

**MAKING DISSATISFACTION DIVINE: AN INSPIRED APPROACH TO WHOLE-SCHOOL REFORM**

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**Abstract**

Building community and supporting learning are two principles of Whole Schooling. This article describes how Center for Inspired Teaching, a nonprofit educational reform organization, uses these principles to foster professional learning communities in public schools in Washington, DC. When change agents approach disengaged, disempowered faculties with respect and empathy, teachers are more likely to embrace school improvement efforts and involve themselves in changes. Specific suggestions for breaking through initial resistance to change are discussed.

**Challenges to Creating a Culture of Professional Learning**

Children benefit when the adults in a school building work together productively and joyfully. When the classroom teachers, instructional aides, administrators, and support staff all feel that they are part of a community that supports them as professionals and as valued individuals, all of these educators become more willing and able to offer personal support to students. Unfortunately, too often, schools are places of isolation, competition, and emotional stress for teachers and for learners. The teacher-driven culture of collaboration that is so essential to supporting whole schooling can be impossible to foster in the absence of a sense of personal and collective efficacy, a deep and abiding ‘can-do’ attitude. In schools where teaching professionals are subjected to isolation and other forms of professional insult and injury, faculty and staff may act in ways that reflect a learned helplessness, consistently avoiding responsibility for problems and their solutions (Barth 2006). Faculty-lounge conversations—if they touch on issues of teaching and learning at all—may often focus on the failures of administrators, policy makers, parents, and students. The ‘blame game’ can be especially frustrating for change agents who believe that teachers are the most powerful influence on student achievement (Haycock 1998).

When teaching professionals have become resigned to the belief that they have very little influence and even less desire to use it, how does a change agent start from ‘less than zero’ to transform an adversarial or isolated atmosphere into one that is characterized by collective responsibility, mutual respect, and critical self-reflection? This article draws on the approach and experiences of Center for Inspired Teaching, an educational reform nonprofit that provides facilitation and training for faculties of public and public charter schools in Washington, DC. In our role as catalysts for more humane, more child-centered education in some of the most challenged schools in the nation’s capital, we have found that establishing a professional learning community requires serious and sustained efforts to build teachers’ sense of personal and collective agency. For a professional learning community to develop, change agents must foster a culture in which teaching professionals think of themselves as capable of, and responsible for, making interpersonal, instructional, and institutional choices that have a positive impact on school climate and student learning. Here, we offer some insights into the difficult but rewarding process of creating an atmosphere where teachers feel safe enough, valued enough, and capable enough to join in efforts to improve the nature of teaching and learning in their school, so that students, teachers, and schools can reach their full potential.

### **Cultivating a Stance of ‘Divine Dissatisfaction’**

Professional learning communities are built on a foundation of respect for teachers—a strong belief that teachers are the solution, not the problem, and that the goal of professional development should be to build capacity, not conformity (Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette 2002). A foundation of respect allows instructional leaders both to challenge and support faculty members as they engage ever more fully in a collaborative process of instructional and institutional improvement. An expectation of improvement, however, implies that existing approaches or outcomes are less than perfect. In contexts where criticism has rarely been constructive, change agents face a particularly thorny challenge in framing the need for professional development. Working from a stance of ‘divine dissatisfaction,’ to use choreographer Martha Graham’s memorable phrase (de Mille 1991), can help change agents frame the desire for change as a vote of confidence. It communicates both a respect for what teachers already know and can do as well as a firm expectation for professional learning. Inspired Teaching facilitators begin their work

with teachers by saying, “I am here because I believe I’m a good teacher and I know I can be better. And I expect that each one of you is here for the same reason.” When this message is communicated consistently, and genuinely, teachers are more likely to ‘lower their defenses’ and open themselves to new ideas.

It’s important, however, to strive for something more than a friendly tone. Many disempowered faculties get along just fine, but are also fine with just getting along—an ‘I’m OK, you’re OK’ mindset that allows the status quo to continue unchallenged. Skilled facilitators establish an environment that is safe, but not comfortable—saying, in effect, that while you won’t be allowed to fall, you will definitely be pushed. In such an atmosphere, meaningful adult learning can take place because participants are engaged in their *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky 1986), that point just outside a learner’s comfort zone where growth occurs.

### **Dedicating Time for Professional Learning Community to Emerge**

To engage teachers in envisioning and enacting a renewed school culture, it is vitally important to provide ample support in the form of *time*—time for reflection, for talking with colleagues about new solutions to old problems, and for educators to build community. The Inspired School model, which is currently being implemented in a half-dozen public schools in DC, includes significant time for professional learning during the school day. The model also requires time over the long-term. Inspired Teaching’s partnerships with schools are a long-term commitment, lasting three to five years, so that a cultural shift can not only take root, but have time to grow and become self-sustaining.

Although as advocates for teachers, we are sometimes reluctant to make additional demands on already over-worked and under-paid educators, Inspired Teaching has found that out-of-school time is especially important for community building at the beginning of the process. Off-site retreats are an important element of our school renewal process because they allow us bring all adults in the school together—including often-overlooked support staff such as cafeteria workers, security guards, and custodial staff. Retreats provide an unmatched opportunity to build community, set collective goals, and provide sustained time to renew and reflect.

During school hours, teachers and paraprofessionals in Inspired Schools devote a considerable amount of time to ongoing professional learning, and do so in a variety of settings.

Individualized teacher support is provided by an on-site Inspired Teaching mentor teacher, who meets with faculty one-on-one to provide confidential feedback on instruction and help teachers meet individual goals for professional growth. Small-group learning for teachers takes place through teacher inquiry groups, monthly collaborative meetings in which teams of teachers take on an action research project that allows them to delve into a specific aspect of classroom practice. While these inquiry groups are also facilitated by Inspired Teaching staff—usually the mentor teacher who provides individual support—they are places where teachers take ownership of the work by generating research questions, developing ways to investigate them, collecting informal and formal data in their classrooms, and sharing their findings with the larger school community. Seminar series are the final element of the Inspired School model of whole-school renewal through teacher learning. In keeping with Inspired Teaching’s core philosophical commitment to progressive, constructivist education, these after-school workshops for all faculty focus on topics related to student-centered instruction.

In each of these settings, an inter-active, responsive pedagogy allows for (and even requires) significant input from the teachers who are our learners. In the sections that follow, examples illustrate teacher learning focused on creating a school where children and adults can find joy in their work.

### **Out with the Old, In with the New**

Meaningful learning often requires the development of new means of communication. The use of physical movement in adult learning settings can be an especially effective technique for establishing the expectation that the work ahead of a faculty is going to require a dramatic change in pre-existing communication styles and norms of interaction. For this reason, one of the hallmarks of Inspired Teaching’s approach is the use of play, improvisation, and physical movement as core teaching techniques. Activities can be as simple and safe as inviting teachers to stand in a circle to share a word and a gesture that reflects what they love most about teaching, or as involved and risky as asking teachers to engage in a role-play in which symbolized fighting is used to explore frustrations and conflicts. (In the photograph in Figure 1, teachers are physically representing a concept from their newly-articulated educational philosophies.) By

introducing a new means of communicating with each other and with themselves, movement-based activities invite participants to leave their comfort zone and try on new ways of thinking, talking, and being. Often, because adults have become unused to using gross physical movement as a means of communication, participants discover insights that would have remained inaccessible otherwise. Physical activities that are unfamiliar, unrehearsed, and unexpected invite complete engagement and attentiveness, which is critical in developing a culture of ‘being fully present.’ Tough, honest conversations about important issues that must be tackled collectively are more likely to occur when participants are engaged physically and emotionally, as well as intellectually.

**Figure 1. Teachers create a human sculpture in order to share an insight with other educators.**



Physicalizing unfamiliar concepts can help teachers articulate and internalize new ideas.

### **Fostering Agency through Collective Problem-Finding**

Healthy, productive norms of communication are an important building block of collaboration, but experienced facilitators know that ‘healthy’ doesn’t always equal ‘happy’. Once a safe atmosphere is established and teachers feel licensed to speak their minds, concerns that were previously hidden behind a wall of silence are likely to emerge. Inspired Teaching’s

response: Let them. Although conversations that focus exclusively on problems can be uncomfortable, it’s important to remember that when teachers speak critically, it means they are thinking critically. In fact, the habits of critique, analysis, and open communication are essential to professional learning communities. Skillful facilitators help faculty move from problem-finding to problem-solving without dismissing teachers’ concerns or mislabeling teacher’s critiques as mere ‘gripping.’

An exercise that heightens teachers' awareness of their personal agency can be useful in transforming laundry-lists of complaints into more meaningful areas for positive action. Facilitators invite teachers to use individual index cards to write down factors that influence children's performance in school. The resulting list is typically wide-ranging, including everything from whether and what students eat for breakfast to standards-based curriculum alignment. Teachers are then asked to place their cards on one of two labeled areas: "In My Control" or "Out of My Control." Once individuals have indicated their opinions, the group is invited to review where the cards have been placed, and to move cards that they feel are misplaced. Engaged, passionate discussion often follows. For instance, a faculty that unanimously agreed that 'time' was a major challenge in improving student outcomes disagreed vociferously on the nature and extent of teacher influence on how instructional time was allocated. The objective of the activity is not to reach consensus, but rather to open up discussion of the role of the teacher, inviting teachers who feel disempowered to acknowledge and claim the power of their personal influence, making space for redefinition and reflection on individual and collective responsibilities. Such work is important, as collective efficacy has been shown to be a key predictor in student achievement (Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy 2000).

### **Building a Community Rooted in Collective Problem-Solving**

It's important to follow the In/Out of My Control exercise with one or more tangible actions that can be implemented with relative ease and generate a 'quick win.' At an elementary school in Southeast Washington, DC, the veteran staff and new principal agreed that the primary challenge facing the school was that a relatively small group of students frequently disrupted class. Borrowing an idea from the Coalition of Essential Schools, Inspired Teaching facilitators asked teachers to brainstorm a list of all the students in the school who consistently had trouble living up to teachers' expectations. Children on the list were then 'adopted' by a teacher 'buddy,' an adult who wouldn't normally interact with the child in the course of a regular school day. Each member of the faculty, including instructional aides, took on the task of seeking out their buddy each day to check in with the student and make some sort of personal connection. Teachers warmed quickly to the idea, thinking of creative ways to pleasantly surprise their buddies. One could often hear the question "Did you talk to your buddy today?" in the hallway or teachers' lounge—and the conversation that followed, more often than not, included an amusing anecdote

about the child or reflected a new appreciation for the individual circumstances of the child. These conversations reflected an important change in school climate inspired by the buddy activity. Slowly but surely, teachers began to talk to each other about children as individuals, rather than as problems. Adult buddies shared insights about their charges with classroom teachers, and teachers tentatively sought their students' buddies for advice and support. This subtle shift set the stage for a later transformation in teacher discourse in which faculty conversations became less dominated by complaints about working conditions and started to focus increasingly on issues of teaching and learning. More immediately, the novelty and instant gratification inherent in the informal chats with children helped to engage and empower a staff that had become accustomed to a routine of frustration, isolation, and dismal school outcomes. Although there was still a long way to go toward creating a functioning professional learning community, teachers had taken the first step by beginning to build professional relationships that were rooted in collective problem solving. The buddy activity served as tangible evidence that changes at the school were possible, and maybe even desirable, and, building on the "In/Out of My Control" activity, demonstrated that creating change was within the control of the teachers.

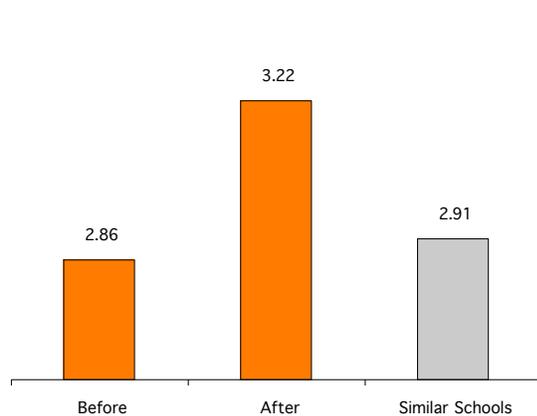
### **Empowering Teachers Creates Conditions for Change**

For substantive, lasting change to occur in schools, teachers must be centrally involved in the reform process. When teachers are supported in developing and claiming their sense of personal agency, it permits them to move past problem-finding to problem-solving. Successful approaches to overcoming learned helplessness engage teachers emotionally, intellectually, and even physically, moving teachers out of their comfort zones and encouraging them to channel their hopes and frustrations into productive action.

The results of taking a strength-based approach, such as cultivating a stance of 'divine dissatisfaction,' are evident in the changes at Inspired Schools in Washington, DC. When Inspired Teaching works with entire faculties at underperforming schools, one of our first steps is to ask teachers what they need in order to reach their full potential as educators. In addition to facilitated conversations with faculty, one tool that we use in this task is a nationally-normed survey of teacher working conditions. This instrument (developed and made available by Center

for Teaching Quality) pinpoints areas of the school climate that distract educators from their primary mission of supporting children’s social and academic development. The Teacher Working Conditions survey also provides a way to assess the impact of the creative, ‘messy’ work of rebuilding the professional culture in dysfunctional schools. As the results in Figure 2 illustrate, such an approach can lead to measurable changes.

**Figure 2. Teacher ratings of teacher empowerment before and after Year One of the Inspired School model, a strength-based approach to whole-school reform.** Based on average responses from three schools; survey administered to fifty classroom teachers. Scale of 1-5. Comparison data courtesy of Center for Teaching Quality.



These data, which reflect average results from three elementary schools (totaling 50 educators) before and after one year of Center for Inspired Teaching’s work, suggest that the approach described above leads to an enhanced sense of teacher empowerment. When teachers are encouraged and empowered to re-envision their role in school reform, changes that take place are

likely to be more substantive and more sustainable than those that follow from top-down mandates. The end result is a school where adults’ needs are met—allowing them, in turn, to meet the needs of the children they serve (*cf* Langford 2003).

A process rooted in respect for teachers, along with a genuine commitment to building their capacity, acknowledges the problems of the past but also empowers teachers to take control of their future. When faculty dissatisfaction becomes ‘divine,’—when imperfections begin to be seen not as reasons to give up, but as reasons to keep on trying—then a school is well on its way to becoming ‘whole.’

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