T he Ray School is located in Hanover, New Hampshire, a quintessential New England town with white church steeples, a vibrant main street and the stately brick buildings of Dartmouth College campus. Our school is home to a student population in the elementary school of about 500. Education is a highly valued in the Hanover 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 Mehr.

Some years ago, the principal of our school went to a Philadelphia conference 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.

This 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 continued the work. Each of 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 have not have 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 precision tools 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 continuing 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 of art in 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. One of 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 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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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 bear 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 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 improvement 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 classrooms and urban schools. I cannot abide by the thinking that teachers are so disempowered by the educational system that they, in turn, are unable to empower and engage their students.

I believe in order to ensure 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 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 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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“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.”

- Ashley Dierenfeld, a student

The National School Reform Faculty
goals in mind. We have committed a great deal of time to this effort. For us, it has meant a shift from thinking about not only the purpose of the gathering, but also the processes to be used. It has meant a shift from a passive staff being addressed by the principal, to meetings that encourage conversation and participation by all present. Purposeful planning involves grappling with many ideas, the first of which is being clear about the purpose of everything we do. The questions: Why are we doing this? What is the purpose? If the purpose is to create thoughtful and meaningful conversations, do we have structures that allow for conversation in which people feel respected, trusted, and have chances for their voices to be heard?

We have recently discovered the power of meeting together in a circle. It involves sitting together in a circle without anything in the middle – including a table – that would interfere with the flow of conversation. A circle enables us to be totally self-conscious and aware of what we are saying and how we present ourselves to others in the group. A circle promotes community with the power distributed among all participants. It supports the norms of listening, respect, and trust. No one can hide in the back of a circle. Christina Baldwin, in her book Calling The Circle describes it this way: “A circle is not just a meeting with the chairs rearranged. A circle is a way of doing things differently than we have been accustomed to. A circle is a return to our original form of community as well as a leap forward in our community as well as a leap forward in the use of the circle in our faculty, community as well as a leap forward in the community, as well as a leap forward in the way of doing things differently than we have been accustomed to.”

A Sense of Power
Camilla Greene, New Jersey

I n all of my years of experience as a high school and middle school teacher and as a school improvement activist there has always been a disconnect between the educational practices, i.e., “all kids can learn,” “No Child Left Behind,” “Students at the center,” “Kids First” and what students in urban schools and classrooms across the country actually experience. In a videoconference (Ohio, October 22, 2002), Joe McDonald spoke about the University Neighborhood School located in the Lower East Side of New York City. Joe said that the teachers in this small school wanted to prepare the economically poor students at the school with five keys. These five keys would enable all students, regardless of their ethnicity or economic standing, to be successful in college. The five keys are:

1. A sense of power
2. A sense of purpose
3. A sense of quality
4. A sense of progress
5. A sense of community.

These keys were to be understood and practiced by students and adults in this school in their relationships, their work, and in their writing. The first key, in particular, has captured my thinking about our children and our work. Ted Sizer talks about the fault line between theory and practice. For me the fault line is between issues of power and control and how those issues are played out in urban schools. For many years I have been wondering how educators, particularly those in urban areas want to instill a sense of power in their students? With all of the research I have done, I wonder how many participants have the will to share power with the poor children, the children of color, and the children who do not reside in the hearts and minds of the mainstream.

My experiences in urban schools all over the country lead me to believe that not enough teachers want to empower students. Kids instilled with a sense of power buy in to challenging, academic work. Kids instilled with a sense of power identify their own issues, read to learn how to address those issues in nonviolent ways, and act to make their immediate environments places where all can thrive. Kids instilled with a sense of power act in kind ways toward each other. Kids instilled with a sense of power help each other succeed. Kids instilled with a sense of power respect adults and engage in open and honest dialogue with them.

Assuming that most teachers are unaware of the dynamics of power and control in their educational settings, how can we raise the issue of power and control without alienating educators and limiting chances for change to occur? I am wondering why we in the National School Reform Faculty have not raised the bar in our CFG work to include awareness of, understanding of, and actions to address the issues of power and control as they impact millions of students and teachers in urban, rural and poor areas.

I am well aware of the hard work we have been doing to more clearly and intentionally address and act on issues of equity. Most of us have, in one fashion or another, incorporated discussions of equity into our CFG seminars. We as a group have begun to examine our own equity issues. And we are thoughtfully pursuing an aggressive program to confront issues whenever we encounter them. But our work with equity cannot stop short of addressing issues of power and control.

I have been facilitating CFG seminars in a variety of urban settings for many years. Currently I am a school coach and coordinator of CFG training at the Center for Effective School Practices at Rutgers University in New Jersey. In the year that I have been...