

Developing a Teacher Identity: The Impact of Critical Friends Practice on the Student Teacher

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I check my watch, cursing the highway department as I turn my car on the marked detour that is taking me in the exact opposite direction of where I want to go. It's clear to me that despite my best intentions, I am going to be late for this meeting. Quick to comfort myself, I remember that as these people are teachers, too, they understand busy schedules. They are both flexible; I've been in their classroom a number of times. They've canceled appointments at the last minute. None of this self-talk does much to mitigate my fear: I won't look professional to them. In a very palpable way, I want both the student teacher and her mentor to have confidence in me, believe in what I am doing, and see me as a professional.

It occurs to me that this anxiety about professional identity is not mine alone. I sense when I go into classrooms as a clinical supervisor that the mentor teacher is eager to make a positive impression on me. I'm there to assess the student teacher and give feedback, yet the mentor teacher, and often even the students, want to make a statement about who they are. We live in a world of negotiated identity, one where we continually construct and revise our visions of self. Those of us who create "teacher" as part of our identity must negotiate the particular implications of our professional identity in relation to students, peers, the general public, our intimates, and ourselves.

In my work as a clinical supervisor of English language arts preservice teachers, I've had the opportunity to witness the evolution novices experience when they make the transition from student to teacher. Students use a rich array of resources and contexts to navigate the student teaching experience and emerge as teachers. Traditionally, though, student teachers do not

have access to the full spectrum of professional interactions that fill the world of veteran teachers. One such opportunity has been made available to my group of student teachers. As part of a three-year initiative, students in the University of New Mexico's Secondary English Language Arts Cohort are being exposed to Critical Friends practice during their teacher education program.

The Critical Friends Group (CFG) concept brings together teachers at all levels of experience to prompt and support one another's professional growth. CFGs, an outgrowth of work done by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, are being used as models for site-based professional development nationwide with a targeted outcome of improved student performance. So, what will this experience mean for our student teachers? In what ways does participation in a CFG impact the development of an English teacher's identity? To begin answering these questions, I conducted a case study of a student teacher participating in a CFG at her school-site and as part of her student teaching seminar.

Constructing a Teacher Identity

The development of a teacher's identity is a continuing and dynamic process. As Cooper and Olson (1996) suggest, teacher identity is continually being informed, formed, and reformed as individuals develop over time and through interaction with others. Scholars such as Vinz (1996), Knowles (1992), and Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) among others identify multiple influences that shape teacher identity, ranging from personal experience to media images to pedagogical beliefs supported by preservice instruction. Knowles, for example, recognizes four sources which impact the preservice teacher's self-conception: (1) role models, especially positive ones; (2) previous teaching experiences; (3) significantly positive or negative education classes; and (4) remembered childhood experiences about learning and family activities. Balancing these multiple influences, the preservice teacher begins to construct an explicit view of self as teacher.

Some teacher education programs require specific courses to "help prospective [teachers] understand . . . what teachers do on an ongoing basis" (Dickinson & McEwin, 1997, p. 273), but the development of a professional identity is perhaps best seen as a by-product of teacher education programs rather than a targeted outcome, at least from the student teacher's perspective. As one English language arts preservice teacher puts it, "So much of what we learn in teacher education is didactically focused on perfection. We (preservice teachers) are experts in learning to become teach-

ers, but we do not often think of ourselves as teachers” (Harkavy, 1999, p. 226). In a dialogue sharing her insights into her student teaching experience, another student writes, “The day I walked into [my cooperating teacher’s] classroom, I was like any other student—worried where I would sit, afraid that I would not be accepted by the masses, and worst of all, petrified that I would not be successful” (Notman, 1999, p. 20). This unequivocal

identification with the student role rather than the teacher role is indicative of the challenge student teachers face in making the transition from student to teacher.

Critical Friends Groups are practitioner-driven study groups that reflect the growing trend for site-based professional development in which practitioners behave as managers of their own learning.

The practicum experience is often stressful for preservice teachers because they encounter dissonance between their preconceived view of teacher and what they observe in the field.

Mentor teachers might see their role as one of supporting the student teacher’s growth in practice (Crocker & Wilder, 1999), but some student teachers articulate a different need: effective role models. Two student teachers reveal their disappointment and frustration in the models they have access to:

The biggest fear we have is that the party line may have changed to one of indifference. . . . Time and again we have heard from teachers we’ve worked with that they have become “burned out” because they have no real freedom to do what most interests them. Time and again we have heard that teachers must teach “to the test.” Time and again we have heard that students aren’t “like they used to be,” that they can’t be controlled, and, worst of all, time and again we have heard from professional, experienced teachers that we are making a mistake [by entering the profession]. (McBride, Yuhasz, & Mollineaux, 1999, p. 22)

Given this lack of access to inspiring professional models, it is not surprising they ask, “Why do we not have enough communication among teachers who love their jobs? Why do we not take advantage of the resources we have in each other? How do we continue to cherish the learning process?” (McBride, Yuhasz, & Mollineaux, 1999, p. 22). Such questions can be answered, in part, by inviting student teachers to participate in the collaborative work of engaged professionals.

Critical Friends Groups

Critical Friends Groups are practitioner-driven study groups that reflect the growing trend for site-based professional development in which practitio-

ners behave as managers of their own learning (Dunne & Honts, 1998). A typical CFG is comprised of 10 to 12 teachers who meet once a month for at least two hours to share their practice and improve student learning. In order to achieve this, participants in CFGs use structured protocols to explore teaching strategies, conduct peer observations, and analyze evidence of their students' growth.

Commonly used protocols involve looking at student work in which a teacher brings a sample of student work and presents the work along with a focusing question. Members of the group then take turns describing and hypothesizing about the work while the presenting teacher takes notes. After several rounds of comments, the presenting teacher shares what she found useful in the conversation. Then the group debriefs the entire process. Protocols used for peer observation involve two teachers using a predetermined format and focus for observing each other's teaching. Problem-solving protocols open with the presenter asking a question about a specific dilemma. Participants then ask probing questions and discuss the problem among themselves while the presenter takes notes until the discussion is finished, at which point the presenter shares what she heard that was useful or important for her dilemma. All CFG protocols use specific turn-taking rules, and the feedback given is observational, not judgmental. The theoretical foundation for CFGs is that teachers belonging to a group learn to collaborate by participating in professional development activities such as examining student and teacher work. This participation leads to greater reflection about teaching practice, which then supports change in practices aimed at improving student achievement. Finally, as a result of the continual process of teacher reflection, action, and feedback, student achievement improves (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000; Cushman, 1999).

While improved student achievement is the desired outcome of CFGs, an interesting question emerges as to how participating in a CFG impacts a teacher's sense of self. As Meyer and Nore (1999) suggest, teachers and students are co-voyagers on a journey in which all are learners. They suggest teachers and students who are cognizant of their evolving roles reflect openness to transformational experiences and willingness to explore, change, and reveal their identities. The collaborative and transformative nature of CFG work provides just such an opportunity for continuous renegotiation of professional identity. Recognizing that student teachers need both access to positive role models and opportunities to stretch their imaginations and challenge their assumptions regarding the profession, I wondered what might happen when a preservice teacher is given the opportunity to participate in a CFG. How might formalized interaction with veteran teachers dem-

onstrating transformation in their own identity influence the student teacher's construction of a teacher identity?

Recent training as a CFG coach prompted me to wonder further how the CFG experience might lend itself to the structure of the required student teaching seminar. My partner and I decided to use the CFG structure as the basis for the seminar and incorporate protocols into our curriculum, believing this would introduce pre-student teachers to meaningful professional development early in their careers. Because the CFG was integrated into a university course which carried credit, attendance and participation in the group were mandatory. Also, the protocols were assigned student work which we graded for participation and reflection. The mandatory and evaluative nature of the CFG in the seminar context is obviously a variation from the norm of voluntary participation found in school sites. Nonetheless, we found the student teachers responded positively to the CFG concept. I observed their change from passive, answer-oriented student behavior to a professional stance of inquiry and thoughtful analysis as they conducted protocols looking at student work.

Six student teachers then had opportunities in their field placement to join CFGs at their school sites due to a grant from the Lucent Corporation. This extensive financial support offered to several schools in the district enabled the creation of these collaborative inquiry groups. I encouraged student teachers placed at these school sites to join the school's CFG, based on the idea that such an experience would provide them with role models who have a passion for teaching and a desire to learn. Improving student achievement, the desired outcome of CFGs, is a long-term process, one not likely to happen during the relatively short duration of a student teacher's field experience. So, what then is the benefit of a student teacher's participation in a CFG?

Research Method

To explore the impact of CFG participation on the professional identity of a student teacher, I conducted an interpretive case study. The researcher developing an interpretive case study "gathers as much information about the problem with the intent of analyzing, interpreting, or theorizing about the phenomenon" (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). Using purposive sampling, I selected a student teacher who appeared to be "information-rich" (Merriam, p. 61)—one who possessed attributes important to the scope of this research. The student teacher I selected demonstrated thoughtfulness about her identity as a teacher in both her written and oral communication; she was in fre-

quent contact with me, her clinical supervisor; and she showed initiative in gaining access to the CFG at her school site.

Research Context

Rebecca (all names have been changed) was a 28-year-old Anglo student teacher in the final semester of her teacher education program at a large state university. Working toward an endorsement in secondary English language arts, Rebecca successfully completed her pre-student teaching assignment at a predominately working-class Albuquerque middle school in the Fall 2000 semester. She then fulfilled her student teaching requirement at Valle Grande Middle School, situated in a middle-class Albuquerque neighborhood.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place at the school site, in a student teaching seminar, and at mutually agreed upon locations outside of the school setting. I conducted a series of three 45-minute phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 1991) with Rebecca, a process in which open-ended questions are used to guide the participant's reconstruction of her experience with the topic under study. The interviews were focused on Rebecca's life history as related to becoming a teacher, details of her present teaching and CFG experience, and her reflections on the implications of the CFG experience for her future. In order to verify the data provided by the student teacher and to add richer description, I also conducted a briefer (25–30 minutes) semi-structured interview with the mentor teacher to gather her impressions of the student teacher's professional identity. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Additionally, I observed Rebecca engaged in professional activities including participating in her student teaching seminar, teaching class, and conferencing as part of her midterm and final evaluations. During these observations, which lasted 45 to 90 minutes, I looked at how she communicated her understanding of her role as a teacher. Specifically, I was interested in how she talked to students, colleagues, and her mentor about teacher responsibilities and whether her avowed values were congruent with her practices. Because the school-site CFG is predicated upon a commitment to trust and confidentiality as one of the norms, I was not allowed to observe Rebecca's participation during a CFG meeting. While I would have liked the chance to see those interactions firsthand, what remains important is how these experiences affected her sense of what it means to be a teacher,

information I gathered through interviews and observations of her actual teaching.

Documents I used as data sources include e-mail communication between Rebecca and me, her lesson plans, her portfolio, and her reflective writings. A primary purpose in using documents, as Merriam (1998) suggests, is as “part of the process of inductively building categories and theoretical constructs” (p. 125). As with the observations, I looked at how the student teacher described her teaching and CFG experiences and how her ideas of what it means to be a teacher evolved as demonstrated through her writing. Further, I examined the National Council of Teachers of English (1996) *Attitudes of Effective English Language Arts Teachers* to see how they correlated with Rebecca’s articulation of professional identity.

Data analysis was ongoing and recursive in nature. The peril of amassing volumes of data without engaging in analysis has been underscored by several authors (e.g., Merriam, 1998; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Using constant-comparative methods, I continually read the data, reflected, referred to literature, and formulated tentative categories that could be compared to each other and to other instances. As Merriam (1998) notes, conveying an understanding of the case through rich, thick description is of primary importance. The presentation of case study findings may have a greater proportion of description than in other qualitative research; however, the level of interpretation extends to the presentation of categories, themes, models, or theory (p. 194). The categories I developed to explain the relationship of the CFG experience to Rebecca’s professional identity overlap and inform each other. When the categories are conceptualized as a whole, a clear theme of a significant experience emerges. With that in mind, I present my findings.

I saw Rebecca evolve throughout the course of her student teaching semester from a passionate student of teaching who was tentative with her insights to an articulate novice teacher who found not only a voice, but also a meaningful place to share it.

Findings: Rebecca’s Growth as a Student Teacher

Committing findings to text is a bit like capturing the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. I can savor the strength and substance of what I know to be there, but when I try to hold the vapors in my hand, they are suddenly gone. So it is with representing on the page what is a lived, dynamic, ever shape-shifting experience of this student teacher. I saw Rebecca evolve throughout the course of her student teaching semester from a passionate student of teaching who was tentative with her insights to an articulate novice teacher who

found not only a voice, but also a meaningful place to share it. This growth was fostered by a number of factors: her increasing confidence and growing independence, her commitment to the profession, her involvement in a student teaching seminar, and, ultimately, her participation in a Critical Friends Group. Rebecca's experiences offer insight into the ways in which a collaborative study group can enrich a student teacher's vision of the profession; it was through her CFG that she found a safe place where her voice joined with others to foster change and a place to work through her own teacher identity crisis.

Coming to Terms: What Is Teacher Identity?

What does “teacher identity” mean to Rebecca? Six weeks into her student teaching experience, Rebecca is uncertain about the term and its relevance to her. She shifts slightly in her chair, pauses mid-sentence, then continues:

I'm still working on trying to come to terms with that [teacher identity] because, um, in the position I'm in right now, student teacher, I find that I do a lot of things that I wouldn't normally do or that I hadn't envisioned myself doing as a teacher One of my goals . . . is to be genuine to my own personality because I think that's important.

The tension between being oneself and fitting into a role is characteristic of the student teaching experience. As Britzman (1994) writes, “The circumstances of student teaching, then, provide the contextual arena wherein the student teacher, as part student, part teacher, has the delicate work of educating others while being educated, and of attempting unification in an already contradictory role” (p. 55). Rebecca recognizes the friction between who she is and the role she occupies as something she must work out through her practice. “Right now,” she says, “it depends on the day . . . some days I feel like this is who I want to be. And other days, I'm like, I have no idea who I am up here; I'm just trying to get through it.”

Despite her inability at this point in her teaching to experience a coherent teacher identity, she articulates characteristics of the teacher she wants to be. Reflecting on her early desire to become a teacher, she speaks of wanting to maintain her enthusiasm and blending it with a realistic approach to classroom practice. She sees herself as an *English* teacher, one committed to bringing real-world literacy to her classroom. She sees this process begins with her commitment to an active literary life, saying:

I really hope to show students that [I am] a reader and a writer . . . I think it's important to get involved in book discussion groups, in the literary

community outside of school and model for students that there really is a language arts or literature community beyond the classroom.

Listening to students is a priority for her; as she says, "I want to be able to be fair, and be able to always talk. I want to be the kind of teacher who doesn't just say, 'No, do this, do that.' I want to be able to listen." An even clearer picture of Rebecca's values is seen in her statement of educational philosophy, an assignment she completed during the first week of her student teaching experience. Speaking both generally as an educator and particularly as an English teacher, Rebecca articulates a wide range of beliefs about the role of a teacher. Embedded in her philosophy are themes to which the CFG gave substance. It is through her CFG experience that Rebecca found a safe place to grow as both a learner and a teacher.

"A Safe Environment"

The school should be a safe place, promoting equality and cooperation among its members.

—from "My Educational Philosophy" by Rebecca Gillan

Perhaps the most consistent theme to emerge from my case study is Rebecca's identification of the CFG as a safe place. Rebecca's personal experience with school sheds light on her desire for a sense of security in the professional setting. "School was like my place, and I was always happy to be there," she says. "My teachers were always really supportive of me and I wasn't, like, really happy anywhere else except for school. And it was a place that I felt safe and that I felt that I was recognized." It is not surprising that someone who found refuge in school as a child would, as a novice teacher, seek a venue within the school context where she felt both safe and validated. For Rebecca, this happened most clearly in the CFG. She says:

It's neat to be in a school community where there are teachers who have been teaching for like, Sandra James, I don't know how many years she's been teaching. Tons. And then there's teachers who are first year teachers. And people who have been teaching, you know, eight years, ten years, and they totally accept the ideas of a student teacher who is barely coming into the practice. It's a really safe environment. I've never had anyone treat me different than everyone else.

Rebecca's sense of safety within the CFG is predicated upon three factors: (1) a sense of equality, (2) the group's positive attitude, and (3) the purposefulness of the work.

Student teachers have to negotiate (literally and metaphorically) a

space for themselves within their school environment, an uncomfortable process often accompanied by an awareness of one's status. The CFG, founded on principles of equality, gave Rebecca an opportunity to participate with other teachers in a professional capacity as an equal. Sprinkled throughout her conversations and reflections are references to how she is "just like everybody else," that she's "not treated any differently," that "even the CFG leaders [teachers at the school] are equals." This "authentic reciprocity" (to use a term suggested by a representative from the grant-funding agency) seems to be at the heart of Rebecca's comfort in the group. She differentiates this from language arts department meetings or Balanced Literacy meetings (another study group at the school) in that she feels she is welcome at these meetings, but that her views are tempered by her position. "There is always that air about, you know, well, there's so many decisions being made about departments and staff and I don't really have a voice because I'm not staff and I'm not language arts," she says.

Acceptance and validation are clearly important factors in Rebecca's sense of safety, and a third requisite condition appears to be her perception of the group's positive outlook. Having been exposed to protocols as part of her university course work, Rebecca had learned how a group using them might function. In her pre-student teaching seminar, Rebecca and her peers had practiced a variety of protocols including the Tuning Protocol to work on lesson plans and the Consultancy Protocol to broaden their thinking about a problem they were facing. The Tuning Protocol, developed as a means for teachers in the Coalition of Essential Schools to fine-tune alternative assessments, provided an effective means for pre-student teachers to get peer feedback on their lesson plans. Working in groups of four, students took turns presenting a lesson or unit plan, facilitating the session, and giving feedback. The presenter began by framing the work with a question such as "Are the assessments I have planned appropriate for my learning goals and activities?" which the participants wrote down and referred to while giving feedback. In this way, and because students prefaced warm feedback with the phrase "Wow—I like. . ." and cool feedback with "I wonder, . . ." the presenter was able to receive feedback in a non-threatening, non-evaluative manner. Rebecca explains that initially the highly-scripted process seemed artificial:

At first, the process felt corporate, like I was sitting in the boardroom of some Starbuck's-sippin', Birkenstock-wearing, team-oriented company . . . or like sitting in student council, using Robert's Rules of Order to discuss something we were all feisty about although we were restricted by conventions that were hard to remember.

Despite the initial awkwardness of the structure, Rebecca found the feedback she received to be quite useful:

Usually I get responses like “This is really good, but I’m confused about the goals,” or “I love your lesson, but do you think you can do this in one day?” I need concrete examples of where the goals don’t fit or how and where I can pare a plan down to make it realistic for a class period. The Tuning Protocol provided this through varied points of view and structured criticism which [I] can take or leave.

Another protocol which Rebecca found beneficial was the Consultancy Protocol, designed to help a teacher facing a dilemma think more expansively about the problem. The format of this protocol is similar to others in that the presenting teacher gives an overview of the dilemma, the group then asks clarifying questions to ensure they understand the problem, and then they ask a series of probing questions of the presenting teacher. The goal of these questions is for the presenter to learn more about his or her own question and uncover assumptions made regarding the problem. The next step in the Consultancy is for the participants to discuss the dilemma among themselves while the presenting teacher takes notes. In this free-flowing conversation, group members comment on what they heard, what they think might be relevant, what possible solutions might exist. Because the presenting teacher is not part of this conversation, participants are prevented from giving direct advice or taking control of the problem. This part of the protocol usually lasts ten to fifteen minutes, after which the presenting teacher takes a few minutes to respond. Again, a non-defensive posture is possible because it is the presenting teacher who determines what is relevant for response.

In Rebecca’s case, the Consultancy proved to be a useful means of alleviating anxiety while addressing a potentially serious conflict with her mentor teacher. Early in her placement Rebecca enjoyed a positive relationship with her mentor, feeling that she was supported as an individual and a professional. Midway through the semester, however, she was beginning to show signs of stress. In the classroom she rushed transitions between activities, warning students, “We have a lot to do today.” During post-observation conferences, she had difficulty relaxing, and she acknowledged that she was sleep-deprived from staying up late working on planning and grading. Through extended conversation it became apparent that Rebecca felt that her mentor teacher wanted her not only to replicate the mentor’s routines, but to squeeze in what seemed to Rebecca like an unrealistic number of activities in both daily and long-range plans. Feeling torn between her de-

sire to meet her mentor's expectations and her own beliefs about student learning, Rebecca requested that a Consultancy protocol be done during her student teaching seminar to help her address the problem.

Rebecca presented her dilemma by describing the situation and asking the group how she could reduce her stress regarding the problem. Comments made during the conversation part of the protocol included that Rebecca might find it helpful to observe other teachers at her school to see specifically how they handle the curriculum and that she could approach her mentor from the perspective of wanting to apply what she learned in her methods classes. After she heard her dilemma discussed by others, Rebecca said that she felt observing other teachers would be helpful, but more importantly, she had figured out a way to talk to her mentor about the situation. She did not go into details nor did she attempt a "dry run" of what she would say to the mentor; rather, she told the group that their feedback helped her reframe the problem in a way that made it solvable for her. Several days later she reflected on the process:

It helped me so much to think about what is going on and how to approach it . . . I told [my mentor teacher] that I was feeling frustrated because I am not experienced enough to make all of our activities work in one block. I told her I felt like I was rushing the kids too much and it was making it hard for them.

The two of them agreed that Rebecca could have more independence in developing lesson plans that reflected her belief that students needed more time to process their learning. While she might well have approached her mentor about the problem without first doing a Consultancy, it was the protocol which she says helped her both understand the problem and generate a way for *her* to solve it rather than getting a university supervisor involved.

Because Rebecca had experienced the usefulness of protocols in a seminar context, she felt the CFG at the school site would offer a venue to use protocols in a more authentic school setting. What she did not anticipate was the optimism she found in the school site group. She expected, she says, more competitiveness from teachers discussing their practice and tension between conflicting views. Instead, she discovered the focus to be supportive and positive. "People really do share in the conversation, and it's always really relevant and positive. No one complains about this student or that student or the administration," she explains. This positive outlook is inextricably linked to the meaning Rebecca (and perhaps other CFG members) attach to their work. She compares her experience using CFG protocols as part of her student teaching seminar with using them in the CFG context at her school, saying:

While it works in seminar to get things done, there is a difference in the kind of feedback, the whole airtime thing, and the whole purpose for people being there. If they [fellow student teachers] share student work they are really proud of, then it's a whole different thing than sharing student work you are really puzzling over.

Inherent in the CFG design is the value of collaborative problem-solving, which accounts for Rebecca's premise that in order for the work to be real, the problem has to be real. Although she does not explicitly say so, it seems likely that her feelings of safety can be explained partially by exposure to the vulnerability of the other teachers in the group. In her group, she is not the only one faced with challenges she does not know how to address. The process of working them through by using a protocol provides not just a possible approach, but also a strong feeling of support. Her words underscore the importance she assigns to the CFG: "I am achieving one of my big goals . . . to be constantly learning and sharing ideas in this positive environment," and "I was thinking how the [CFG] is a meeting but so unlike a meeting . . . It is productive, safe, and really relevant to the work I'm doing."

"Political but Palatable"

I believe that education is a process of democratization and praxis. It is the job of schools to give students the tools to understand the systems of our world and to effect change within them.

—from "My Educational Philosophy" by Rebecca Gillan

For Rebecca, activism is an essential part of teaching. She cites influences of Paulo Freire and Walt Whitman and believes part of her responsibility is to advocate for what is in the best interest of children. She also believes teachers have an obligation to continue working for a collective professional agenda. While the CFG is not a professional organization and its mandate is not to advocate for political change, but rather improved student achievement, in Rebecca's experience, it functions as a means of empowerment and activism. "I believe in it as a collective of professional teachers who are reforming the way we teach and get in teaching outside our own classroom," she says.

Evidence of this activism is present in Rebecca's extended discussions and experiences with issues of tracking. After the first few weeks of her field placement, Rebecca felt she was doing well with her upper-track class, but that she was struggling with management and motivation issues in the lower-track class. An e-mail written in the fourth week of her placement shows her frustration:

I am having so many problems with period 3-4. They dislike me. I have had to be very strict, hoping we'd settle in together. It's not happening, and they're beginning to resent me because they expected an easy ride with a student teacher, I think.

Initially, Rebecca understood the conflict between her and the students as a result of her status as a student teacher. However, as the semester progressed, Rebecca began placing her thoughts about this class in the context of tracking. The students, she says, told her all too frequently that they were the “dumb class” and that she must like the other class better. Sensitive to the underlying message, Rebecca resolved to tackle the issue head-on. She worked with individual students, contacted parents, used interventions, and developed class-wide recognition projects. After a pizza party honoring them, she wrote, “Today I told them that now I look forward to seeing them walk through the door every day.” This class solidified her anti-tracking views, which she had the opportunity to share at a department meeting where CFG protocols were used to explore the possibility of de-tracking. However, the protocol, used outside of the CFG context, failed to promote the kind of thoughtful discussion Rebecca hoped for. She notes the difference between the CFG using a protocol and a non-CFG group using ones:

Anyway, the people who were not [CFG] members . . . were frustrated by not being able to “discuss” as we normally do. That's the beauty of Critical Friends though; we do not spin our wheels on tangents, etc. . . . By the time I left, the group had ditched protocols and it had gotten very confrontational and heated. I was amazed and uncomfortable. The “factions” in the department became apparent and people were making snide remarks. It was unbelievable.

Clearly the meeting was not productive in Rebecca's estimation, whereas she feels that when a difficult issue is tackled in the CFG, progress is possible because of the trust and structure. As she says, “We've talked about how we could use the CFG protocols to work out what teaming really is and for teachers and administrators to work productively, coming to a resolution that's best for students, teachers, and parents.” While tracking and teaming are related but different issues, the CFG remains a framework in which all kinds of policy issues can be explored most effectively.

She explains that the CFG provides an opportunity to explore policy issues in a richer context than reading and writing about the same issues in education classes. Returning to the issue of teaming, she says,

[It] was much more complicated than I originally thought. . . . After discussing the issue using the Multiple Perspectives protocol, I felt that the teaming issue was a problem as it was currently arranged. . . . It was imposed from the top down without considering teachers' points of view on how to make it work. Also, teaming groups kids together all day. . . . in essence, it produces a sort of tracking. . . . Although I did not leave with a clear opinion on teaming, I left this meeting with new perspectives, new questions, new issues to consider.

Rebecca believes that teachers are too isolated in their practice and that, as a result, they have not had a voice in decisions that impact their teaching. She sees this isolation as a response to multiple forces, including top down decisions implemented by administrative and government entities, pressure to raise standardized test scores, and the immense paperwork load she sees teachers handling. Because CFGs de-privatize teacher practice, Rebecca senses political potential in the group's work, explaining that

CFGs transform the way we teach because teachers are given the time, the funding and the substitutes to collaborate. . . . Rather than closing the classroom door, teachers are collaborating to look at issues. Although it may not be a political forum, it transforms teacher involvement and views. Many of the dilemmas teachers have are caused by top-down decisions. How does quality teaching align with these regulations and requirements? What do grades mean? How does the pressure to pass students affect our assessment? These are questions [CFGs] explore.

Her voice rings with passion as she explains her perception of the CFG as "political but palatable":

It's kind of like teachers aren't working to try to fight against the systems that are affecting education or to be heard about what is really needed and they're the ones who know. With Critical Friends there is a bit of activism because it is a venue for being heard and it is a venue for working out problems of how to be heard and how to be respected and how to convince other teachers how to take on an identity like that of an activist teacher.

By the time she gets to her last line, she is laughing at the way in which she hopes CFGs will help her push her own activist agenda; it's a laugh of optimism and energy.

On the personal-is-political level, she also finds the CFG offering validation and support. As a single mother, she recognizes pervasive gender stereotyping in education and resents the implications it has on her. Although frustrated by such attitudes, she finds relief from them in her CFG. "There's

a judgmental piece there,” she says of attitudes she has encountered towards her being a single-mother and a teacher, “and there is nothing judgmental at all in [CFG]—nothing—and I feel comfortable with that.” Indeed, she attributes her CFG work with increasing her own capacity for understanding. “[The CFG] has also affected my personal identity,” she writes, “my life in general. I attempt to be more nonjudgmental, take on different points of view, record facts first without interpretation.”

Rebecca sees a connection between her beliefs about the emancipatory power of literacy and the work of a CFG. She believes that “literacy gives people the means to understand systems and the confidence and tools to enact change within these systems. CFGs give teachers voice outside of the classroom. They give teachers the power of collaboration and reflection,” power which Rebecca believes can help teachers become more self-determinate in setting educational policy.

“A Network and a Form of Community”

I believe that teachers are professionals. As such, teachers should collaborate with peers in study groups, share research and seek opportunities for professional development in order to improve their practice and, hence, enhance student learning.

—from “My Educational Philosophy” by Rebecca Gillan

One of Rebecca’s concerns is that she will not be able to sustain her enthusiasm for teaching, a well-founded fear considering current attrition rates for new teachers (Norton, 1999). This anxiety is especially poignant given her long-standing belief that education is her calling. She remembers the inspiring example of her ninth-grade English teacher:

I guess sixth grade was when I first decided I wanted to become a teacher . . . and then I went to junior high and I realized there was this whole class called English class and it was all about reading and writing and that’s when I wanted to be an English teacher . . . I decided for sure that I was going to be an English teacher.

Her commitment to teaching both energizes and scares her:

As far as the big picture, I am very afraid of “being” a teacher. For a long time I’ve been “becoming” a teacher. I try to look five, ten years down the road and I can’t see it . . . It’s a big fear of mine that I’ll burn out on teaching. So, [the CFG] is something that gives me relief, because I think it’s really a venue for teachers to support each other. After every meeting I felt relief and I felt charged up about what we are doing.

Part of the support she draws from the CFG is based in the on-going learning she sees veteran teachers experiencing as a result of their participation in the group. Of the teachers in the group, she says, "They are very reflective and they are constantly learning and sharing ideas and talking really honestly and deeply about teaching. And, . . . that's the kind of teacher I want to be." Participating in these study groups is voluntary at this school; thus teachers who are involved have generally self-selected because they are interested in improving their practice and reinvigorating their classrooms. For Rebecca, access to these teachers in the CFG context serves a dual function of providing her with positive role models as well as presenting a forum for her own professional development. "I respect all the teachers in the CFG, just for being there and for being so professional," she says. "It really has become for me a network and a form of community."

The learning piece of the Critical Friends Group is particularly important for Rebecca. While she is appreciative, even grateful to belong to the CFG ("My most valuable experience has been in the CFG [TRULY]."), she is not misty-eyed in her assessment of the group's progress this year. She writes, "Today the conclusion was that their whole first year was spent on setting up the environment and working through the usefulness of the protocols together. The whole first year! They never looked at student work or did consultancy dilemmas (since I was there)." She is also surprised at the reluctance of some teachers to conduct peer observation protocols. Reflecting on a recent meeting, she notes, "I was surprised that some of the group members are nervous about being observed," and in an interview she recounts, "The second time [we talked about peer observations] there was still a lot of resistance—ah, in fact, that's not the right word—but there are still a lot of teachers who haven't done it yet, and it's either a time issue or putting it off or just feeling uncomfortable." Rebecca's ease with observation protocols is understandable given her experiences in the student teaching seminar, and more significantly, her entire field experience was based upon observation and feedback. She remembers feeling "terrified of being observed" at the beginning of her placement, a recognition which may contribute to her sense of equality with other group members.

Rebecca's observations about the group's focus on community building rather than substantive issues reflect the emergent work of the CFG. In their study of fourteen CFGs, Dunne and Honts (1998) found three common developmental stages that characterize CFG growth. During the first stage, group members describe the CFG primarily in terms associated with trust and support. Groups in the second stage spend the majority of their time addressing classroom instruction. When groups reach the third stage of work,

their work addresses the wider context of educational purpose. According to the authors, “Mature CFGs begin to blur the lines between the different parts of the school and between the school and the community it serves” (Dunne & Honts, 1998, p. 5). Because Rebecca was recently enrolled in classes in which she was exposed to critical analysis of educational practice, she was perhaps more willing to delve into larger issues than the group as a whole, which, having only begun a few months earlier, was focused on establishing relationships and routines for working together.

Her realization that members of the CFG approach change with mixed levels of apprehension does not dampen her belief in the transformative potential of the CFG. She sees it as the one place where she knows teachers will be pushed to grow, saying, “I don’t want to be the ‘outdated’ teacher either. So I think it’s a place where I can get new ideas as I become more immersed in the classroom. I always want to know the latest research and methodologies.” She says that if she were “to name disappointments” in her CFG experience, one of them would be the group’s failure to delve deeply into substantive issues such as tracking. Despite the limitations of the group’s work this year, or perhaps because the group’s growth has provided her with a tangible example of building community, Rebecca still values the CFG as a forum for professional development. She adds, “[I] learned more about setting up community and a safe environment than from any class . . . especially in my first year, that will be an asset.”

In terms of immediate impact on her classroom practice, Rebecca is somewhat vague. I know, though, from reviewing her lesson plans and reflections and observing her teach that she has adapted several protocols for classroom use, something her mentor teacher has noticed, as well, using, for example, the Multiple Perspective protocol to encourage students to explore other points of view in discussions. These protocols can lend themselves to the English language arts classroom in particular, she believes, because they present a structure for students to give feedback to one another. “I hope in the future I will be able to design activities for students modeled after [protocols]—to make discussions, feedback, and writing more focused.”

For Rebecca, a “major teacher-developmental milestone” occurred when she realized she could apply CFG tools to her classroom. “I had never thought about how a group of people talk productively until pre-student teaching,” she remembers. “Then when I tried to make that happen with kids, disaster. How could I expect them to know when I didn’t? I learned a lot from protocols and think I will expand upon them in my classroom throughout my career.” Another way she transfers her CFG experience to her teach-

ing is by demonstrating to her students the value of reflection by requiring them to produce written and oral, formal and informal, reflections on their learning. When prompted to talk more about the connection between the CFG and her teaching, she speaks about “all the possibilities” she sees when she learns a new protocol. In identifying ways to incorporate her learning into her practice, she says she wants to talk with students more about her CFG experience and give them background on why she uses protocols so that they can understand the “real world” connection.

She also sees the potential to use skills she developed through participating in the study group to problem solve with parents and other members of the school community. For example, when faced with parents who deny their child’s apparent need for intervention, she saw how a protocol might be used to promote understanding, writing:

I just don’t get it. This kid needs help: He’s 12 and hangs with 20 year olds. He knows I read this stuff [his poetry]. This would be the perfect case to do a consultancy dilemma [protocol]. Every meeting, there is an excuse rather than a solution. That’s why I like Critical Friends . . . it is productive.

As part of the documentation submitted to the grant-funding agency, the entire CFG group was asked to identify ways in which the experience has impacted student learning. Rebecca shares her thoughts about this, “Some of us aren’t at that point where we can say how it’s affecting student learning. The only thing I can think of is it’s made me make a lot of choices about helping students be reflective because I’m always trying to work on that.” Her changing notions of reflective practice are evident as she looks back on her growth:

Prior to pre-student teaching, there was no focus on reflection in education classes. I have really realized the value of it now. [Critical Friends] helped me extend that to the kids’ work. And I think it will help me to make them think about and understand more what they’re learning . . . I think now it’s always important that kids know what and why and how they’re learning. [Critical Friends] has been a big part of that . . . [Critical Friends] is there, even if not blatantly. It’s hard to measure what it does or what it will do.

Indeed, the multiple ways in which the CFG experience manifests itself in Rebecca’s practice are hard to quantify. She feels strongly that this is “what I want to identify with and be recognized for. In short,” she adds, “I am sold for life.”

This commitment comes at an emotional cost, as Rebecca recounts

her feelings after the final meeting of the year: “During the last half hour we talked about next year—what [the group] would look like. This was the only time I felt I didn’t have a voice. I won’t be there next year, and I just wanted to bawl. I am in denial about leaving a place where I’ve found place.” Fortunately for Rebecca, shortly thereafter, she was offered a position for next year at a new school that is starting a CFG. She already looks forward to carrying some of her current concerns to the group next year. “A big problem for me is student assessment,” she writes. “I am very careful to justify my ‘grades,’ yet I never feel I really know what’s happening with the student. That’s very frustrating. So I hope [the group] will concentrate on looking at student work.”

At this point in her career, Rebecca is once again in a liminal state as she balances finishing her student teaching obligations with preparing for her new job. The consensus of those who have worked with her this semester is that she will be a strong teacher whose practice corresponds to her stated values. According to her mentor teacher, Rebecca “thinks like a teacher” and “has outstanding content knowledge.” Her university professor comments on her portfolio, which shows evidence of [her] “particular priorities and how [she acts] on them—for example reading and writing are carefully and continually linked, and [she approaches] reading in an interactive way.” As her supervisor, I saw exceptional knowledge of student-centered teaching practices accompanied by an effective management of the learning environment. Our expectations are that Rebecca will serve students well as she continues to develop her practice.

The way in which the Critical Friends experience has impacted Rebecca’s teacher identity is multi-stranded. When she speaks of safety, she speaks of change. When she talks about community, she talks about purposeful work. She celebrates her school and critiques it at the same time, seeing teachers who want to grow and those who don’t risk enough. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw distinct categories around her experience, one thing seems apparent. “[Involvement in the CFG] adds a whole new layer of depth to teaching,” she says. “Everything we do affects students. It’s really woven itself into the way I think about teaching.”

Discussion: Growing as a Teacher Educator

Rebecca’s professional identity at this point in her career is clearly tied to her CFG experiences, which suggests that formal collaborative practice can enhance the preservice teacher’s conception of the profession, as well as function as a psychological safety net. It is readily apparent from the way

Rebecca talks about her CFG experiences that she values the opportunity as part of her teacher preparation program. Her professional identity is infused with CFG values and practices, and she looks forward to a teaching career supported by continuing collaborative inquiry.

Rebecca's experiences, as demonstrated through this case study, offer insight into how teacher education programs might support the student teaching experience by providing access to authentic professional development experiences. Carolyn Phipps (2001) addresses the importance of nurturing new teachers, reminding us that:

In this crucial time of teacher shortage, in a time when new teachers rarely stay in the profession more than an average of three years, in this time of burnout, teachers, especially English teachers, need mentors. If we fail to retain good teachers in the profession, we are allowing the less than best to teach our children. (p. 23)

The collaborative inquiry model presented by CFGs is grounded in the belief that teachers of all levels can mentor and support one another. It offers a wealth of potential as a means of inducting new teachers into the practice and exposing them to the essence of professional development by inviting them to join with teachers examining their own evolving practice.

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Dana Fox (1995) offers five recommendations for mentoring new teachers: (1) enable novices to deal with their conceptions of teaching and teachers; (2) provide beginning teachers with opportunity to examine their beliefs about their content area; (3) provide new teachers with on-

going, collegial support in order to combat their sense of isolation; (4) acknowledge the context of their particular teaching situation; and (5) promote the reading of professional publications. The CFG offers a means for addressing all five areas, as participants grow their own practice through critical inquiry and text-based discussions. As teacher education programs endeavor to prepare candidates who have the resources and knowledge to sustain a strong career, it would behoove us to develop opportunities for student teachers to explore more fully what being a teacher is all about.

Linda Darling-Hammond's research (2000) on teacher education programs as a factor in career longevity points to the importance of engaging prospective teachers in inquiry early in their careers. Such programs "envision the professional teacher as one who learns from teaching rather than one who has finished learning how to teach, and the job of teacher education as developing the capacity to inquire sensitively and systematically into

the nature of learning and the effects of teaching” (p. 170). Learning through inquiry is the basis of Critical Friends endeavors, and such models present a viable method of promoting the student teacher’s reflective growth. Likewise, Graham, Hudson-Ross, and McWhorter (1997) present a compelling case for revising current teacher preparation practice to incorporate meaningful collaboration with all constituents, noting that such risk-taking can result in increased understanding. They speak to the power of breaking the boundaries that define professional interests and ending the isolation which so many classroom teachers adopt as a survival strategy. “Coming out of isolation to hear other teachers’ stories of perceived failure, uncertainty, and productive risk built confidence that all had the power to be good teachers. In many ways, we found, uncertainty is power” (p. 124).

Like many researchers, I find that the question I started with leads me to new wonderings and interesting problems. Most importantly, though, working with Rebecca on this case study provided me with a renewed understanding of what it means to become a teacher. Likewise, being involved in the case study prompted Rebecca’s thinking and reminds us that student teachers need multi-faceted support systems as they assume the role of teacher. “I feel fortunate,” she writes, “because your interviews have really helped me to think about some of the weird apprehensions I have. It’s helped me to absorb my experiences in school. The experience is very different with your back to the chalkboard.”

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