Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty
Winter 2003

Protocols in Practice: It’s Elementary!
NSRF Work at the Bernice A. Ray Elementary School
Diana Watson, Deb Franzoni and Margaret Taylor, New Hampshire

The Ray School is located in Hanover, New Hampshire, a quaint New England town with white church steeples, a vibrant main street and the stately brick buildings of Dartmouth College campus. It serves 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 time to the annual conference that is formerly held, in a non-threatening way. It was especially helpful because the principal upon his return from the Philadelphia conference. Since then, those of us trained have indeed continued the work. Each of our would have found it interesting to see different ways, 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.”

To prepare the students for the assignment, the art teacher placed the child’s work on 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 they 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 that child’s work on 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 they 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 onto the paper. The art work was then displayed beside the others on the wall.

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 from page 5)

A Sense of Power

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

You can contact Camilla Greene at cagreene@rci.rutgers.edu

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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 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, 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 deficiency and more security guards get hired, we have a misalignment. Similarly, when principals report having problems with teachers who have poor classroom management skills, much 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 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 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 is an equitable, intentional way is either ethically supported by the ability on the part of an educator to distribute power to students in those classrooms.

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better express all his wonderful ideas in the different subject areas.

In the past three years we have tried everything, from looking at student work to placing dilemmas on the table. This year, we are organizing an integrated arts show that will involve all of us, working with three different grade levels, in the performance of a multi-media tumbling show. Our goal is to develop a rubric that will guide us from start to finish, one that will ultimately help us look carefully at our teaching and at our students’ work.

The result of our work is simple: Focusing our energy on the goal of teaching and student learning has strengthened us as a group and as individuals.

Margaret Taylor teaches one of the school’s seven combined kindergarten/first grade classes. She has held the role of grade-level team leader for several years. She writes: “One of the reasons I wanted to join the CFG training was to improve my skills as a facilitator of a group of K/1 teachers. We had decided that we needed some leadership that would help us all meet our mutual goals and all feel heard. The training focused me and taught me skills that ultimately guided me to being a facilitator, not a leader. Discussing and agreeing on a set of ground rules allowed everyone to feel part of the group and secure. These became a concrete document we could all refer to. As I learned more from the training, it became clear that the ‘structure’ of the group, having an agenda, listening to each other and making group decisions was moving us forward. The protocols became useful in looking at children’s work. In time, CFG work has filtered into professional evaluations and Critical Friends Groups. Work protocols have direct applications in courses I am taking. The Looking at Student Work protocols have direct application to my work with Schools Attuned. Our CFG work has also moved our Science Curriculum along.”

And then there’s my own reflection: Last year, I had one of the most enriching experiences of my teaching career: peer coaching. Our class as a whole had just adopted Mousings of Their Own as a method through which to increase our students’ reading comprehension skills. Using the book Strategies That Work as a guide, every teacher in the building set out to incorporate this approach into our reading instruction. Sherrie Greenley, the Reading Specialist spear-heading the initiative, was looking for an opportunity to see firsthand how this would work in the classroom. I was looking for a peer coaching experience; professional collaboration; a chance to really examine my teaching practice.

Sherrie and I designed this experience as our method of evaluation for the year, so there was an added layer of accountability. She and I met every Monday while the students were at recess, to plan our two peer coaching sessions for the week. We met very briefly immediately before each lesson to pose a focus for the observation, then we had the lesson and met immediately afterward to debrief while the students were at lunch. Each teaching session was videotaped. We took turns in the roles of observer and teacher. The observer would take notes, but it was also very instructive (and often amusing) to watch the video.

Each Monday during our planning session, we would review the debrief discussion notes to incorporate what we had learned about the children’s learning. The planning was dynamic and integral. The actual teaching of the lesson became a “meta-teaching” experience because we were watching the lens of a learner. Sherrie and I both felt this was a truly beneficial experience. We learned a lot about our own teaching strengths and areas where we need growth.

Our CFG work has also moved our Science Curriculum along. The looking of the lesson became a “meta-teaching” experience because we were watching the lens of a learner. Sherrie and I both felt this was a truly beneficial experience. We learned a lot about our own teaching strengths and areas where we need growth.

The students were fascinated by this process, and we were deliberately transparent about what we were doing together. It may sound corny—but the students loved that they were teaching us how to teach better. And isn’t better teaching really what this work is all about?

Diana Watson is a kindergarten/first grade teacher currently on sabbatical. You can contact her at d2watson@adelphia.net

When I accepted the invitation to travel to Seattle last June to take on the role of “Process Observer” for the CES NW Critical Friends Groups Coaching Seminar, I really didn’t understand fully what I had agreed to do.

It turned out that I had stumbled into one of the most profound learning opportunities of my experience with CFG work. The role of Process Observer, a relatively new form of Peer Observation, went far beyond my expectations. Not only did I observe and report my observations to the Seattle facilitators; I also learned a great deal about giving feedback, about maintaining objectivity by basing interpretations on the data observed, and about myself as a facilitator.

Overview of the Sessions

When John D’Anieri and I arrived in Seattle to act as process observers, we had relatively little definition of our actual role. Jill Hudson, in an e-mail a few days before we arrived, defined the task as: “Basically, we are looking for you to see what the classroom looks and sounds like if we are really going across the following ideas: improving student learning, a professional learning community, inquiry, reflection, Coalition of Essential Schools’ 10 Common Principles, collaboration tools, and tools for looking at evidence of practice. When John and I met the local members of the seminar facilitation team, they refined their feedback needs by providing the following focus questions:

- How do we meet the different levels of learners in our seminar?
- How are the transitions between exercises? Are they smooth? Connected? Do they make sense?
- Timing and pace: Does it feel rushed? Does one activity need more time than another? Are all activities necessary? Should anything be cut?
- What is the balance between beliefs, functions, and structures?

We used the Observer as Learner protocol that first day, and we agreed that the feedback at the end of the day would be mostly written and centered on the focus questions the group had provided.

Starting on the second day, John continued to work with the Beginning Coaches team for the duration of their four-day seminar, while I worked with the Continuing Coaches Seminar, which started its three-day session on Wednesday. At the end of each day, both teams debriefed for an hour among themselves, after which we each provided 15-20 minutes of warm feedback, cool feedback, and questions for the facilitators to think about. They met at 7:00 each morning to incorporate any changes or new ideas based on the previous days’ debrief. Our roles, at the request of the members of the facilitation teams, evolved into something like a “coach of coaches” role. During the course of the next few days, we met with each of the individual facilitators at least once to give feedback on specific aspects of their facilitation, directed by individual focus questions.

Learning – Some Anticipated and Some Surprising

The first five years of our existence at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, many of the costs associated with attendance at conferences and coaches’ seminars— including registration, food, transportation, and lodging—were covered by the generosity of the late Walter Annenberg. That level of funding is no longer available.

Please consider sending a tax-deductible contribution to: NSRF Scholarship Fund, P.O. Box 1787, Bloomington, IN 47402

“At the risk of sounding redundant, this year NSRF becomes even more deeply rooted in the practice of creating democratic learning communities made up of reflective practitioners who support each other’s growth and practice. We are not a fad. We are a way that is purposeful, productive, and effective.” - Daniel Baron, Co-Director NSRF

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