

Protocols in Practice: It's Elementary! NSRF Work at the Bernice A. Ray Elementary School

Diana Watson, Deb Franzoni and Margaret Taylor, New Hampshire

The Ray School is located in Hanover, New Hampshire, a quintessentially New England town with white church steeples, a vibrant main street and the stately brick buildings of Dartmouth College campus. We have a student population in the elementary school of about 500. Education is a highly valued in this college community, and we are fortunate to have supportive families, administrators, and school board members. The philosophy of NSRF and CFG work has been embraced throughout the district to the point that membership in a CFG and structured peer coaching experiences are now contractually protected options of professional review. This year, the administrators in the district have dedicated five two-hour blocks of professional development time exclusively to CFG work. Hanover hosted the Principals' Council in July 2002, facilitated by Nancy Mohr.

Some years ago, the principal of our school went to Philadelphia to attend one of NSRF's annual conferences. He came back incredibly enthusiastic about something. So enthusiastic, in fact, that he spoke at great length about this incredible work he'd experienced, and how he hoped to incorporate it into our school culture. We, the staff, noted his passion about this thing, this work, but really did not understand at all what he was so excited about.

Then, in the school year 2000-2001, we got a chance to find out. About twelve staff members from our

District were trained as CFG coaches. By the end of our training, we were all imbued with the same passionate enthusiasm we had witnessed in our principal upon his return from the Philadelphia conference.

Since then, those of us trained have indeed continued the work. Each of us has applied what we learned in a slightly different way, all with significant results. Here are some reflections on what we are doing at the elementary school level:

Our principal, Bruce Williams, reports about one recent experience in which he was able to use the *Peeling the Onion* protocol to address a "particularly thorny issue" of special education. Bruce said, "The protocol uncovered several embedded assumptions that may not have even been consciously held. It also addressed the layers of complexity of the issue in a non-threatening way. It was especially helpful because

other people in the meeting were also trained coaches." He feels the level of understanding about CFG work and the use of protocols is increasing within the staff, and therefore he did not need to use precious time at the meeting to give an introduction to the philosophy behind the use of protocols, nor to garner support for its use. The work is becoming part of

our culture.

Deb Franzoni is a trained coach, and one of the physical education teachers at our school. She writes:

Two years ago, as an alternative to the traditional evaluative process (an administrator visiting our classrooms and writing an annual evaluation based on the visits); the "Specials" at our elementary school

formed a CFG.

Since the beginning we have had many memorable sessions. One of my personal favorites was a presentation of a piece of artwork created by a second-grade student. The art teacher placed the piece on the middle of the table and asked us to tell her what we saw. The art teacher does not like to critically judge student work at a young age, hoping to encourage the enthusiastic flow and growth of personal creativity, but she was wondering if, with this child's work, she should be more critical, since his looked so, well, unique, when placed beside the others' on the wall.

Using the *Collaborative Assessment Conference*, we set to work. She told us nothing about the assignment. After an hour (and we could have continued) the art teacher was amazed. The teachers at the table had figured out the assignment from the piece in front of them and had pointed out, throughout the many configurations on the paper, how the child had successfully achieved what the others in his class had, though differently.

To prepare the students for the assignment, the art teacher had read a story. She then explained that it was a custom in the time and place they were studying to draw events of the day onto plates. She asked the children to draw a sketch that reminded them of the story she had read, onto a shape of a plate. Instead of focusing on one or even a few details of the story, this child had thrown everything in his head onto the paper.

By the end of the session, the teacher realized that this child had indeed fulfilled the assignment, in fact overfilled it! What was exciting about this session was that not only did the art teacher come closer to learning how that child learns, but so did the rest of the Specials teachers, who also worked with him. By the end of the meeting, everyone had some accommodations in mind to help this child

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A Sense of Power

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facilitating these CFG seminars, I, with co-facilitators, have "trained" over 112 teachers, administrators, and school district personnel in groups of 8 to 26 participants. In each instance we have laughed, cried, gotten angry, thought deeply about our own practices and our impact on our students. For the most part the participants have had significant and positive experiences. Many report being rejuvenated by the opportunity to work with each other in collaborative ways. But often after a good experience with other teachers, after learning what a learning community is, after learning some protocols to look at student work, very little happens when they return to their urban classrooms. Instead, when I visit these schools I hear instances that translate to a breakdown in power and control. For example, when coaches return talking about a tone of decency and more security guards get hired, we have a misalignment. Similarly, when principals report having problems with teachers who have poor classroom management skills, more often than not, those issues are evidence that the students in those classrooms do not have an authentic voice. Those students are grabbing power in disruptive ways because they're not being offered a healthy alternative. Offering the teacher "management strategies without addressing the root cause is another example of a misalignment. How can we as educational improve-

ment coaches help teachers get at the issues of power and control that are aligned in nonproductive ways in their classrooms?

I have witnessed and heard about many courageous acts that have been performed in urban classroom and urban schools. I cannot abide by the thinking that teachers are so

seminars to have each adult examine his or her issues of power and control. Once the question is addressed, we can move from an awareness of how the use and abuse of power and control in urban classrooms undermines the education of poor urban students, to an understanding of how power and control need to be distributed in our classrooms so that

*"Don't do things to us; we'll rebel.
Don't do things for us; we'll complain.
Just do things with us,
for in working together, we all thrive."
-Ashely Dierenfeld, a student*

disempowered by the educational system that they, in turn, are unable to empower and engage their students.

I believe in order to engage students in learning that you have to give them voice in authentic ways. You have to engage them in the learning process through open and honest dialogue about issues of power and control. The challenge for me is to open this dialogue with my friends and colleagues at the center where I work and with my colleagues in the Coalition of Essential Schools and with my friends and colleagues in the National School Reform Faculty. The question we need to address is how we can use the transformative experiences adult educators receive in CFG

all of the stakeholders succeed. Finally, we need to have each educator articulate specific actions he or she can take in his or her classroom to distribute the power and control equitably so that the poor, ethnically oppressed students can gain a sense of their power in authentic and productive ways.

To paraphrase Toni Morrison, the ability on the part of an educator to distribute power in urban classrooms in equitable, intentional ways is either hopeless or a slow walk of trees. Although some days I have less patience than other days, I want to go with "a slow walk of trees."

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better express all his wonderful ideas in the different subject areas.

In the past three years we have tried everything, from looking at student work to placing dilemmas on the table. This year, we are organizing an integrated arts show that will involve all of us, working with three different grade levels, in the production and performance of a multi-media tumbling

show. Our goal is to develop a rubric that will guide us from start to finish, one that will ultimately help us to look carefully at our teaching and at our students' work.

The result of our work is simple: Focusing our energy on the goal of teaching and student learning has strengthened us as a group and as individual teachers.

Margaret Taylor teaches one of the school's seven combined kindergarten/first grade classes. She has held the role of grade-level team leader for several years. She writes: "One of the reasons I wanted to join the CFG training was to improve my skills as facilitator of a group of K/1 teachers. We had decided that we needed some leadership that would help us all meet mutual goals and all feel heard. The training focused me and taught me skills that ultimately guided me to being a facilitator, not a leader. Discussing and agreeing on a set of ground rules allowed everyone to feel part of the group and those guidelines became a concrete document we could all refer to. As I learned more from the training, it became clear that the "structure" of the group, having an agenda, listening to each other and making group decisions was moving us forward. The



protocols became useful in looking at children's work. In time, CFG work has filtered into professional evaluations and Critical Friends Groups with particular curriculum purposes. I am now finding that CFG work applies in courses I

am taking. The Looking at Student Work protocols have direct application to my work with Schools Attuned. Our CFG work has also moved our Science Curriculum along."

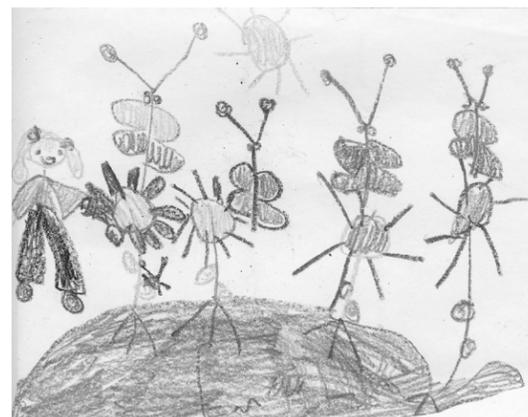
And then there's my own reflection. Last year, I had one of the most enriching experiences of my teaching career: peer coaching. Our school as a whole had just adopted *Mosaics of Thought* as a method through which to increase our students' reading comprehension skills. Using the book *Strategies That Work* as a guide, every teacher in the building set out to incorporate this approach into our reading instruction. Sherrie Greeley, the Reading Specialist spear-heading the initiative, was looking for an opportunity to see firsthand how this would work in the classroom. I was looking for a peer coaching experience; professional collaboration; a chance to really examine my teaching practice.

Sherrie and I designed this experience as our method of evaluation for the year, so there was an added layer of accountability. She and I met every Monday while the students were at recess, to plan our two peer coach-

ing lessons for the week. We met very briefly immediately before each lesson to pose a focus for the observation, then we had the lesson and met immediately afterward to debrief while the students were at lunch. Each teaching session was videotaped. We took turns in the roles of observer and teacher. The observer would take notes, but it was also very instructive (and often amusing) to watch the video.

Each Monday during our planning session, we would review the debrief discussion notes to incorporate what we had learned about the children's learning. The planning was dynamic and student-centered. The actual teaching of the lesson became a "meta-teaching" experience because we were looking through the lens of a learner. Sherrie and I both felt this was a truly beneficial experience. We learned a lot about our own teaching strengths and areas where we need growth.

The students were fascinated by this process, and we were deliberately



By Samantha, age 5

transparent about what we were doing together. It may sound corny-but the students loved that they were teaching us how to teach better.

And isn't better teaching really what this work is all about? ■

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When I accepted the invitation to travel to Seattle last June to take on the role of "Process Observer" for the CES NW Critical Friends Groups Coaches Seminar, I really didn't understand fully what I had agreed to do.

It turned out that I had stumbled into one of the most profound learning opportunities of my experience with CFG work. The role of Process Observer, a relatively new form of Peer Observation, went far beyond my expectations. Not only did I observe and report my observations to the Seattle facilitators; I also learned a great deal about giving feedback, about maintaining objectivity by basing interpretations on the data observed, and about myself as a facilitator.

Overview of the Sessions

When John D'Anieri and I arrived in Seattle to act as process observers, we had relatively little definition of our actual role. Jill Hudson, in an e-mail a few days before we arrived, defined the task as:

"Basically, we are looking for you to see our entire seminar and look to see if we are really getting across the following ideas: improving student learning, a professional learning community, inquiry, reflection, Coalition of Essential Schools' 10 Common Principles, collaboration tools, and tools for looking at evidence of practice."

When John and I met the other members of the seminar facilitation team, they refined their feedback needs by providing the following focus questions:

- How do we meet the different levels of learners in our seminar?
- How are the transitions between exercises? Are they smooth? Connected? Do they make sense?
- Timing and Pace: Does it feel rushed? Does one activity need more time than another? Are all activities

necessary? Should anything be cut?

- What is the balance between beliefs, functions, and structures?

We used the *Observer as Learner* protocol that first day, and we agreed that the feedback at the end of the day would be mostly warm and centered on the focus questions the group had provided.

Starting on the second day, John continued to work with the Beginning Coaches team for the duration of their four-day seminar, while I worked with the Continuing Coaches Seminar, which started its three-day session on Wednesday. At the end of each day, both teams debriefed for an hour among themselves, after which we each provided 15-20 minutes of warm feedback, cool feedback, and questions for the facilitators to think about. They met at 7:00 each morning to incorporate any changes or new ideas based on the previous days' debrief. Our roles, at the request of the members of the facilitation teams, evolved into something like a "coach of coaches" role. During the course of the next few days, we met with each of the individual facilitators at least once to give feedback on specific aspects of their facilitation, directed by their individual focus questions.

Learning – Some Anticipated and Some Surprising

When I agreed to spend four days in Seattle, I certainly anticipated learning some new approaches that I might be able to incorporate into the Coaches Seminars that I coordinate for the UCLA School Management Program in Southern California. I also expected that I would improve my skills at providing feedback. Those goals were certainly met – and then some!

I honed my skills at giving "edible feedback" – feedback that is nourishing (it helps the recipient to grow) and is easy to swallow (the recipient doesn't have to fight to take it in). I learned on Day One the value of sticking with warm feedback until the recipient actu-

ally asks for cool feedback and probing questions. The trust that we began to develop once the facilitation team heard positive feedback – backed up by (continued on page 18)

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- Daniel Baron, Co-Director NSRF