early in the school year, a small group of teachers and administrators met in an elementary school faculty room to discuss a topic of interest to all of them. A short time before, one teacher had made the observation that in his fourth grade classroom there were many more boys in remedial reading programs than girls. He asked the question, "When it comes to reading in the primary grades, why does there seem to be a gender gap and what can be done to decrease that gap?" The group was engaged and began to observe and gather data in their classrooms.

The data led to new questions. Could some literacy activities be problematic for some boys? Are teachers using materials that appeal to both genders? Can classroom literacy practices be broadened so that a wider group of students is engaged? What language practices engage boys outside of school? How do these match the text choices and activities of classrooms? What counts as literacy at school?

The group broadened their investigation by interviewing their male students and reading books and scholarly articles on the question. Through the course of a semester, meeting once a week, they shared and analyzed their findings, experimented with new strategies and recorded and shared outcomes. As a result, a plan gradually emerged to introduce new literacy activities which better engage both genders, to bring in male adult readers from the community as positive models and to

broaden reading choices to reflect boys' outside interests.

In the scenario above, educators identified the problem, chose the question(s), collected and analyzed the data and developed action plans based on their findings. Often today, the current drive for accountability in schools does not allow for a process that teachers themselves can use to solve their own problems and to evaluate the effects of their own teaching practices. That's what **collegial inquiry** is intended to do, and its use generates school-wide excitement, renewed commitment to examining teacher practice, and most important, measurable improvement in student learning.

Collegial inquiry is a process for enhancing the knowledge and skills of individuals within a community of learners. Professionals who collaborate with others learn to document actions and results and use data to make informed decisions. They deepen their understanding of the various roles and perspectives that lie within their community, and they learn to reconcile and use those perspectives to improve learning and professional practice. Collegial inquiry supports the development of professional learning communities, which promotes the growth of those within the organization.

For the past several years, Suffolk's Edge Teacher Center has actively promoted and supported the formation of professional learning communities through its grant programs and training. Many schools have begun this process. Next year the Teacher Center will embark on a three-year collegial

inquiry project to strengthen established learning communities and grow new ones in our member schools. Here's how the project will be implemented.

From July 2007 through January 2008, core facilitators will be recruited and the application process for district teams will be introduced. From February through June 2008, applications will be reviewed and readiness assessment will be conducted to establish district teams. Core facilitators will be trained and district teams will choose a team member to take a *Communities for Learning* Fellowship where they will participate in a mature professional learning community. In school years 2008 through 2011, facilitators will lead teams in collegial inquiry with continued support from the Teacher Center.

Who participates in collegial inquiry? Teams determine their own participants, but they must include volunteer teachers and district level and/or building level administrators. Additional staff, parents, students, etc. may also participate.

What purposes will the collegial inquiry serve? The collegial inquiry cycle provides processes for improving learning for all students and creating professional learning communities that will allow for continued growth. The cycle focuses on deepening the knowledge and practice of the members, engaging them in the use of collaborative processes and fostering a commitment to deep understanding and reflective practice.

Looking for a convenient Master's Degree Program?

Two New Programs!

- **MA in Liberal Studies** with concentration in special ed inclusion or literacy (starts Winter, 2008) Stony Brook University
- **Master of Science in Literacy Education** (starts January, 2008) Dowling College

For registration and information, call Suffolk's Edge Teacher Center at 254-0107 or check our website at www.seteachercenter.org, and click on Professional Development.

NYS Teacher Center Online Academy

Courses open to all can be found at the Rockland Teacher Center website at www.rockteach.org. Click on Online Courses, then Online Academy Catalog and follow the directions. Be sure to check with your district for course approval.

What does the work of a learning community involved in collegial inquiry look like?

Its work involves

Inquiry and Research

- collecting and analyzing student performance data
- articulating questions/topics to pursue
- using research on best practices related to teaching, learning, leadership and sustainability
- accessing and using multiple perspectives from research and data
- taking new action and examining impact on student learning

Assessment and documentation

- recording actions taken and efforts made
- collecting and analyzing data resulting from action
- documenting intended and unintended consequences

Ongoing reflection on individual and group processes

- self-assessing against established criteria
- periodic monitoring of work and progress
- reflecting regularly on effectiveness of processes used and on the learning of both individuals and the group

Use of democratic and collaborative processes

- establishing and monitoring norms and ground rules for group work
- using the constituency to access various perspectives and when appropriate, to come to consensus and make decisions
- communicating with district, community and legislatures (when appropriate)

Learning Communities Websites

http://www.nsd.org/standards/learning_communities.cfm National Staff Development Council's Learning Communities website.

<http://www.teachinflorida.com/teachertoolkkit/PLC.htm> from the Florida Professional Development System Evaluation.

www.annenberginstitute.org/images/ProfLearning.pdf Excellent site for thorough understanding of learning communities.

<http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html> Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's informative website about educational change and its issues.

"Originals" in the Classroom

You can spot them almost immediately: the eighth grader who talks obsessively about baroque architecture, the six year old who'd rather spend recess talking to the class hamster than playing dress-up with her classmates, the fourth grader who fights going outside because he doesn't like the way the grass feels. Previous generations of parents and teachers could more easily embrace or overlook a child's unconventional behavior than the teachers and parents of today.

More and more, kids who once would have been considered slightly out of step with their peers are emerging with diagnoses of ADHD, sensory integration dysfunction, or pervasive developmental disorder, to name a few. Today it is estimated that one in 150 kids has an autism spectrum disorder. Just this year, a study found that the number of

children under 20 receiving a diagnosis of bipolar disorder jumped from 18,000 in 1994 to an estimated 800,000 in 2003.

As a teacher, having an "original" in the classroom is often challenging, but it can also be intensely rewarding. The challenge is in making the classroom (his/her daily world) sufficiently kind and welcoming to him and his eccentricities while providing him with the basic skills needed to navigate in that world. The fun comes in seeing a uniquely different way of being and doing unfold before you. You can't help but wonder at the flawless logic of a nine year old who wears her clothes inside out because "the seams are too hurty." There are many children who do benefit from diagnosis and the prescribed coping strategies that go along with it. But some originals should just be experienced and enjoyed! *(excerpted from a Newsweek Health for Life article. September 17, 2007).*

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