Classroom "Family Meetings" use NSRF Protocols to Practice Leadership, Civil Discourse, Democracy

By Kathy Boone, CFG Coach in Indiana, kathylboone@hotmail.com

Kathy Boone has been a teacher at Harmony School in Bloomington, IN, for nearly 20 years, with most of her time in this 5th-6th grade classroom. Using NSRF protocols and activities enriches her and her students' learning every year. She says she appreciates working within a multiage classroom within this preK-12 school because it allows her and her co-teachers the opportunity to be "the first level of trusted adults" beyond a student's family, and she honors those deep connections.

Kathy invites your questions or comments at kathylboone@hotmail.com

Editor's Note: This article is one excerpt from a longer article about a major life-skills curriculum revision due to a particularly challenging year in a 5th-6th grade classroom. Another excerpt was printed in the January 2014 issue of Connections.

Family Meeting (structured discussion for community-building and decision-making facilitated by students) stands out as a founding pillar of Harmony School. Harmony tradition strongly encourages the scheduling of regular Family Meetings as an opportunity for students and educators to connect as a community and empower student voice.

This venue provides students the age-appropriate opportunity to practice democracy, develop leadership, balance the voices heard within discussions, and make significant decisions about school policy and course of study. Through my various roles in many different programs at our school over the last twenty years, many memories of Family Meetings stand out as some of the most powerful moments I've experienced as an educator.

In the past several years, however, it seems our 5th & 6th grade Family Meetings languished. Less and less often did students bring provocative issues to the agenda, and more and more, Family Meeting evolved into simply a morning business meeting. The voices of our majority felt dismissed and subordinated by only a few charismatic, dominant individuals who were erroneously perceived by the group as harbingers of the norm.

Given the magnitude of issues we were dealing with in our class last year (as we shared in the January issue of ***Connections***), my co-teacher and I reflected on how to inspire student leadership and advocacy among our masses. How could we bring out the values and ideas and needs of the silent bystanders? Through generous use of NSRF protocols, we feel our Family Meetings have been revolutionized. Our objective was to empower bystanders to become active participants in our democratic process, and it has, by and large, been realized.

Never have I experienced such profound learning experience and examples of peaceful civil discourse, student leadership, and democracy in education as this year once we purposefully put NSRF Protocols, primarily Chalk Talk and Fishbowl, to work in Family Meetings.

Protocols allow us to practice facilitation skills, to hear all the voices in the group and practice civil discourse, to bring up sensitive issues, to create plans of action and agreements, and arrive collaboratively at decisions.

We began the year utilizing Chalk Talk, arriving at our Agreements, which students wrote up and posted in the classroom. They refer to it with each other from time to time.

Weeks later, I was stunned at the power of student voice and respect and civil discourse between the kids while using the Fishbowl Protocol. Teachers had previously modeled the Fishbowl Protocol, rather transparently, when we talked specifically about Civil Discourse and Nonviolent Communication. Our modeling, a discussion of a lighter issue,

served as a foundation for subsequent, more emotional issues. I feel it is important to practice the protocols a few times before tackling weightier issues.

Students chose the Fishbowl as a vehicle to discuss a proposal my co-teacher and I had been resisting: to allow music listening through headphones during independent work time. I think our classmates would agree that individual students became fully invested in the process and now are unlikely to transgress the new policy derived through that rather involved process. The experience was transformative for me, as I truly believe we deeply heard each other's concerns.

Even when a protocol spins out of control under student facilitation, ultimately we believe there is great potential for the intended lesson to internalize through higher order thinking skills as students experience the process.

Later, we experienced a messier and more tense (but not necessarily less effective or transformative) Fishbowl, around the problem with students talking out of turn. When the "fish" were all students and we teachers were on the outside of the "bowl" observing, the students agreed that their 'best' conversations were spontaneous and that turn-taking limited their creative thought. At that point they began disregarding the rules of order (and the protocol), 'modeling' their point to teachers. Chaos ensued… the student facilitator grew angry, several students left the circle in tears, and several dominant personalities fell into parallel heated arguments. Students with diverse neurological landscapes and certain sensitivities left the room.

After teachers redirected students back to the original Fishbowl Protocol process with the student facilitator, the children arrived at the conclusion on their own that it is probably best to follow basic rules of collegial discussion and turn taking in order to hear everyone's voices and lessen stress. We heard mindfulness training in their conversation (see previous article in January issue of Connections), as several of them described how their bodies became tense when the previous conversation had grown out of control. I'll admit our impulsive little group still tends to talk out of turn when excited about a topic, but we've clearly evolved to a more respectful level of deep listening and turn-taking. The process helped us to develop a shared rhetoric for disagreement and conduits for discussion where we can peacefully agree to disagree.

Even when a protocol spins out of control under student facilitation, ultimately we believe there is great potential for the intended lesson to internalize through higher order thinking skills as students experience the process. Sometimes learning and stretching our boundaries feels a little uncomfortable, doesn't it? NSRF protocols have certainly left their legacy, as our 5th & 6th Grade Family Meeting is surely forever transformed for the better.

Many scientific studies online cite mindfulness techniques like meditation,

mindful breathing, and yoga improve self-awareness, decrease stress, and help us live more peacefully within our own lives and as a community.

And through it all, I can say so far it's one of my favorite and most memorable years as an educator. Sometimes it is messy, because personal growth is difficult, and we've all grown through the experience. Yet on a daily basis we see friendship groups expanding, people speaking up for justice, supporting those with special needs, advocacy for the minority view, among other positive effects. We feel the positivity and human kindness in our days. It's not perfect, we are dealing with humans and change takes time, yet I think I can speak for the group that we are having a great year.

While I do not claim that using protocols in the classroom was the sole effect of such monumental change in our class from one year to the next, I do profess that mindful use of protocols in the classroom drastically improves student engagement, adds breadth and depth to student learning, and inspires students and adults.

I would welcome opportunities to discuss our approach to community building 'mindfully,' so please email me with your comments or questions. Ultimately, I hope our work as educators will help all of us grow as individuals, as a community, and ultimately help make the world a more just and peaceful place.

So far it's one of my favorite and most memorable years as an educator. Sometimes it is messy, because personal growth is difficult, and we've all grown through the experience.