

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

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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

(continued on page 14)

A Sense of Power (continued from page 5)

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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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 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 become accustomed to. A circle is a return to our original form of community as well as a leap forward to create a new form of community.” The use of the circle in our faculty meetings promotes thoughtful conversation. In parent meetings, it helps us resolve conflicts. In our decision-making committees, we use the circle to honor the voice of staff, students and parents. The most rewarding feedback that we have received after trainings we have done with other schools is learning that other school faculties are



beginning to meet in a circle and the positive-difference it has made in promoting conversations.

Other processes we have used effectively to promote conversation are the structures and tools we have learned from our Critical Friends experiences. Protocols provide agreed-upon guidelines for a conversation and it is the existence of this structure – which everyone has agreed to – that permits a certain kind of conversation to occur, often the kind that people are not in the habit of having.

In your school setting, what are the ways that you could use protocols beyond critical friends meetings to begin to develop a culture of conversation?

At Steamboat Springs, we are beginning to see progress in how we work together, learn together, and work with students. Meaningful conversations are at the heart of our continuous efforts to improve our school. Are conversations enough to improve schools? Margaret J. Wheatley, in her book *Turning to One Another*, answers it best: “To advocate human conversation as the means to restore hope to the future is as simple as I can get. But I’ve seen that there is no more powerful way to initiate significant change than to convene a conversation. When a community of people discovers that they share a concern, change begins. There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about.”

Dave Schmid and Cindy Gay both work at Steamboat Springs High School in Colorado. Dave is the principal and Cindy is a science teacher and the coordinator of staff development and curriculum development. Together they have been training school staffs and administrators across the state on how to use CFGs to promote conversations. You can reach Dave at dschmid@sssd.k12.co.us and Cindy at cgay@sssd.k12.co.us.

Christina Baldwin, *Calling The Circle, The First And Future Culture* (New York: Bantam Books 1998)

Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage To Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers 1998)

Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning To One Another* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2002)

CFG Snapshot

(continued from page 4)

- What is it (the item)?
- What inspired it (What made you come up with the idea)?
- Why do you think it works?
- What are the next steps (revisions or adding on to it)?

This provided a forum for everyone to share a success and to reflect on common traits of teaching that seems to work. Though we didn’t get through everyone’s presentations we all got a lot of food for thought. At the end of the meeting we agreed that we would all try to bring something in as a focus point for a full protocol in the course of the school year.

All in all the group is doing well and seems to be developing a sense of mutual trust and reflection.

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In 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 mantras, 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 provide 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 used 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 CFG training I am doing, 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

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

*"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."
-Mahatma Gandhi*

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

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 inequities wherever 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

(continued on page 19)