

Unbundling the Elements

Collaboration, Inquiry, and Reflection: A Principal Creates a CFG-Inspired Learning Environment

by Jill Hudson

I was a high-school science teacher when I first encountered the practice of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). I was impressed by the depth and breadth of the learning I experienced through three practices: collaboration, inquiry, and reflection. In each meeting with my CFG, whether I presented my own students' work or studied and analyzed other classrooms' results, I gained valuable insights that helped me meet my students' learning needs better.

As a middle-school principal, I have found that the same three practices—collaboration, inquiry, and reflection—are as important to my leadership skills as they were to my classroom skills. Instead of practicing the usual top-down leadership, I facilitate the growth of my staff in their practice. Such facilitative leadership allows me to focus on leadership for learning instead of micromanagement for control. I try to lead others to make their own decisions and assume responsibility for their actions. As a result, several techniques embedded in the work of CFGs have become pervasive in my school's culture.

Collaboration at meetings is formalized with written norms, or operating principles, that prevent the most common, predictable unproductive behaviors from interfering with our work. We review the norms at the beginning of each meeting, and afterward we reflect on how we did and set goals for attending better to the norms and our ability to work more effectively as a group.

Protocols that keep conversations safe, productive, and equitable have become part of our collaborative culture as well. Protocols often guide the conversations of teams of teachers at weekly meetings that examine curriculum and student learning. At staff meetings and building-

leadership team meetings, we use protocols to discuss research articles and make informed decisions about implementing practices. Protocols are even used in classrooms, because giving students a specific text to discuss and time to speak appears to improve dialogue among students—even middle-school students!

Inquiry helps in setting annual student-learning goals. During the process our teachers analyze data and reflect on standards. After selecting appropriate student-learning goals, they identify instructional strategies for their students and student work for analysis in their CFGs. It is an iterative process: analyzing student work, identifying new strategies to enhance learning, and analyzing the resulting student work, all accomplished in a structured environment with trusted colleagues who support one another's professional development.

Reflection has also become a regular feature of our practices. Whether the focus is on content or process, we frequently engage in reflection to learn from our experiences. After a difficult staff discussion, I often ask staff members for input to various prompts—e.g., I learned, I feel, I will, I would like more of, I would like less of.

Such reflection seems to give people a voice about what has occurred. I look at the comments with my administrative team or my building-leadership team to ascertain our next steps. We review the feedback with the staff before the next meeting or conversation, for we have found that regular feedback allows us to grow as a staff and contribute to our supportive school culture.

The essence of collaboration, inquiry, and reflection is the same when I employ them as a principal as when I was a teacher. However, the impact is much greater. Teachers may care about their students and work collaboratively with them to create engaging learning experiences, but such benefits, however great, seldom extend very far beyond the classroom. However, teachers and staff members who care about one another, who work collaboratively to inquire and reflect on their practice, create an atmosphere that permeates the school. The students sense it and come to realize what it means: that the adults care enough to provide the best learning experiences possible.

When collaboration, inquiry, and reflection are the norm at a school, the whole of the resulting educational environment becomes greater than the sum of its parts. People not only continue doing their jobs, but beyond that, they keep striving to do their jobs better. Such striving, together with the encouraging, supportive environment that goes with it, adds value that is not only quantitative, but qualitative: the outcome is not just more, it is better.

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