Protocols in Practice– Whose Voice?
Kim Feicke, Washington

It was Day Two of a CFG training and the only African-American participant had been taking more airtime than others, partially to better explain her cultural perspective. Her facilitator referred to a norm around equity of airtime to bring this to her attention. "Oh, she responded, "I thought that since I'm the only person of color in the room it meant you needed to hear from me more often!" The group had a short discussion about the differences between equitable and equal and moved on.

Later in the training, this same participant wondered aloud if these protocols weren't geared towards white ways of interacting, since people of color don't use such structured dialogue. It wasn't the first or last time I've heard that question. "No, no," our white participants always say, "it's weird for us too." And it is. Many of us have found that there is a natural continuum in learning the protocols: from feeling stifled and uncomfortable to valuing and embracing the structures. The protocols force us to think in new ways – breaking us out of our assumptions and our everyday practice of telling people what they should or shouldn't be doing.

And while this is true, the question still lingers in my mind. When white people come to the training and feel uncomfortable within these same structures, I've never heard them try and attribute it to another racial culture. If people of color often need to adjust the way they speak and act in dominant (white) culture settings, it seems like an easy leap to connect one more uncomfortable form of dialoguing to that same source. But what if there is something deeper in how the protocols are structured that helps support dominant culture thinking and keeps us from hearing a truly diverse set of perspectives? What if the protocols really do reflect and promote a dominant culture perspective?

I realize that many of my colleagues of color have had to develop keener ears and eyes to respond to and survive the discrimination that lies at the center of many of their experiences. As a person in a position of more privilege, I don't have to pay nearly as much attention to the difference between what people say and what they do. And I feel pretty confident that when I speak I will be heard.

I'm learning that when my colleagues of color sit in protocols with me, they are listening not only to the things that are being said, but to the things that are not being said and those silences often ring louder than the words. More and more, as I work

Hi Kim,

Thank you for gathering your thoughts on paper for this important piece. Even in reading your piece again, I found my chest tighten up a bit and a warmth sweep over me. Every time I relive that experience it makes me feel my "otherness" in the room and in the work. It is not a good feeling. It is a shameful feeling. The feeling makes me acutely aware that I have been tricked, once again, into thinking and acting as if my presence means anything when white people are "conducting their business" in educating kids – mainly poor kids, but mostly kids of color. What does it mean for educators of color in the room and at the table with their privileged sisters and brothers?

As I remember the event, I think what really embarrassed - and yes, hurt me was that I went to the CFG training with an open heart. The teachers at my table were also open-hearted – asking me questions and engaging in dialogue with me both personally and professionally. I felt pretty comfortable in responding to the questions and comments. In other words, I felt that the interactions at the table were positive and productive. My identity as a black educator was intact - and in fact honored by their questions, responses, and demeanor. I think one of the teachers was Mexican-American, so she would respond to questions from her cultural perspective, as well.

I was aware that I was the only black person in the room, but that did not curb my enthusiasm or curiosity about the CFG training. Since all the white educators were convinced that the CFG process was the best thing since sliced bread, I felt I needed to find out what they knew so I would be "down with the program," too. So I let my guard down and was prepared to be as open to learning as I could be. So imagine my surprise and dissonance when the facilitator warned me to curb my "airtime" in the training! I felt that I didn't need to be there if I was not completely

in cross-difference groupings, I am finding that our protocols are designed to support and build on what is being said, and that we don't create space to hear what's not said.

So when my colleagues of color speak to the silences that they hear, it begins to shift my thinking about what I'm hearing (missing?). I feel that I am slowly building my capacity to see and hear things that the lens of my white privilege has prevented me from seeing/hearing for most of my life. This shift makes me wonder whose voices we hear and prioritize in our protocols and whose voices we might be silencing.

I am now struggling with how to use our protocols to hear and respond to what's not being said and ensure we're focusing on the issues and strategies that matter most to our struggling students. When we don't attend to what's not being said, I find that too often white adults like me leave the table feeling good and yet nothing substantial has changed for kids. There's often a tension between where adults are willing and ready to go and where our students need us to go. I know that I need to better understand that tension in order to engage it, if I am truly going to implement the NSRF mission in my work. I had a recent experience that exemplified this for me.

Doing an Issaquah protocol in a recent training, a vice principal brought this question to the table: *How do I motivate my teachers to take attendance consistently?* In the clarifying questions, it became clear she needed better attendance records so she could document who was skipping and give them consequences as a way to reduce skipping, which was chronic at the school.

In the probing questions, a couple of us asked questions like "Why do you think kids are skipping?" and "Do you see any connection between what's going on in the classroom and who skips?" It was evident from her answers that she was not ready or willing to go in the direction of these questions. She needed strategies to motivate teachers. That's what she asked for and that's what she responded to in the questions and feedback.

I struggled with this because my experience in schools tells me that too often we push kids out of classes by using teaching strategies, curricula and subtle behaviors that offend and don't meet the needs of many of our student populations. By allowing this vice principal to not address a potential underlying issue, I felt I was now complicit in supporting a school curriculum that potentially pushes

transparent and open to learning the process. I needed to ask questions and mediate the answers so that I could understand and use the process as part of my work toolkit. Needless to say, being openly rebuked for "talking too much" in my group on the first day of CFG training closed the door to my interest in using "the process" as part of my professional practice. I left the training, and didn't go back. I was through, finished, and cynical about how CFGs could ever positively impact my learning or that of my community.

As an experienced educator, I knew that my community would not sit still for a process that did not listen, hear, or change to suit the needs of the players. It was only through a whole year of serious conversations with my personal critical friends that I regained the desire to revisit CFG training. I traveled over two hundred miles to attend a week long NSRF CFG training. Again, I was the only black person in the group. I still smarted from the sting of "airtime" over "why?" questions. I still wanted to go deeper – and there was nobody there to talk that over with. I completed the task, got the certificate, and went back to my personal critical friends to debrief and unpack my experience.

So you see, I will always relive that moment as part of my critical friends training experience to make sure that that is not what I replicate in my practice, but what I use as a transformation tool. Our work should be about transforming education, not replicating it!

- Lynda

kids out of classrooms and then punishes them for not being there. Because I followed the protocol and responded to the focus question and the adult need, I supported her in continuing her practice of recording who was in the room without figuring out why they were or weren't in the room. For whom did I create a powerful learning experience?

What has begun to help me in situations like the one above is working with a revised tool for framing dilemmas (see protocol on our website). The tool supports participants in fram- *(continued page 18)*

a combination of case studies and self-reflections. The benefits of professional cases include the extension of the profession's knowledge base by recognizing the value of the practitioner's knowledge, connecting practitioner knowledge with formal research, supporting transitions in responsibility that may facilitate smooth leadership succession, easing communication among various school constituencies, and becoming a basis for professional development and learning. Such professional case studies provide real-world examples for educational programs as well as practicing principals, affording both groups the means to study practices and develop strategies to address daily challenges. Finally, the authors explore the knowledge that individual principals bring to their school. They examine the important knowledge for principals, how principal candidates can structure their developing knowledge, suggest performance tasks that support the development of structured knowledge, and propose contexts to help principal candidates use their knowledge.

Bellamy, Fulmer, Murphy, and Muth provide a fresh approach to rethinking the design of school leadership practices while offering valuable insights and ideas for analysis and reflection for principal leadership. The four leadership domains and the Framework for School Leadership Accomplishments challenge the principal to establish measurable goals and identify desired results that improve student learning. These domains provide a means for principals to embrace the core tenets of critical friends groups, namely a press for achievement, adaptive practice, and improved student learning. Indeed, the authors' call for an "annual case [study] of school leadership" (p. 139) in support of continuous learning provides a vehicle for principals and their case teams' to address the mission of the NSRF by reflecting on their practice and working collaboratively to create powerful learning experiences that improve student learning. This book is a must-read for anyone open to having their assumptions about effective school leadership challenged! ∎

"Principal Accomplishments: How School Leaders Succeed," G. Thomas Bellamy, Connie L. Fulmer, Michael J. Murphy, Rodney Muth Teachers College Press, © 2007

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ing their dilemma in a way that ensures that the focusing question is focused around what's going to make the greatest difference for students with the greatest needs. It helps to surface some of the assumptions we bring into the work.

This vice principal left with great ideas for getting better attendance records, but I would argue that it didn't create more powerful learning experiences for students. Our mission states that our end goal is to "create and support powerful learning experiences for **everyone**." As practitioners and as an organization, I think we have barely dipped our toes into unpacking what our mission statement really means and what it looks like in action.

CFG work has changed the lives and practice of many educators, including myself, but the elephant in this room is that most of us doing the work are white. If this work, as we're currently doing it, really empowered all voices, wouldn't we see more faces of color at our national meetings? Wouldn't we see stronger data around equitable student outcomes connected to our work?

What do we need to do to think differently about our work in the future as we shift our thinking and our structures to better engage the "everyone" in our mission statement? I'm left with the conviction that we still need protocols to support our collaborative work across difference. However, my conviction is now tempered by an awareness that protocols are guidelines that must be revised, interrupted and sometimes scrapped, in the moment, if the process is not serving the needs of our most underserved students. I'm talking about stepping into the "zone" of dissonance and staying there because we know we can't really grow until we are disturbed and uncomfortable enough to change our practice. ∎

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Visit our website at www.nsrfharmony.org/connections.html to download Kim Feicke's Framing Dilemmas tool as cited in this article.