

Chapter 1

Twenty Years Facilitating Professional Learning Communities Across Difference: What Have We Learned?

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ABSTRACT

Colleagues from the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools (SF-CESS) reflect on the evolution of its intentional learning community program called equity-based iGroups (individual inquiry groups). Over the past 20 years, a core component of the work has been intentional facilitation across difference – racial, gender, role, etc. These colleagues reflect on the ever-constant learning behind their planning, facilitating, and debriefing across difference and share a synthesis of learnings organized by a larger framework for transformation. The chapter includes examples of specific curricular design and facilitative moves and closes with an example of a protocol used to engage in anti-racist discourse.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7270-5.ch001

INTRODUCTION

Capturing the learning from nearly 20 years of work is a challenging task. As a learning organization committed to an equity-centered culture of continuous inquiry and improvement, capturing the collective learning of facilitators who intentionally have worked *across difference* for two decades is a whole other task. Yet here we are intending to do just that.

The term, “across difference” may be newer to some readers. Our use of this term refers to intentionally acknowledging AND collaborating across different identity markers (racial/ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic status, religion, gender, etc.) and experiences that have shaped who we are today, how we show up, and how we are perceived and treated because of these differences. Working “across difference” adds value to co-facilitation and enables us to see, hear, know, and lead from a much broader set of experiences and perspectives, interrupting the reliance on a singular, dominant narrative as the only one. This commitment counters the traditional mode of one individual leading from the center of the room, singularly controlling the direction and outcome of a set of work. By design, it is more likely that two or more individuals will co-lead from multiple places (and perspectives - even when calibrated) in and around the room. This way of holding space often models the content related to disrupting common and traditional power dynamics to ensure more equitable engagement and representation.

In 2005, the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools (SF-CESS) formed with the intention of supporting small schools by design with leadership coaching and program implementation. Soon after its formation, we realized that many of our schools were led by equity-centered leaders who may have shared a desire and will to work hard but lacked a common base of knowledge and skill. Thus, we had to expand our own work to support equity-centered, facilitated learning for well-intentioned design and leaders to create and foster spaces where learning and transformation could be constant and continuous.

In our first years we came together with colleagues from other organizations including the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Small Schools and the National School Reform Faculty. Our purpose was to interrogate and improve the construction and facilitation of equity-centered professional learning communities by bringing expertise partners who have particular expertise either in theory, practice, or structure. We were at a point in time when using the word “equity” was a commodity but truly understanding the concept and implications as well as fully integrating it as a central design principle were still in the beginning stages. It was here that the primary authors of this chapter first met.

The phrase “intentional learning communities” (ILCs) is from the School Reform Initiative, which defines ILCs as “places where educators work together to learn the skills of reflecting, collaborating, de-privatizing practice, and exposing and exploring fundamental assumptions” (Fahey & Ippolito, 2015, p. 2). The word “intentional” indicates a certain level of conversational rigor and mutual accountability that participants hold by choosing to participate in the community. Fahey and Ippolito also note that ILCs are further differentiated from communities of practice and professional learning communities because ILCs require skilled facilitation as well as the use of discussion protocols to guide learning.

The authors of this chapter refer to Intentional Learning Communities as Equity-Based iGroups or iGroups for short. SF-CESS coined the term iGroups for its version of Intentional Learning Communities to highlight some distinctions from previous formations such as Critical Friends’ Groups™. The term iGroup is short for “i”ndividual “i”nquiry groups, a title intended to remind participants that the

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