MAINTAINING, REFRAMING, AND DISRUPTING TRADITIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUPS

WENDY BURKE
Teacher Education, Eastern Michigan University

GARY E. MARX and JAMES E. BERRY
Leadership & Counseling, Eastern Michigan University

Districts across the country are currently adopting models of professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means for improving teachers’ instructional practice and student achievement. This evaluation research case study shares the 3-year history, development, and challenges of a district-wide implementation of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), a particular format for PLCs. Using Argyris and Schön’s (1974) theories of action framework, the authors identify teachers’ espoused theories about a contextually situated CFG initiative and examine teachers’ conceptualizations about the ways in which their work influences the progression and effectiveness of this professional development model. Findings from this study suggest that the degree to which the CFG implementation model is integrated with other school improvement initiatives, specifically those that address teachers’ professional development, dramatically influences how key stakeholders conceptualize and draw the necessary connections to their roles in improving instructional practice and addressing student achievement and learning.

The New Haven School District, a pseudonym for a Midwestern K–12 district with 4,100 students, is located within a mile of a large comprehensive public university and 10 miles from a Research I public university. Because of its proximity to these universities and the impoverished

Address correspondence to Wendy Burke, Teacher Education, Eastern Michigan University, 313 Porter Bldg., Ypsilanti, MI 48197, USA. E-mail: wendy.burke@emich.edu
student population it serves, New Haven School District has a historical relationship that reflects the ebb and flow of various political, social, and ideological agendas of those who have led and conducted research within its classrooms and schools. When Michael Williams became the assistant superintendent, his primary objective was to create a more coherent vision for professional development and research activities that solely addressed improving teachers’ practice in order to raise student achievement. “If we aren’t focusing on helping our students to learn and be successful, we won’t be doing it,” he said to our research group, at the onset of our forming a school–university Critical Friends Group (CFG) to support his leadership efforts.

“We are much smarter working together than we are working alone,” is an oft-repeated phrase Williams used as a mantra to guide the district-wide CFG professional development initiative. Williams, a National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) trainer, began introducing and implementing CFGs as a professional development model in New Haven in 2006 using what became annual week-long summer training sessions for “in-district” CFG coaches. The training focused on motivating and coaching teacher leaders and school leaders to engage other educators in sharing and improving their practices through a group learning model, a process we are calling the “deprivatization” of practice. These coaches, representing the continuum of formal roles, age, ethnicities, and years of experience in the district, facilitate the monthly CFG meetings held throughout the academic year at the district and school sites. Thus, New Haven is a fertile setting to explore the connections among teacher-initiated professional development models, critical friends groups, teacher development, leadership, whole school change, and instructional practices that impact student learning and achievement.

This research report shares interim findings from an ongoing longitudinal study conducted to evaluate the impact of a district-wide initiative in its 2nd year of the implementation of building-level CFGs, a specific version of professional learning communities (PLCs). The following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. What are the challenges involved in implementing CFGs as a district-wide initiative to improve student achievement and learning?
2. What is the espoused theory of action for improving student achievement and learning?
3. How does this initiative impact teachers’ instructional practice?

The purpose of this formative evaluation study is to highlight the successes and challenges inherent in this district’s use of the CFG model
and provide the district and school leaders with feedback to inform their progress as they enter the 3rd year of implementation. Initial findings suggest that the CFG model can positively impact the professional development of those involved. However, without explicit attention being given to the nature of the dialogue that actually occurs within the CFGs and its relationship to the larger school improvement efforts, and teachers’ individual practice, it is difficult to affect changes in how teachers either share or enact their instructional practices. The research also contributes to the larger educational community by illuminating our findings about the successes and challenges to prompt others to further examine discrepancies among espoused theories of PLCs, CFGs, and teacher-directed professional development models and stakeholders’ theories-in-use as reflected in their actual behavior.

**Framing the Theoretical Perspective**

This evaluation study is grounded in multiple theoretical frameworks that have influenced the meaning-making lens at every stage of the research process. In this section, we review the intersection of the research on the teacher, the teachers, PLCs, professional development, and organizational learning.

**When the Teacher Became the Teachers**

According to the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) Web site, a CFG is, “A professional learning community consisting of approximately 8–12 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for about 2 hours. Group members are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning” (NSRF National Center, para. 1, n.d.). In 1994, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform initiated the use of CFGs as a “different approach to professional development, one that would be focused on the practitioner and on defining what will improve student learning” (NSRF National Center, para. 2, n.d.) and that conflate the theoretical constructs: the effective teacher, reflective practitioner, and school change through professional development.

In the literature on the effective teacher, the centrality of the individual and his or her level of competency as a unit of analysis cannot be overstated. Historically, educational research has focused on the individual teacher and the relationship between her knowledge, skills, behaviors, and dispositions and her ability to impact student achievement. Some broad teacher effectiveness agendas include
teacher competency (Medley, 1977), pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986), learning to teach (Borko & Putnam, 2000), efficacy and preparedness (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005), dispositions (Socket, 2006), developmental phases (Danielson, 1996), and more recently, cultural competency (Bradfield-Kreider, 2001; Diller & Moule, 2005).

Becoming an effective teacher has also been written about as a journey that reflects a solitary, and often isolated, trip of survival, exploration, and soul searching that brings one from the wilderness into the light of how to enact one’s core learning principles about reaching and teaching one’s students (Ayers, 1993; Lima, 2005). Ethnographic narratives about individual teachers then serve as representative stories about the “teachers” whereby individuals are understood as monolithic, generalizable characters in a much larger narrative about schools, individual change, and school reform. Further, the many case studies represent an examination of a few teachers; the unit of analysis in each of these areas of extensive research has predominately been the individual teacher and her ability to change or develop herself, her teaching behaviors, competencies, and knowledge base.

It has been noted that few studies have yet to closely examine individual or groups of teachers’ effectiveness as it relates to student learning and achievement over a significant amount of time; such research is considered highly problematic to conduct because of the challenges in controlling for all of the possible variables that impact student outcomes or to withhold beneficial support for some students (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Shepard, 2000). Although some studies have examined teacher effectiveness in relationship to the specific impact of identified teacher behaviors on student engagement and learning, it is far more challenging to control for contextually situated and specific variables as they dramatically affect student learning and achievement from classroom to classroom and school to school settings. Herein, we distinguish student learning from student achievement as the difference between the process of students engaging in acquiring new knowledge and skills and the reporting of learning outcomes on formative and summative assessments. In this case, we focus primarily on student achievement as this was a stated goal for this CFG initiative.

With the introduction of organized professional development for teachers, a new unit of analysis became the focus for educational researchers: a group of teachers in one school or a district (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989). As states began to require inservice days through an enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, districts struggled with how to best structure their efforts to leverage teachers’ professional development to address contextually situated teacher qual-
ity and student achievement concerns. Many districts have adopted a learning community format designed to enable teachers to collaboratively address problems of practice, and understand their work as interdependent with others in their building and district. PLCs are promoted as a progressive, group learning method for empowering professionals to learn from one another through high levels of practitioner reflection that promotes positive change in individual and group behaviors (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Westheimer, 1998). However, aside from the occasional group work activities, few teachers have had previous experiences or mentoring during their teacher preparation to make the transition from an intrapersonal construction of instructional practice (i.e., reflecting on a mini-lesson in a 2–3-page reflective essay) to an interpersonal model of professional development (i.e., reflecting openly as a group on one lesson taught by a member of a group) and its direct linkage to whole-school reform (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

It is noteworthy that little distinction has yet been made between the often-cited research conducted on individual teachers’ practices and those studies conducted on groups of teachers as each of these bodies of literature inform PLC and CFG initiatives (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004). This blind spot in the literature, sometimes ignored, sometimes blurred, has created challenges for districts attempting to change individual teachers’ practice through whole-group models of professional development that rely on both individual and organizational change. The challenge for addressing teacher quality using professional development frameworks has been and continues to be the tension between approaching changing practice as individuals or as groups of individuals working within an organization that is implementing a whole-school model of change (Chrispeels & Martin, 2002; Elmore, 2000; Leithwood & Prestine, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Professional Learning Communities and the Work of Professional Development

According to DuFour et al. (2005), there is sufficient evidence that professional development practices associated with PLCs are preferable to more traditional, didactic formats. PLCs purport teacher-directed school improvement that centers a dialogic professional development format for engaging individual teachers in examining and improving instructional practice at the building level. This approach is billed as a framework that privileges teachers’ agendas for change over those of the district or school principal. Further, the literature on PLCs suggests that
in their purest form, each school’s improvement goals are internally informed by the professional dialogue among teachers, an analysis of student data, and the examination of student work instead of a priori or externally determined by the building principal or the district office. This purported deviation from the traditional agenda-setting norms for professional development and school improvement creates new unprecedented expectations for teachers’ collegial relationships about instructional practice and student learning, shared expertise, and linkages between individual classroom practice and school improvement goal setting. Such an approach also locates the teachers’ individual and collective expertise as the quintessential factor for creating and sustaining positive change in a school.

The challenge to this approach to goal-setting is a persistent gap between the knowledge of what needs be done within PLCs to improve student performance and enacting the purposeful collective and individual action steps required to do it. This disconnect between knowing and doing is particularly evident as teachers confront the notion of shared professional practice as a means to improve instruction and increase student achievement (Capers, 2004). Research on learning communities has found emerging evidence that PLCs positively impact teacher collaboration and professionalism, but these same studies found less support for the contention that PLCs change teachers’ practice, and even less to indicate they impact student achievement (Hord, 2004; Key 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Recognizing that large numbers of schools have embraced the PLC structure for professional development in an era of increased accountability pressure, this research examines broad challenges involved in implementing PLCs as a district-wide initiative and primarily focuses on understanding the nature of the implementation process in relation to the interim goal of the deprivatization of teachers’ practice.

Deprivatization, as we define it, is a characteristic of school culture associated with a PLC that enables teachers to develop deeper understanding of curriculum, instruction, and how students learn, and thus, how to increase teaching effectiveness. Where the norm of deprivatization is strong, teachers regularly observe classroom instruction, share instructional practices and interact in reciprocal roles as consultants, mentors, problem solvers, and learners. The process of developing a deprivatized school culture requires teachers to move from an intrapersonal view of instruction to a more interpersonal and ultimately, a professionalized perspective. When a school community has fully realized a deprivatized culture of practice, teachers’ understanding of and experiences with professional development activities reflect a shift from being the objects of others’ change agendas to being the subjects of
their own agenda as it relates to improving the impact of their individual and collective teaching practice on student learning, achievement, and engagement (Datnow, 1998).

**Theories of Action**

For this research we use a theoretical framework that draws upon Argyris and Schön’s (1974) conceptualization of “theories of action.” According to Argyris and Schön, individuals develop mental models regarding how to act in various social settings, and they posit that it is these tacit models that determine how people behave rather than the theories of action they explicitly espouse.

When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance, and which, upon request, he communicates to others. However, the theory that actually governs his actions is this theory-in-use. (Argyris & Schön, 1978, pp. 6–7)

Stated more plainly, individuals often report that they will behave in ways consistent with their expressed beliefs, principles, and values; yet in practice, they often behave differently than they have said they would.

Through a process that involves socialization, inquiry, and reflection, each individual member of an organization dynamically constructs his or her own representation of the predominant organizational theory-in-use that governs acceptable behaviors (Argyris & Schön, 1978). According to Smith (2001), Argyris and Schön’s vision for individual and organizational learning involves making a distinction between espoused theory and theory-in-use by reflecting on the extent to which the individuals and the collective behaviors line up with espoused theories. Further according to Smith,

The key role of reflection, we could argue, is to reveal the theory-in-use and to explore the nature of the “fit.” Much of the business of supervision, where it is focused on the practitioner’s thoughts, feelings and actions, is concerned with the gulf between espoused theory and theory-in-use or in bringing the latter to the surface. This gulf is no bad thing. If it gets too wide then there is clearly a difficulty. But provided the two remain connected then the gap creates a dynamic for reflection and for dialogue. (para. 8)

Argyris (1980) argued that individuals and organizations are most effective when there is congruence between the espoused theory people use
to communicate their intended behavior and their theory-in-use that determines what they actually do.

Using the theories of action framework to guide this first phase of our study, we examine CFG coaches’ and principals’ espoused theories concerning the relationships among teachers’ practice and student learning and achievement articulated during the early phase of CFG implementation. By uncovering the espoused “mental maps” that guide the meaning making of leaders of this initiative in Phase I, we are then able to compare these with theories-in-use concerning CFGs as inferred from observable behavior during Phase II of the study conducted during the 2008–2009 school year.

**Methodology**

Our examination reflects the use of case study methodology (Stake, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Yin, 2003) to conduct an in-depth bounded qualitative research study. Trust building and preliminary data collection began in August 2006 with dialogue among three university faculty and the district’s assistant superintendent. As observer participants during the monthly principals’ meetings and separate meetings with the district assistant superintendent during September 2006–February 2009, we recorded extensive field notes. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted December 2007–February 2008 with seven building principals and nine teacher coaches as identified by the principals as those leading highly functioning CFGs in their buildings. (Two of the CFGs were lead by co-teacher coaches.) The building principal and the teacher coach at one of the middle schools were not interviewed.

Data sources for this study include artifacts (e.g., handouts from meetings, e-mail correspondence, training materials, the district school improvement agenda); 3 years of field notes and documents generated through participant-observation in meetings with the assistant superintendent, district level meetings for principals, and CFG training programs; informal dialogue about the history and current concerns of the district; and transcripts of 14 formal interviews conducted with building principals and teacher coaches.

The interviews were conducted to inquire into the theories of action and challenges associated with implementing CFGs as a district-wide initiative to increase teacher effectiveness and improve student achievement. The empirical literature related to comprehensive school reform (Cohen, Gates, Glazer, Goldin & Peurach, 2007; Rowan & Miller, 2007) and research on the development and diffusion of innovations
W. Burke et al. (Peurach, 2007) was used to identify broad categories of challenges associated with large-scale program implementation. We adapted these categories to include four levels of challenges: those inherent in the CFG design; those in organizing to support CFG implementation; those associated with the implementation context of individual schools; and those in the broader internal and external educational, political, and fiscal environments. The categories were used to structure the interview protocol and as placeholders for an initial coding of the data in the transcribed interviews and field notes. The second phase of analysis utilized pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and the creation of concept maps to capture espoused theory associated with the initiative. Our conclusions were validated by triangulating between data sources; by “member checking” conversations with the assistant superintendent; and by conducting an informal presentation of preliminary findings to the district CFG advisory group to confirm our understanding of phenomena and obtain feedback.

**Challenging Notions of Professional Development “Work”**

The history of the CFG implementation in New Haven School District is characterized by some distinctive components that have directly affected its current state and how “progress” is understood and measured by teacher coaches, principals, and Mr. Williams. The district’s approach to starting with a few lead teachers and principals to serve as the teacher coaches and then fully implementing a trainer-to-trainer model of implementation has lead to this initiative being understood as an alternative to the traditional, top-down professional development programs and approaches that had been used throughout the history of the district. This chosen approach stands in stark contrast to those professional development programs that were provided by outsider “experts” who conducted 1- and 2-day “workshops” characterized by didactic formats and predetermined agendas. Carla, a teacher coach in one of the elementary schools, exemplifies this perspective:

I think with professional development at that time, each building had the choice of what they would do, so the principals decided with their staff how they would spend professional development days. So oftentimes here at our school we talked about school improvement and we had speakers come in. We always had an agenda; we always had something that we were doing. We’d work on reading and writing and I guess just have different speakers come in to talk to the staff. So that’s what was happening with professional development.
The fact that 85% of district educators participate in CFGs demonstrates that Mr. Williams’ approach has been successful for instilling the proposed mantra, “We are much smarter working together than we are working alone.” The extraordinary level of commitment to this mantra has resulted in renewed sense of ownership in and optimism about the district’s strategic vision and goals.

When asked directly, teacher coaches and principals say that the CFG “work” is to discuss and identify aspects of their practice that need to be examined and perhaps changed. After analyzing our field notes and interview data, countless instances document teacher coaches exploring how to use the CFG protocols to lead group discussions and to engage in professional dialogue. Discussions about the work related to their instructional practice are characterized as distinctive from their work as CFG coaches. In the role of coach, teachers characterize work as leading, discussing, and learning. In the instructional role, teachers and principals characterize work as teaching. The disconnect between learning and teaching as it relates to CFGs is most evident in these discussions about the work.

There is a strong espoused belief that this district is cultivating its own leadership and professional expertise among existing ranks and that this cultivation is the new work of professional development dialogue. Given the district’s shared history of serving as the fertile ground for many educational researchers, experts, and leaders attempting to infuse their own agendas and expertise into the system, educators in New Haven who were once skeptical of this approach are now valuing its benefits. According to Susan Bellow, the principal of the Early Childhood Program,

> When Michael came here three years ago, he began having conversations with administrators regarding PLCs and provided us with a number of readings about how to—how schools become high achieving schools, how to address achievement gaps, and basically how to better conduct professional development times and make better use out of our professional development times. We also looked at things in terms of what we wanted to do with collaboration among our staff and we have growing leaders among our staff.

Participant learning began with the development of procedural knowledge related to the CFG design elements that differ from traditional approaches to professional development (e.g., the establishment and reinforcement of group norms, protocol use, interdisciplinary conversation). As procedural routine became more established, participants began to develop an understanding that CFG work involves improving student achievement through changes in teachers’ instructional prac-
ties. The tacit assumption by all who are now trained as CFG coaches reflects the following progression: once teachers and school principals understand the CFG theory of change, they are expected to make a personal and collective commitment to engage in the espoused work of examining practice through interpersonal dialogue, which ultimately involves taking personal risk associated with the privatization of practice. In this instance, teachers are connecting what it could mean to be “effective, reflective practitioners” who participate in professional dialogue about their individual practice. These initial learning and commitment phases are interrelated precursors to actually engaging in the work of instructional improvement, which is a precursor to improving student achievement. Trust building among teachers and the coaches has been shared as an essential component of these professional dialogues that is located under the espoused theory about highly functioning CFGs.

Requiring principals to structure the CFG model as a key component of the professional development activities during designated professional development days, but relying on teacher leaders for its effective implementation during the actual meeting times has communicated an espoused belief that relies on teacher autonomy, pedagogical expertise, and professionalism that teachers appreciate. The CFG continues to be implemented as a voluntary professional development whereby those teachers who do not want to participate in a CFG are required to meet with the building principal in a professional learning community. This PLC was consistently characterized as the traditional top-down principal-driven discussion about school-related issues.

Based on our interview data, the espoused theory of the work of CFGs is that the agendas set by each group will be closely connected to emergent issues of practice that “naturally” will lead to professional dialogue about instructional practice, improvement, and student learning. Challenges encountered with this espoused theory now focus on CFG coaches knowing how to respond to the lack of coordination with school improvement goals and other district curriculum initiatives such as instructional consulting teams; a mathematics program with the nearby Research I university; a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) program in one of the elementary schools; and the ending of a Reading First grant. The espoused theory about teacher-directed and initiated professional dialogue and agenda setting is bumping up against teachers’ individual decision making about their own classroom practices and their involvement in the other initiatives listed above. Within the current implementation of CFGs, teachers—both as a collective and as individuals—are challenged to reconcile what they believe is the work of CFGs and professional development as a collective construct and their practices within the classroom.
Although using the clearly articulated goal of collectively working to raise student achievement as the reason for forming CFGs and scheduling monthly sacred blocks of time for CFG meetings has lead to increased engagement of teachers and principals in professional development activities, teachers are struggling to understand how professional development in the form of CFGs relate to their own individual professional development. The degree to which each CFG can attend to the relationships between teaching practices and student achievement gaps (i.e., minority vs. majority student achievement scores, disproportionality, and teachers’ expectations for student achievement) was analyzed in Phase II of our research project as we participated in the CFG meetings over a 6-month period.

Garnering Support for Critical Friends Groups: Evidence of Some Success

Evidence from the analyzed field notes and transcribed interviews strongly suggests that in the middle of the 3rd year of this initiative, New Haven’s implementation of CFGs is progressing in the following areas:

- A formalized training and support system is in place to facilitate the further development of teachers and principals who know and can use the CFG protocols to lead professional dialogue and establish communities of practice within and across buildings. One-third of teachers and principals have participated in introductory or advanced training and assumed leadership roles in CFG implementation at the building and district levels.
- Participants emerge from district-sponsored training events sharing a common espoused theory about CFGs evidenced by the consistency with which changing practice as a means to raising student achievement was cited as the intended outcome of CFG work.
- The CFG structure has replaced traditional approaches to professional development at all sites and participants demonstrate high levels of support and commitment for CFGs as a professional development model.
- There is evidence of some emerging change in school culture and some indication that some teachers may be experimenting with different instructional practices as a result of participation in a CFG. Teacher leaders repeatedly shared how much they loved working with their groups and the benefit of having time to discuss professional issues.
The consistency with which principals and coaches cited similar espoused theory associated with the CFG model is an impressive testimony to the effectiveness of the initial training they received. Coaches reported being excited about returning to their schools to implement the model at the conclusion of the training experience.

Levels of Impact and Challenges to the Deprivatization of Teachers’ Practice

As implemented in New Haven, the original NSRF design for CFGs was adapted and modified in three significant ways: a shift in focus from changing teachers’ practice to increasing student achievement, the decoupling of CFGs from a Comprehensive School Reform model, and the expansion of the design and unit of change from a school to a full-scale, district-wide initiative. These changes will be discussed and analyzed separately in what follows.

Teachers’ Practice and Student Achievement

The original CFG model emphasized changing teachers’ practice as the stated purpose that organizes and substantiates the professional dialogue prompted within the monthly meetings. Further, the fact that NSRF emphasizes “student learning” rather than “student achievement,” is a noteworthy difference that likely changes the starting point for examining the intersection of teachers’ practice and student work. The initial implementation strategy in New Haven emphasized improving student achievement, but when the leadership teams attempted to impose a strict focus on student achievement onto the agenda setting process within the CFGs, many experienced high levels of disequilibrium between the espoused intent of CFGs and the new mandates directed by the leadership team. Although many would have cited a shared commitment to addressing student achievement as the work of the CFGs, there was a consistently stated belief among principals and teacher coaches interviewed that each CFG would have the autonomy to determine its agenda, how it would structure the allotted time, and the expected outcomes from its members. However, other than references to state standardized test scores, student achievement has not been operationally defined, nor has the district provided any blueprint regarding what is required to raise student achievement nor how addressing student achievement relates to changes in teachers’ practice. This allows for multiple interpretations of what should be
done as illustrated by the following statement shared by one building principal,

> We, a team of us, went last year to the Hope conference. We thought that we really needed to start having some serious conversations about race and equity and so from there, that's where we started directing what our CFG was going to be doing and we started the book study.

Based on an analysis of data collected during interviews with teacher coaches and principals and during principals’ meetings, key leaders of this initiative are just beginning to make sense of connections among standardized test scores, student learning, and teachers’ practice. They are still unclear how to make these connections the emergent agenda within the individual CFG meetings. Thus there is a high degree of ambiguity regarding how to achieve the goal of increased achievement and each CFG group is left to determine how to do this on their own. Presently, there are few indications that teacher leaders perceive changing teacher practice as the primary means to this end.

As mentioned previously, the way in which New Haven initiated the CFG model as PLCs that strive to affect gains in student achievement has resulted in the dissociation of individual teachers’ practice from student outcomes within the CFGs’ professional dialogue. When asked, Mr. Williams shared that because of the teachers’ negative experiences with professional development agendas that focus on changing them, he was a strong advocate for CFGs leading to teachers examining themselves and their practice when issues related to student achievement were within their control to address. This stated purpose for CFGs and how they promote desirable instructional and pedagogical changes has currently lead to the sharing of teachers’ espoused beliefs about effective instruction. There is little evidence thus far that the widespread implementation of CFGs has lead to teachers either confronting or changing existing theories-in-use. This area of implementation and the above challenges to deprivatization of practice will be explored in much greater depth during Phase II of this research study as the district’s initiative moves into its 3rd year.

**Complex Interrelated Challenges**

Disassociating the district-wide implementation of CFGs from any specific reform initiative simplified the change process to some degree and probably reduced potential resistance by allowing building sites to maintain control of existing programs. However, the ultimate success of this approach requires principals and teachers to not only make sense of
the CFG process and procedural requirements but also determine the content and topics that define the work. In addition, all those involved will need to unlearn old ways of thinking about power relationships in schools and develop collegial relationships with group members before the CFGs can become self-directed. At this site, the initial groundwork has taken two full school years for most to develop a basic understanding of the teacher-directed nature of the CFG process with the hope of learning how to focus on student learning issues. “Teachers learning from other teachers” is espoused as a primary purpose of CFG work and yet according to teacher coaches and principals, teachers have yet to share much if anything about their individual instructional practices within the larger group settings or the individual CFG meetings.

Conventional wisdom underestimates the role of adult learning in the CFG implementation process and the time required for this learning to occur. Coming to understand the nature of the CFG innovation requires teachers and principals to adopt new norms of interaction, unlearn old ways of thinking, acquire new knowledge and skills, and learn how to apply these in context before they can begin the real work of changing instructional practice. Because the nature of CFG work has not been formally specified, a high degree of variability regarding topics and activities currently exists across groups within individual schools and across schools in the district; CFGs have yet to become integrated with school reform processes, programs and initiatives; and most CFGs currently orient outward to the school and community environments rather than inward to the classroom and a critical examination of instructional practice.

Issues of Scale and Probabilities for Sustainability

The original CFG model treated the school as the unit of change. The New Haven version is a district initiative. The decision to go to scale and use existing structures and resources resulted in part of every designated professional development day to be at least partially devoted to CFG work. This implementation strategy appealed to teachers, because it observed some contractual obligations about their work day hours, integrated the time for teachers to meet for professional dialogue within the school day, and helped to engage large numbers of people in the initiative by allowing teachers to assume key facilitation roles. Further, the effectiveness of this model as implemented rests on its use of teachers selling the benefits of the initiative to their collegial peers. Initial recruitment of teacher leaders included a heavy emphasis on teacher autonomy and control of the professional development agenda, which
appealed to participants and resulted in structural implementation at scale over a relatively short timeframe. However the issue of agenda control is now a potential barrier to focusing CFG work on teacher practice, thus achieving alignment with the original model’s theory of change and the espoused theory articulated by the district.

An association with existing professional development structure, as opposed to a focus on instructional improvement, is one factor that made it hard for participants to understand the intended nature of the work because they initially interpreted the CFG process using existing mental models of what constitutes professional development. Teachers seem to readily understand the benefits of autonomy and control of agenda setting associated with the CFG approach, but most struggle with a lack of a frame of reference for understanding or discussing how CFGs will improve student achievement, which was another and arguably the intended “selling point.”

Although the district has provided exceptionally high levels of training and implementation support, the variability in building level context and leadership capacity puts a strain on available resources. The district’s decision to cultivate the “in-house” capacity of so many of its school leaders and teachers rather than providing greater ongoing and in-depth support and professional development for principals and CFG coaches has resulted in a widespread horizontal but quite thin level of expertise among those who are being called upon to lead this initiative. CFG coaches struggle to move their groups much beyond the initial introduction of each of the CFG protocols. As Mr. Williams noted, “My approach has lead to the realization that now we need to go much deeper in our thinking about how to use CFGs to improve student achievement.”

Perhaps the biggest challenge to New Haven’s district-wide implementation of CFGs is the lack of integration with other initiatives in the school at this phase of implementation. For example, the very way that professional development days are structured tends to reinforce that there is CFG work and school improvement work (i.e., “We do school improvement for half the time and CFG the rest of the time,” said one interviewed teacher). Mr. Williams’ modeling in the principal’s CFG was structured in a similar way. Even with extensive training, figuring out how to facilitate CFGs in the various school contexts is an ongoing experiential learning process. The CFG work is a part-time responsibility for these full-time teachers.

**Discussion**

Argyris (1980) made the case that effectiveness results from developing
congruence between theory-in-use and espoused theory. Thus, CFGs in New Haven must centralize their agendas on their espoused theory that changing practice is the work of professional development, uncover and explore their theories-in-use as they relate to instructional practice and student learning, and reconcile any discrepancies if these groups are to succeed. The groundswell that propels this initiative will soon flounder if CFG teacher coaches do not soon illuminate and then address the blind spot between the collective work of CFGs and the work that requires individual teachers to become engaged in learning about and from their instructional practices as they relate to promoting student learning and achievement. A major challenge facing the district administration is determining how to leverage district-wide change within spaces that teachers now consider sacred. If teachers within a CFG do not feel that their instructional practices and their impact on student learning is the right topic to explore, there is little that can be done to redirect the work without undermining the initial promises of this district’s alternative approach to professional development.

By design, CFGs provide a generic delivery system for professional development intended to support existing or emerging programs of reform. Currently, CFG activity in New Haven appears only loosely connected to the work of school improvement and participants are challenged to recognize that integration is intended. CFGs were originally designed as a professional development delivery system at sites voluntarily participating in Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) projects. The “content” for the professional development was provided by the particular CSR model that was adopted by the Annenberg schools. CSR models utilized three basic design strategies to encourage instructional change. The first two strategies included the use of “professional controls” (e.g., a well-specified curriculum, descriptions of what constitutes an effective instructional program) or “procedural controls” (e.g., a set of highly specific instructional routines for teaching a particular subject) to organize and guide the work (Rowan & Miller, 2007). When professional or procedural controls are utilized, implementation fidelity is concerned with the specified practices and routines.

CFG implementation in New Haven applied a form of the third CSR design strategy, “cultural control,” as the means to bring about instructional improvement. This approach promotes a normative commitment among principals, coaches, and teachers to an abstract vision of increased student achievement. No particular area of the curriculum is targeted for change and desired changes in teaching practices are unspecified, so each CFG group, and each teacher within the group, is required to select a content area and then determine the change in instruction that is most appropriate and likely to increase student per-
formance. Implementation fidelity is concerned with the CFG process rather than any particular curricular or instructional innovation.

Because student achievement has no operational definition, individual interpretations of what contributes to student achievement provide a rationale to justify almost anything that teachers want to discuss in their CFG group, and these interpretations vary widely. There are instances where the principal provides the rationale, even though the topic is clearly peripheral to technical work.

Further Inquiry

It appears certain that reaching the goal of improved achievement in New Haven will require an intensive and long-term commitment to a complex developmental CFG implementation process. A proposed conjecture is that this is a typical implementation phenomenon, rather than an indication of any failure on the part of the people involved. This evaluative case study has resulted in the identification of the following key areas for further research related to implementation challenges:

1. How do schools and districts integrate existing and emerging instructional programs and improvement processes into coherent designs that can provide the “content” and conceptual knowledge for CFG work?
2. How do schools and districts balance the decentralized, self-directed nature of CFG group activity with increasing external accountability demands focused on system outputs? How do they assess progress?
3. How do schools and districts sustain the training and support required to facilitate sense-making related to the CFG innovation and avoid drift? Are current efforts sufficient?

This study is continued during the 2008–2009 year in order to further examine what we had previously determined to be at the heart of the meaning-making between individual and group professional development, district school improvement, and student learning and achievement. In Phase II of this study, we acted as participant-observers in two CFGs and attended school improvement meetings at an elementary school over a 6-month time period. Getting closer to the level of individual and group meaning-making allowed us to inquire more specifically about teachers’ professional dialogue, and teachers’ attempts to reconcile espoused theories and theories-in-use as they relate to this professional development initiative.
References


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