Shanghai American School

Julie Lindsay, China

In August 2006, I arrived at Shanghai American School wondering what kind of community I'd find. My husband and I have been teaching overseas for thirteen years, at five different schools in Asia and the Middle East, and in that time many of our friends and family at home have asked us how we do it. How do we pack up our belongings and move with our two children to jobs, cities, and countries entirely new to us, where we don't know the language and we can't read the signs? A job at an international school, however, is much more than a hundred and eighty days of teaching and a check every month. When you take a job overseas, someone meets you at the airport and takes you to where you will sleep that night. Someone shows you where to buy bread and milk and toasters and televisions. As you start your new job you meet other teachers, some of whom are new, like you, and some of whom have been around for years. You swap stories with the former, and take advice from the latter. You go out for dinner, and you go shopping. You make friends, and with any luck your kids do too. You enter a community.

International school teaching has its material perks—tax free incomes, low cost daily living, and lots of opportunity to travel—but the best overseas posts, I think, are defined not by the salary package or living standards, but by the warmth of the community. International school teachers will often identify as their favorite posts the time they spent in the most difficult circumstances, in developing countries or areas of conflict, precisely because the difficulties of day to day life brought people together. It was immediately clear that day to day life in Shanghai was going to be comfortable—our apartment complex is like a resort hotel—but as we went through the orientation week activities with the other eighty or so new hires we quickly found other families to bond with. Shanghai American School, however, is China's largest international school, and the largest school Andrew and I had ever worked in. SAS offers a core American curriculum to about 3,000 students on two campuses. Our student population comes from over 40 countries, with the majority being of Asian descent. The school offers an exemplary college preparatory program at the high school level, and an incredibly diverse range of courses and extra-curricular opportunities. The two campuses are divided by the Huangpu River, winding through the center of Shanghai, and a sea of traffic congestion. So, as I accustomed myself to this setting, I wondered where individual teachers found support, and how they engaged in collaboration. How did they work together to provide learning experiences for kids? Would the community inside the school be as easy to fit into as the one outside seemed to be?

Sepi Johnson, Julie Lindsay and Frances Hensley

A couple of months later, I was still knee-deep in transition, getting settled in at home and trying to make connections for collaboration both in my grade level team and in the sprawling elementary faculty. My classroom was on the first level of the elementary school and it took me months to see the second level and understand where the grade 4 and 5 classrooms were located. There are about 70 teachers in my division and my life in the initial stages focused on the six members of my grade level team. It was clear that there were many exceptional and talented teachers in the organization, but there just didn't seem to be enough systems in place to allow teachers to take time to plan, collaborate, and grow together.

It was then that I found an email in my inbox announcing an opportunity for teachers to join CFG training with Dr. Frances Hensley, a consultant from the University of Georgia and a member of National School Reform Faculty. As I read the mission statement of the NSRF for the first time I thought about other schools I had taught in, schools where I had felt the essential support of community that the mission statement described, and about how that support permeated all facets of my life as a faculty member. The brief description of the CFG training sparked a hope that our large faculty could begin to find connections that could bring teachers together in meaningful ways.

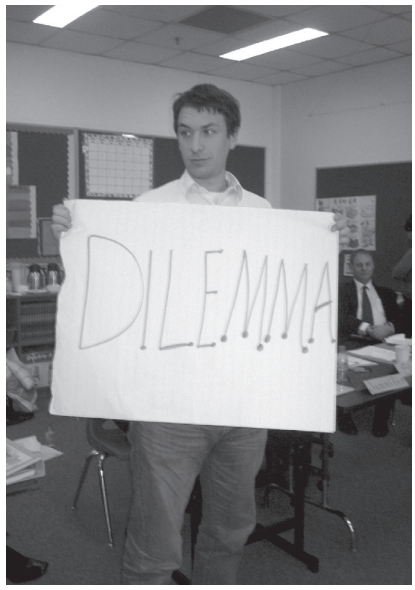
On the first morning of our training the school superintendent took some time out from his busy schedule to join our meeting. He told us the story of how he had heard about CFGs in the US *(continued on page 14)*

and had been so impressed that he traveled to small town Georgia to meet with our facilitator. He said that, to his mind, the introduction of CFGs across our organization was a key to the success of our teachers and community. He also admitted that the empowerment of teachers could be scary for administrators, but he said he was willing to give it a try.

On that note, we started our CFG training with a cross-division group from the two campuses. As in any overseas setting, we had a wide variety of teachers in terms of experience, language, culture, and roles. Over those initial three days, what we came to call "The October Cohort" grew to understand CFG protocols as key in building relationships that foster trust and support among teachers. Every person in the group left feeling the warmth of their SAS community and the potential that CFG could create networks around the school and in their professional lives. Those of us who had undertaken the training started our own CFGs in our divisions and teams, and found that, slowly, administrators were beginning to understand the power of the protocols that were being used in these groups. Though the groups represented a small number of our faculty, the administration persisted with more training workshops and kept bringing Frances from Georgia to keep the CFG ball rolling. Mid year, our cohort completed its training and by the June of 2007, we had CFGs operating at some level in all divisions and were preparing to offer a week of training at the end of the school year.

So now, a year and a half later, what is the status of CFGs in our school? As the 07-08 academic year rolls full steam ahead, we find ourselves facing an obstacle that all schools struggle with: time. CFGs are only one of a number of school wide initiatives currently being implemented. We are in the middle of an accreditation process that involves numerous meetings outside of our regular commitments, and in a school as dynamic as our in terms of extra-curricular activities, coaching, and clubs, teachers are struggling to find time to honor even a monthly commitment to CFGs. Though many people have expressed a keen and sincere interest in the groups, the fact is that the groups we started last year are meeting less and less. Nonetheless, I feel that CFGs have changed the SAS community in very powerful ways.

One of the most obvious changes has been the opportunity for expatriate teachers to get a glimpse of the professional lives of our Chinese colleagues. The great success of the June cohort was that Chinese teachers numbered more than half of the group. Here, I had the chance to see past the language and cultural barriers that often separate expat and host country teachers. As facilitators and participants, we were thrilled to spend the week learning so much about the Chinese language program, their professional dilemmas, teaching and assessments strategies, and their lives as the host country teachers in an American school. The power of the protocols and their systematic inclusion of all participants provided us with a view of the Chinese teacher's professional lives that we would not be exposed to in other contexts; we got to see what their lives as teachers in this large American organization was really like. The week ended with feelings of elation, possibility, and cross-cultural connections as we said our goodbyes for the summer.



A less obvious change, but one that I think has far reaching potential, has been a broad based effort by the administration to incorporate CFG protocols into the day to day running of the school. When the new teachers arrived in August, for example, they were divided into groups of 8-10, each with a CFG trained leader. These "mentor groups" had regular meetings throughout the orientation process, and at each meeting the leaders used the protocols to help move new people through important school wide documents, have text discussions, and provide practical support for transition. Most importantly, these mentor groups provided a friendly place to go when dealing with the rigors of adjusting to a new and challenging work environment. Participants were known to put aside other meetings and push past first

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Winter Meeting Wrap-Up

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Reflection quotes:

Warm

- Our facilitators did an excellent job of meeting all needs of our group.
- Incredible! This was an unbelievably relevant and productive conference.
- Thank you for bringing in Gloria Merriex. She was quite an inspiration. What an amazing "giver" she is.
- We worked together more deeply than any other group I have ever been a part of!
- I plan to do this work at my school. I think this is a great way to look at and learn from student work.

Cool

- I would like more "nuts and bolts" information/resources about how to implement SLCs within different school settings.
- I was disappointed in the facilitation of my Home Group. It felt like the main facilitator was teaching us. The focus seemed to be on acting as a CFG rather than on deepening any aspect of our facilitation. Not much processing – and even sometimes, no debrief.
- As far as I could tell issues of equity were not part of the ongoing conversation.
- Time was rushed but meaningful.
- I brought student work and was disappointed I did not get to present.

Instead, those of us who remained met to debrief the meting and discuss plans for the next Winter Meeting.

The 2009 Winter Meeting, which will be our lucky 13, will be held in Texas, where we will be hosted by no fewer than three NSRF Centers of Activity- Houston A+ Challenge, The Urban Forum for Leadership and Learning/Houston Independent School District, and San Antonio NSRF Center at Trinity University. We look forward to seeing you all again next January! ■

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For more Winter Meeting follow-up, including evaluation results and please visit our website, www.nsrfharmony.org.

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year fatigue to be with their groups. Similarly, this fall the school superintendent proposed a program based on CFG protocols for teacher leaders. This developed into our TFT (Teacher Facilitator Training) program. The TFT was designed to provide two to three day training for all teacher leaders to become facilitators of CFG protocols for all school meetings and collaboration on every team across the school. The intent of this program was to initiate a kind of systemic CFG presence across the school to provide equity, voice, and effectiveness in meetings at every level.

I cannot help but be disappointed that the essential work of teachers sharing their teaching practices and strategies in the context of comfortable community circles is not moving forward as quickly as I would like. I am encouraged, however, by the positive reactions of many of my colleagues as they are exposed to the protocols in areas like full faculty meetings, key accreditation committees involving parents, admin, and teachers, as well as developing programs like teacher assistant training, parent education groups, and high school student associations. That's not to say that we have found no resistance to the use of protocols, but what began as an October cohort of 15 participants is moving into a scope of acceptance and use across an organization of hundreds. Indeed, as we get ready to go back to school after the Chinese New Year break, I feel that, by and large, the majority of teachers in this faculty of about 300 are feeling the community building power of the conversations that CFG protocols bring to their professional lives. ■

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13th Annual
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Houston, Texas
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for more information, visit:
www.nsrfharmony.org/
wintermeeting.html