

An Authentic Learning Community

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

by Adam Robson & Carrie Hernandez

Dr. Margaret Beale Spencer is frustrated. Very frustrated. “I am so tired of reading about yet another gap,” she says. “Every week there’s a new gap.” The racial gap. The gender gap. The socioeconomic gap. The foster care gap...the list continues to grow.

Dr. Beale Spencer, the Marshall Field IV Professor of Urban Education and Professor of Life Course Development at the University of Chicago, has spent her career researching resiliency, identity, and competence formation in youth from preschool to young adulthood; and although she understands that all of us — no matter one’s race, ethnicity, gender, or class — represent some status of human vulnerability, she is also certain that the sources of these vulnerabilities cannot be isolated in a lab, but occur in contexts that are essential to understanding the nature of the vulnerability itself.

Reducing a given demographic to its “deficits” and attempting to remedy those deficits through one program or another is a common practice of educa-



Dr. Margaret Beale Spencer of the University of Chicago speaks to a group of HighScope educators on November 11, 2015.

tional reformers. This trend has perhaps been exacerbated by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), which not only raised awareness of the disparity between the educational outcomes of white students and minorities — it raised awareness of other achievement gaps as well. For Beale Spencer, this focus on gap outcomes is a problem. In part, that’s because that attention has been ineffective, having “led to more targeted interventions for different groups of students, but not [narrowing] most achievement gaps to an appreciable degree a decade after the law passed” (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center).

More to the point, says Beale Spencer, by focusing on the gaps, we’re

scrambling for answers to the wrong questions. “The real issue is not just counting the outcomes — the *what*. You can count the *what*. That’s easy arithmetic,” she says. But it’s not simply a matter of determining the educational outcomes of various demographics and applying a one-size-fits-all solution. “The calculus,” she says, “is the *how* and the *why*. If we understand the *how* and the *why*, then we’re able to design apropos programming wedges to intervene with those outcomes.”

A call for collaboration

It was this focus on the *how* and the *why* that brought Dr. Beale Spencer with Ypsilanti, Michigan to collaborate with HighScope staff, teachers, field consultants, and others in building a foundation for a professional learning community (PLC) dedicated to ensuring children’s long-term competence and general resiliency, and concerned with the direction of mainstream initiatives to address educational inequities. Funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the HighScope pilot PLC aims to answer “the right questions” — questions that remain

unasked because all too often, says Beale Spencer, mainstream efforts at reform have focused not on how an education gap came to be, but on the easy math required to demonstrate an assumption about the fact.

“A bias for those of us who are producers of science — one that is never acknowledged, never spoken of — is the bias about ‘the Other,’” she explains. “And when we place people in the position of ‘Other’, then the questions that are posed are questionable or inauthentic. The interpretations made of the data are questionable. And the strategies that are used are questionable; in fact, the remedies are inadequate for producing the desired outcomes.”

If, for example, the gap between black and white students is measured by standardized testing, the answer isn’t to throw more money at tutoring for students whose test scores neatly match researchers’ assumptions. That may be the most readily measurable approach, but it doesn’t address the underlying cause, or remedy the “gap,” because it assumes a deficit on the part of the student, and removes the all-important context from the calculus. Failing to acknowledge and account for the significance of context is the equivalent of assuming a toy is defective, without asking “In what way are there connection issues?” and “Who was playing with it last?”

A revolution of conscience

Dr. Beale Spencer advocates a different kind of science, a “science with a conscience” that recognizes our connectedness, our shared humanity. And so it transpired that the kickoff event held at the Ypsilanti Marriott on November 11th to “start the conversation” involved a dialogue largely about *how* to start the conversation.

“We’re going to figure it out together. In this movement to maximize our children’s development, we’re all in this together,” said HighScope President, Dr. Cheryl Polk. “This is a lifelong commitment.”

This commitment asks us to think differently about our children and our responsibilities to one another; it’s a change in “the way we do things around here” — what Beale Spencer calls a “revolution of conscience” — and it’s not just a personal change, or a structural

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change, but a cultural and collective one. This kind of profound collective change, according to Richard DuFour and Michael Fullan (2013), two recognized authorities on professional learning communities, “requires altering long-held assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that represent the norm” (DuFour & Fullan, p. 2).

So this commitment to building an authentic learning community — one focused on asking the *right* questions — concerns not just *for* whom we are doing this, but also *with* whom.

“If we don’t partner, then we don’t maximize best fit, and we are

Building authentic learning communities means acknowledging that everyone has vulnerabilities to some extent or another, and everyone needs support.



What is a PLC?

One trait common to the process of starting a PLC is confusion about what exactly a PLC is, and is not. Many teachers in the current educational climate have found themselves part of a nominal PLC, without any direction or indication of its purpose. Those loose affiliations tend to fizzle out fast. So too do top-down management



Professional learning communities (PLCs) create a process for system reform with the goal of achieving better results through quality implementation.

systems that lack the buy-in of the change agents within the system. It's important, then, at the beginning of the process, to establish just what a PLC is. DuFour and Fullan, authors of *Cultures Built to Last: Systemic PLCs at Work*, offer six characteristics of a professional learning community:

1. Shared mission (purpose), vision (clear direction), values (collective commitment), and goals (indicators, timelines, and targets), which are all focused on student learning
2. Collaborative culture with a focus on learning
3. Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality
4. Action orientation or "learning by doing"
5. Commitment to continuous improvement
6. Results orientation

(Cultures Built to Last: Systemic PLCs at Work, 2013, p. 14)

undermining our own selves and our own efforts," says Beale Spencer.

Given the responsibility that HighScope and other early childhood education organizations have to make good on their potential to effect positive

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change for those without a "seat at the table," Beale Spencer advocates for an "intellectual assertiveness," a demand on the part of agents of change to do whatever it takes to build authentic learning communities. Together, as the early childhood education community, we make decisions about "what we do, how we do it, and the questions that are asked." By collaborating, we maximize the impact we have with others who serve as the context of development and learning for our children. To do anything less, she insists, "should be considered a human rights violation."

Building an authentic learning community

So it begins with a mission. The purpose of HighScope's pilot professional learning community is to advance equity and excellence in education for the youngest learners of all cultural, linguistic, racial, and economic backgrounds. Field consultants in Seattle and Michigan will begin by looking at the kinds of supports their respective communities need. These supports will follow from asking the right questions: How can teachers harness their collective sense of responsibility to form a strong collaboration focused on student learning across the birth-to-grade-three continuum? How do issues of diversity implicitly and explicitly, inadvertently and intentionally,

shape and affect the educational context and teachers' mindsets, relationships, practices, and effectiveness?

Accomplishing the shared goals of the organization requires a leadership that empowers agents within the system to engage with others and use evidence strategically "to better meet the needs of individual students, to inform and improve individual and collective practice, and to strengthen the ability of the team to achieve its goals" (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 57). To do this, HighScope's pilot PLC relies on a bottom-up approach that will enable ongoing, field-embedded professional development for HighScope's field consultants who work directly with preschool and child care practitioners across the country as they learn to implement the HighScope early learning curriculum and assessment system.

By investing in the development of practitioners and coordinating with families, this pilot will break new ground in deeply understanding how diversity affects our children's educational context. Through participation in a professional learning community, field consultants can engage in "iterative cycles of inquiry" and reflective practices, or what Dr. Beale Spencer calls "a reanalysis and recritique of who we are and how we do what we claim we wish to do in support of kids." Only through this "state of self-critique" and reflection can we then apply the insights to bring about individual and institutional changes in professional practice that accord with principles of equity and excellence.

An authentic learning community maximizes the efforts and impact of those who create the context of our children's development.





One of the primary goals of the HighScope professional learning community is to use the insights of current research systematically to better meet the needs of individual students.

In essence, HighScope, through this pilot PLC, is establishing a culture of “many leaders who work *on* the system as well as *within* it” (DuFour & Fullan, p. 64). And that is “the right work” of the PLC process, as educators strategically “use evidence of student learning and not merely gather it.”

As the dialogue proceeds, as we find out what works and what does not, the culture that we establish in the process becomes organic, inseparable from the process itself. This cohesion of purpose and identification with the organization is what DuFour and Fullan call “systemness” — an essential component of all authentic learning communities (p. 18). It is this collective responsibility and identification that HighScope and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation aim to achieve — by asking the right questions, and strategically applying what is learned from those questions.

This strategic application of data is at the heart of Beale Spencer’s message too. “One of the critiques that people have leveled over the years in terms

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of the success of the Perry Preschool Project has been the expense,” she explains. “What happened here is that you demonstrated that you can make a difference — you can make a long-term

difference.” But, she argues, the debate that continues over whether the expense is worth the outcome proceeds from the wrong question.

Instead, Beale Spencer assumes variability within vulnerability in a given population — that is, though vulnerability may be typical of a group, not all members experience that same level of vulnerability, or experience it in the same way. Viewed from this perspective, could it be, she asks, that a more strategic application of the supports recommended by the Perry data would produce the same outcomes?

In other words, if we can provide quite significant supports for those who have a level of need and will use them, rather than generalizing across a population based on assumptions, the work we do will go that much further. Our efforts “could have even more impact on even more families and even more kids,” she reasons, “if we were more strategic — looking *within* the population, with the same amount of money. The suggested strategy acknowledges variations of available protective factors and supports evident even within the same family and most certainly within the same community.”

Honest assessment is the result of honest dialogue and asking the right — and often tough — questions. “Honest self-assessment is not easy. Indeed, it is often uncomfortable,” says Dr. Polk. “But with the support of a PLC, together with other dedicated early childhood professionals and families, we can continue to do the work HighScope has always done — improving lives through education.” ■

Reference

DuFour, R., & Fullan, M. (2013). *Cultures built to last: Systemic PLCs at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
 Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. (2011, July 7). Issues A-Z: Achievement Gap. *Education Week*. Retrieved November 23, 2015 from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap/>



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