

Mackin, of Standards of Mind and Heart: Creating the Good High School (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), and the coauthor, with Grace McEntee et al., of At the Heart of Teaching: A Guide to Reflective Practice (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

Taking Time to Tend to the “Good”

by Betty Bisplinghoff

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In today’s climate of grading schools and blaming teachers, educators more than ever need to understand exactly what they do well. The public discourse on failing schools, inadequate teachers, and under-achieving students rarely touches on the miraculous moments witnessed every day in classrooms across the country. It is hard for educators to resist being overcome by all the negativity, and even harder to maintain their motivation each day. Perhaps that is one reason half of new teachers quit within their first five years in the classroom.

I believe that to guard against the prevailing negativity, we need to identify and report what works, as well as learn how that can make engaging and accomplished education available to all students. Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) are a particular kind of learning community in which participants share and care about the quality of their work in supporting student achievement. At the 2005 winter meeting of the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), the organization’s co-director, Gene Thompson Grove, recalled how one coach explained the work of a CFG: “It means that I am as committed to and responsible for your practice and your students as I am to mine.” Gene also explained how NSRF was born of two simple questions asked of colleagues in 1994: “If you could do anything to shape the professional development in your school, what would you do? What do you know that works?” Thus, the NSRF network and the CFGs that emerged from it grew, literally, from seeds of “goodness”: from a focus on what was working.

NSRF protocols can help us identify what we do that is really good and use it more effectively. In CFGs we use protocols to engage in the conversations necessary to get better at what we do. Protocols, designed to scaffold risk taking for participants, build from “the now” toward new possibilities. Many protocols help us expose the complications that shroud the problems, critical incidents, and successes of our practice.

Certain protocols in particular help move us away from problem-centered thinking and encourage strengths-based approaches to understanding our work and its potential to influence student achievement.

The *Success Analysis Protocol*, *Microlab Protocol*, and *Inquiry Circles Protocol* are typical NSRF tools: structured conversations that bring forward our good work and our passions to use in teaching and learning.

The Success Analysis Protocol

The Success Analysis Protocol is intended to help participating educators reconsider a personal best practice, i.e., a process the participant has found highly effective in achieving the *intended* outcome. The first participant describes a personal best practice and explains why it seems to work. The group then asks questions, and after the questions the participants analyze what they heard and how the practice resembles and differs from other practices. As each participant puts forth a personal best practice and benefits from shared analysis, the elements of the “best practice” are dislodged from their narrow day-to-day contexts and broken down into attributes that can be applied separately in other contexts. The collaborative exchange enlarges our understanding of how best practices can help other people in other circumstances; at the same time, the group can capture common features among the examples that can seed future praxis decisions.

The Microlab Protocol

The Microlab Protocol allows educators a public way to align their calling as educators with the disciplined action necessary to advocate what really matters in their work. The protocol, used with relatively small groups (three to five people), is based on a line of questioning:

- * Why did you decide to become an educator? What drew you to this profession?
- * Why do you stay? What keeps you coming back, year after year?
- * In terms of your literacy (or other content focus), what is the one thing you won't compromise? What will you “go to the wall” for?

Participants respond in turn, typically under a time limit of one minute per question. The protocol concludes with a group debriefing that encourages participants to consider:

- * What did you hear that was significant? What key ideas or insights were shared?
- * How did this go for you? What worked well, and what was difficult? Why?
- * How might your conversations have been different had we not used this protocol?

The structured opportunity to discuss the value of the talk and the effectiveness of the protocol presents another opportunity to balance what the participants did well with ways in which each participant might improve.

The Inquiry Circles Protocol

The Inquiry Circles Protocol is designed to support teaching as inquiry. Considerably more involved than the two previous examples, the Inquiry Circles Protocol can be used as a day-long agenda for a CFG institute (an intensive multi-day event) or as a series of experiences for an ongoing CFG. The protocol's sequence of storytelling and retelling helps participants focus on what is healthy about their life's work; then it employs specific acts of critical friendship to help them analyze and understand their stories.

In "Written Rememberings," the first step of the protocol, participants write or draw to reflect on

times in your work life when you felt strong, when you felt your work was honored, and you were living your true promise as an educator. List some of the most successful moments in your work. Select one of those moments to write or draw about. Where is the story for you in this successful experience?

The work then moves to oral storytelling and to theme identification. The concluding steps engage participants in crafting inquiry questions, either for each individual or as an overarching inquiry for the CFG.

During a recent summer institute for experienced CFG coaches interested in focusing their CFG facilitation with inquiry, we used the Inquiry Circles Protocol to shape questions that required better understanding of our work's strengths and value, rather than preoccupation with our problems. It was not "happy talk": it was hard talk, fueled by recent budget cuts and school closings. We left tears on the tables, but the storytelling revived us and readied us to continue to try to make a difference through our CFG work.

The inquiry questions we shaped as a result of our storytelling included:

- * In re-culturing our organization, how can we align individual strengths with our needs and goals?
- * What makes coaching (or facilitating) my CFG group sing?
- * How can I contribute to creating a more positive professional community in my school?
- * In what ways can I successfully contribute to rebuilding trust through collaboration across all levels of my school community?

- * How can I discover what really matters?
- * What will I learn when I invite others to share the power of collaboration?
- * How do we develop and share with the public a positive narrative culture about the work of our school?
- * What relationships can I document between enthusiasm for reading and improvements in reading comprehension?

Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (*Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*, Lakeshore Communications, 2003) proposed that “organizations move toward what they study” (p. 29). The Inquiry Circles Protocol recognizes the power of our questions to influence our actions—in this case, actions that affect the cultures of our schools. Participants in the institute returned to their schools and their CFGs with renewed confidence in their abilities to create professional meaning through inquiry. We had refocused ourselves on our strengths and on the need to pursue questions that remind us what we value. We also had generated some balance. Instead of being disheartened by top-down decision-making in their districts, our teacher leaders were regrouping for a new day.

To be sure, the very concept of “goodness” in education is fraught with contradictions and complications, and “tending to the good” is a demanding and imprecise art. But by grabbing hold of the positive—what is good and working for us—and building on it, we can make a difference in the quality of our work experiences and perhaps in the public conversation about education as well. Helping people to grab hold of the positive and build on it is what NSRF does well. For educators who would experience that work, Success Analysis, Microlab, and Inquiry Circles would be good places to start.

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