Professional Development Schools and Critical Friends Groups: Supporting Student, Novice and Teacher Learning

PATRICIA J. NORMAN
Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, USA

KATHERINE GOLIAN
Walzem Elementary School, North East Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas, USA

HEATHER HOOKER
Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, USA

Recently developed Professional Development School standards underscore the importance of professional learning community, inquiry, shared decision-making and a focus on student learning. These standards closely mirror the goals of Critical Friends Groups, a significant movement in education to improve student achievement through teacher collaboration and inquiry. This paper examines the experiences of a teacher candidate, mentor teacher, and university teacher educator when school and university partners at an elementary Professional Development School implemented Critical Friends Groups. Critical Friends Groups helped novices, experienced teachers, and teacher educators to examine teacher and student work by engaging in inquiry-oriented, practice-based, self-disclosing professional conversation.

As the nation’s P–12 student population becomes increasingly diverse and the teaching force remains largely white, middle class, and female (National Center on Education Statistics, 2005), the need for teachers to be able to
discern, appreciate, and address the diverse needs, capacities, and interests of their students has never been greater. All too often, however, the multiple demands placed on classroom teachers leave little opportunity for thoughtful examination and analysis of students’ learning and work. Rather than wonder about who children are, teachers increasingly ask what can be done to “fix” students (Paley, 2004).

Novice and veteran teachers alike need ongoing support in learning how to examine who students are and to develop their capacity to listen to, understand, and assess children and their learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Only recently, however, have teachers and their professional learning needs begun to take center stage in educational reform. Educators frequently invoke the idea of teachers as “lifelong learners,” but most schools lack well-developed structures or systems for providing serious learning opportunities to teachers (Johnson et al., 2004; Sarason, 1990).

Recognizing the need to change the professional culture into which novices are inducted, several ambitious teacher education initiatives have linked teacher education reform with efforts to restructure schools into centers of sustained inquiry (Levine, 1992). One such initiative advocated the creation of Professional Development Schools, where professional education, teaching for understanding, and inquiry drive university and school collaboration. In other words, both university and school personnel work together to support children’s, preservice teachers’ and experienced teachers’ learning (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996; Holmes Group, 1990; Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).

Heeding that call, Trinity University redesigned its teacher preparation program in 1988, moving away from a traditional four-year program that culminated in a semester of student teaching to a five-year internship program leading to a Master of Arts in Teaching degree. In addition, Trinity created long-term Professional Development School partnerships with a small number of public schools. Prospective secondary teachers complete a major in their disciplinary field while elementary teacher candidates complete a humanities major with concentrations in English and history.

All students take only 11–14 hours of undergraduate education courses that combine theoretical learning with fieldwork in our Professional Development Schools. During undergraduate field-based practica, where students conduct a careful study of one child and analyze the relationship between a teacher’s instruction and students’ learning, teacher candidates begin to identify the assumptions, values, and beliefs they bring to their preparation about the teacher’s role and to get inside the intellectual work of teaching. A year-long internship completed during the fifth year in a Professional Development School is the centerpiece of the program. Mentor teachers assume primary responsibility for guiding and supporting interns’ learning to teach.
In the fall of 2002 Trinity launched a new long-term Professional Development School partnership with Walzem Elementary, a school that serves 665 students, 87 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged and nearly half of whom are Limited English Proficient (LEP). 75 percent of the students are Hispanic, 12 percent are African American, 7 percent are Anglo, and 6 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander. The school has a mobility rate of 31 percent.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOLS AND CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUPS: A SHARED AGENDA

As the university liaison at Walzem, Pat Norman was interested in exploring whether and how Critical Friends Groups—a significant movement in education to improve student learning through teacher collaboration and inquiry—could support the school’s Professional Development School mission. Critical Friends Groups, or CFGs, were initially launched by the Annenberg Foundation and are currently supported by the National School Reform Faculty, a network of people, schools, and organizations committed to pursuing significant change in schools through the development of learning communities. Critical Friends Groups enable small groups of educators to create a professional learning community by establishing group norms and engaging in collaborative practices. A CFG consists of 6–10 members who commit themselves to learning together on a long-term, consistent basis. Each group is facilitated by a “coach,” usually a school colleague, who facilitates meetings and helps group members use a variety of protocols—a set of procedures to structure a focused, equitable, substantive conversation—to examine teacher and student work, solve problems, discuss professional literature, and observe each other’s teaching (Bambino, 2002).¹

Given the close fit between the purposes of Critical Friends Groups and recently developed Professional Development School standards that underscore the importance of professional learning community, inquiry, shared decision-making, and a focus on student learning (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2001), Walzem’s school and university partners launched Critical Friends Groups in 2003 and are entering their third year of implementation. Ten teachers, the principal, assistant principal, and Pat completed the five-day coaches’ institute and serve as CFG coaches. Trinity University funded this training.

Through our learning and work at Trinity University and Walzem Elementary, we have been participants in and facilitators of Critical Friends

¹ Further information about protocols can be found at the National School Reform Faculty website, www.nsrfharity.org.
Groups. Kady Golian, a graduate of Trinity's M.A.T. program, is now a mentor teacher and CFG coach at Walzem. Heather Hooker recently completed her year-long internship in Kady's classroom. Pat co-coordinates the elementary teacher preparation program, teaching undergraduate education courses and serving as Walzem's university liaison, where she supervised Heather and works closely with mentor teachers and CFG coaches. In addition, Heather participated in the school-based CFG that Pat facilitates.

In this paper, we offer three vignettes—each highlighting our distinct perspective as university teacher educator, teacher candidate, and mentor—that demonstrate how our work with Critical Friends Groups supports both preservice and practicing teachers' professional learning. The first vignette illustrates how Pat uses CFG protocols to help undergraduate students begin to engage in professional conversation as well as to discern the needs and capacities of children through a semester-long child study project. The second vignette describes how Heather's presentation of her student's math work during a school-based Critical Friends Group strengthened both her school colleagues' and her own capacity to describe and analyze student learning. The third vignette illustrates how Kady's facilitation of a Critical Friends Group helped her learn how to create the conditions for novices and experienced teachers alike to engage in the analysis of teacher and student work. Finally, we discuss several implications for teacher education.

SUPPORTING TEACHER CANDIDATES' LEARNING THROUGH CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUP PROTOCOLS

In addition to coaching a Critical Friends Group, Pat co-facilitates a study group for the thirteen CFG coaches at Walzem with Kady. Beyond these direct attempts to support the professional culture at Walzem, Pat also works with teacher candidates in Trinity's teacher preparation program so that they (a) are able to engage in the kinds of collaborative processes used in CFGs once they enter the Professional Development School as interns; (b) are well-versed in the differences between congeniality and collegiality; and (c) are well-positioned to serve as agents of change rather than reinforceurs of the status quo, in which teachers are isolated, congenial rather than collegial, and unwilling to make public their practice or students' learning.

Pat introduces teacher candidates to protocols early on in their undergraduate courses in order to sensitize them to the importance of equal talk time, of focusing on student and teacher work, and of making public one's practice. In addition to using a variety of text-based protocols to structure students' exploration of course readings, students also have opportunities to engage in protocols that connect to specific course assignments. For example, in an early childhood practicum in which teacher candidates meet once
a week on campus with Pat while completing weekly field visits in an early childhood classroom, they study a single preschool or kindergarten student across the semester.

This “child study” project is designed to help teacher candidates develop a stance of curiosity and openness toward children and their learning (e.g. who is this child? vs. what’s wrong with this child?), the ability to discern children’s capacities, preferences, interests, and needs, and skill in supporting interpretations with descriptive evidence. To meet these goals, students receive guidance and support across the semester, including the use of the categories from the “Descriptive Review of the Child,” a collaborative process that Pat Carini and her colleagues at the Prospect School developed to help a teacher get to know her student better so that she can use that understanding to better meet the child’s needs. These categories include: physical presence and gestures; disposition, temperament, emotional tone; relationships with peers and adults; activities, interests, preferences; and formal learning. During their field visits, teacher candidates use these categories to focus their observations of their study child.

In addition, after teacher candidates draft their child study, Pat uses the “Tuning Protocol” with her students so that they receive substantive feedback from their peers about strengths and vulnerabilities in their child study as well as concrete suggestions about how to strengthen the draft. Specifically, teacher candidates are placed in small groups and follow the steps of the Tuning Protocol which allots a particular amount of time for every step (Table 1).

Patterns in Teacher Candidates’ Experiences with Protocols

Regardless of the particular CFG protocol used in the early childhood education course, the final step in any protocol is to debrief the process. In other words, teacher candidates step back from the content of the talk they just engaged in and reflect on what it felt like to participate in the protocol, including any frustrations or surprises they experienced as well as insights they gained. Having used CFG protocols for the past two years in her undergraduate courses, Pat has identified several patterns in teacher candidates’ experiences with protocols.

Many undergraduates often express initial discomfort and frustration at the time limits given for the different steps in a protocol. When, as the protocol facilitator, she invites students to move from one step to the next, they later report that this move sometimes feels “unnatural” and “uncomfortable” to them. Although a small number of students, oftentimes those who are most dominant in open discussions, continues to voice their desire for less structured forms of talk, most teacher candidates come to appreciate protocols for equalizing the playing field by building in think time as well as allowing everyone an equal opportunity to talk. Most students really appreciate
hearing from everyone, an important quality in a professional learning community.

In addition, many students shared initial misgivings about raising hard questions and providing constructive feedback to their peers. Moreover, students described how challenging they found it to only listen and take notes while receiving feedback from their colleagues during protocols. They had to fight their initial impulse to explain, justify, and defend their thinking or actions. Over the course of the semester the teacher candidates grew more adept at both giving and receiving feedback, including learning to provide substantive feedback as well as to appreciate hearing feedback without having to respond to it immediately.

FROM LEARNER OF PROTOCOLS TO PARTICIPANT IN A SCHOOL-BASED CFG

When Heather entered into her year-long internship in Kady’s classroom at Walzem, she felt that her undergraduate coursework had prepared her well to engage in professional dialogue in her school-based CFG. Her undergraduate experiences helped Heather gain familiarity with various CFG protocols, facility in engaging in these protocols, and an appreciation for the need to balance her engagement as a listener and contributor during discussions.
Because new Critical Friends Groups were formed at the beginning of the school year, Heather felt like an insider to her new professional learning community and that both she and her group members began on equal footing.

Although Heather felt that her voice and ideas were valued in her Critical Friends Group, her CFG experiences stand in contrast to other contexts within the school where she felt that her position as an intern made it too risky to speak her mind. For example, she noticed that one person usually did most of the talking during faculty meetings and that rarely enough handouts were made for the interns to take their own copy. She and the other interns often received the implicit message during faculty meetings that interns were to be seen rather than heard. Thus, as a Professional Development School, Walzem had developed pockets of professional learning communities within rather than across the school.

Heather's willingness to take risks in her Critical Friends Group led her to raise important questions about such school-wide issues as character development and to present her students' work in her CFG. While completing five weeks of lead teaching in the spring semester, Heather asked Pat if she could sign up to present at an upcoming Critical Friends Group meeting. Heather wanted to present because she realized that she only attended to students' computations when assessing their math work which contrasted sharply with how she approached the assessment of students' writing. By presenting students' math work, she hoped to broaden her understanding about what there was to notice, appreciate, and respond to in their mathematical reasoning and learning.

Pat and Heather met for a pre-conference in order to clarify the particular work that Heather wanted to bring and to choose which CFG protocol made the most sense given her goals. Both agreed that the Collaborative Assessment Conference seemed the logical choice. The Collaborative Assessment Conference is a protocol designed to force teachers to slow down and look at what is actually there in the student’s work without making judgments. So often teachers are pressed for time, unable to give the undivided attention that students' work deserves because of the multiple responsibilities they must juggle. This protocol creates that rare time and space to become truly curious about the work, first describing it in great detail before raising questions and finally making some tentative interpretations about it (Table 2).

When Heather presented at the CFG meeting, she first distributed three pages, each containing a single word problem involving simple addition and subtraction. The word problem itself had been stapled to the top of the page, and the student’s written work had been recorded below. Because the Collaborative Assessment Conference protocol asks the presenter to withhold reasons for bringing the work to the group, the group simply read the work in silence then members were asked, “What do you see?” Heather remained silent during this step in the protocol, taking notes on group members’ responses, which included descriptions of the drawings that the child had made, specific words that had been underlined in the problem, and numbers that had been recorded and marked out with Xs.
Group members were then asked, “What questions does this work raise for you?” Again, Heather listened and took notes as her colleagues wondered about the teacher’s goals for this assignment, the selection of a particular word problem, and what knowledge and skills a child would have to possess in order to complete the word problems. Next, group members were asked, “What do you think this child is working on?” Their responses included clarifying what the question is asking, identifying important information in a word problem, and representing numbers pictorially.

Heather then briefly shared what had stood out to her while listening to her colleagues’ comments. As a result of participating in the protocol and the group’s careful examination of the child’s work, Heather explained her new insight that the student may not have known what the questions in the word problems were asking. Moreover, she had been particularly struck by a group member’s idea that the student might be working on finding the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2. Collaborative Assessment Conference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Getting Started</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The presenting teacher puts the selected work in a place where everyone can see it or provides copies for the other participants. S/he says nothing about the work, the context in which it was created, or the student, until Step 5. The participants observe or read the work in silence, perhaps making brief notes about aspects of it that they particularly notice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Describing the Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The facilitator asks the group, “What do you see?” Group members provide answers without making judgments about the quality of the work or their personal preferences. If a judgment emerges, the facilitator asks for the evidence on which the judgment is based.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Asking Questions about the Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The facilitator asks the group, “What questions does this work raise for you?” Group members state any questions they have about the work, the child, the assignment, the circumstances under which the work was carried out, and so on. The presenting teacher may choose to make notes about these questions, but s/he does not respond to them now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Speculating About What the Student Is Working On</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The facilitator asks the group, “What do you think the child is working on?” Participants, based on their reading or observation of the work, make suggestions about the problems or issues that the student might have been focused on in carrying out the assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Hearing from the Presenting Teacher</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The facilitator invites the presenting teacher to speak. The presenting teacher provides his or her perspective on the student’s work, describing what s/he sees in it, responding (if s/he chooses) to questions raised, and comments on anything surprising or unexpected that s/he heard during the describing, questioning and speculating phases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Discussing Implications for Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The facilitator invites everyone (participants and presenting teacher) to share any thoughts they have about their own teaching, children’s learning, or ways to support this particular child in future instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <strong>Debriefing the Collaborative Assessment Conference</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group reflects on the experiences of or reactions to the conference.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developed by Steve Seidel and colleagues at Harvard Project Zero.
important information in the word problem. Presenting the student’s work at her CFG helped her to slow down and appreciate a number of distinct skills required to solve word problems beyond simply computing the correct answer. All group members, including Heather, then discussed implications for teaching and learning based on what they had observed in the student’s work.

When debriefing the protocol, Heather shared how helpful she found the group’s comments and discussion and reported that she was armed with new ideas about where to go next with the student. Another group member, herself an experienced teacher, commented on the fact that upon initial examination, all she “saw” was a word problem which left her wondering what in the world there was to discuss during the protocol. After the group had generated an entire list of observations and questions, however, the teacher realized that there was much more to notice and think about than she had originally thought.

It is worth noting that Heather, herself a teacher candidate, was the first member of her Critical Friends Group to present student work to her group. Other members had engaged the group in examining professional texts and school-wide issues, or had presented teacher work, including lesson plans and other artifacts that grew out of their teaching practice. Bringing samples of students’ actual work to one’s CFG takes real courage and openness. That Heather did so illustrates her own willingness to take risks and to make her practice public; this action in turn moved the entire group forward.

FROM CFG PARTICIPANT TO FACILITATOR

Kady completed Trinity’s M.A.T. program before Pat began using CFG protocols in undergraduate and graduate courses. Thus, when she accepted her first teaching position in a first grade classroom at Walzem the year it became a Professional Development School, she had not experienced first-hand how protocols can structure professional conversation. Her work as a CFG coach and co-facilitator of a monthly study group for the CFG coaches dramatically altered her understanding of what it means to be part of a professional community and strengthened her capacity to create professional community for her colleagues.

Before her experiences with Critical Friends Groups, Kady’s passion for teaching and learning routinely led her to “take on the world,” telling anyone and everyone her beliefs and ideas. At her first faculty meeting, for example, Kady’s voice was heard louder than any other as she criticized the school’s “discipline program,” raising many questions and concerns about whether the program treated students with fairness and respect. During grade-level meetings she consistently fought for the floor in an effort to ensure that her voice was heard. A relentless advocate for students, she firmly believed that she was “right” and that her colleagues and administrators simply needed to listen to her.
By the end of the first month of school she had alienated and angered many of her colleagues. Kady continued in this vein for the remainder of her first year, aggressively vying for the floor, waiting for that moment when she could jump in to raise questions and offer alternative viewpoints. Once Kady began to think harder about how she herself was contributing to this impasse, she realized that she needed to change the way she approached her interactions with colleagues.

Kady’s first year of participation in and facilitation of CFGs helped her begin to understand that real learning takes place when one stops talking, and begins looking and listening and questioning. She learned that teachers, like students, cannot be told the answers. Rather, they need space and time to seek their own understanding by raising questions that matter to them. Thus, when she entered her second year of CFG work, she wanted to act on this understanding by creating opportunities for the members in her Critical Friends Group to be heard.

Her new CFG had chosen a year-long focus on classroom management. Rather than planning out an agenda for the year that solely reflected Kady’s values and beliefs, she developed a plan that surfaced the group’s needs and questions. At one of their first meetings, Kady invited the group to do a Chalk Talk, a protocol that encourages participants to respond in writing to a prompt, in this case, “What dilemmas or issues are you having with classroom management?” (Table 3).

For 15 minutes the group wrote in silence on a large sheet of butcher paper, both recording their own responses to the question prompt as well as responding to group members’ recorded ideas. The Chalk Talk provided a low-risk opportunity for the teachers to start thinking about their own questions and dilemmas and ensured that everyone be able to share their ideas without fear of interruption or being put on the spot. Questions generated through the Chalk Talk included how to help students accept responsibility for their own actions and how teachers can control their own emotional responses to students’ misbehavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3. Chalk Talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Format**

- **Time:** varies according to need (from 5 minutes to one hour)
- **Materials:** chalk board and chalk or paper on the wall and markers
  1. The facilitator briefly explains that Chalk Talk is a silent activity. No one may talk and anyone may add to the chalk talk as they please. Participants can comment on other people’s ideas simply by drawing a line to the comment.
  2. The facilitator writes a relevant question in a circle on the chalk board or large piece of butcher paper on the wall.
  3. The facilitator ensures that there are writing instruments for all participants.
  4. People write as they feel moved.
  5. When it’s done, the group debriefs the process.

Originally developed by Hilton Smith, Foxfire Fund.
Once Kady’s group quietly read over their Chalk Talk, she introduced the Goal-Setting Protocol, an activity designed to help a group set its agenda for the year by letting members get an overall sense of the group’s interests, and then giving each individual an opportunity to choose the focus of one or two meetings (Table 4). It also allows for some open slots to address any pressing issues that members want to bring as they arise. Each group member first brainstormed a list of her own interests around three categories, relating each to classroom management: individual dilemmas, topics of interest to read about and process together, and school-wide issues to examine as a group. Each member then chose the focus of two meetings.

One teacher, for example, was very interested in reading and learning more about “positive discipline” and its implications for her classroom management and teaching. On that group member’s day, the group discussed an article about positive discipline that the teacher had selected and distributed at an earlier meeting so that everyone could read it ahead of time. Kady facilitated the discussion of the positive discipline article using a text-based

---

**TABLE 4. Goal Setting Protocol**

**Purpose:** to help groups set agendas for their year of work together.

1. **Individual Brainstorm**
   - On their own, participants list ideas for:
     - individual teacher or student work to bring to the group
     - topics to read about and discuss as a group
     - school or district-wide issues to address as a group
   - 10 minutes

2. **Triad Share**
   - In groups of 3, each participant gets 3 minutes to talk through the list s/he generated during the brainstorm.
   - 10 minutes

3. **Create Group List**
   - Each participant adds one choice from their own personal list or something that was discussed in their triad in each category on chalkboard. Once everyone has contributed to new “group lists,” each participants places a sticky dot next to the two choices that most interest them in the “reading topics” and “school/district-wide issues” categories. No one places dots in the “individual work” category.
   - 10 minutes

4. **Schedule Future CFG Meetings**
   - With the coach facilitating, each participant chooses to “sign-up” for a specific future CFG meeting date and identifies the individual work, reading topic, or school-wide issue s/he plans to “present.” Some CFG dates should be left open to accommodate issues that emerge within the group and participants’ practice.
   - 10 minutes

Developed by Jay Davis.
TABLE 5. Save the Last Word for Me

**Purpose:** to clarify and deepen our thinking about articles we read. The process is designed to build on each other's thinking, and not to enter into a dialogue. Timing is important; each round should last approximately 7 minutes.

1. Create groups of four. Choose a timekeeper (who also participates).
2. Each participant silently identifies what s/he considers to be the most significant idea addressed in the article, and highlights that passage.
3. When the group is ready, a volunteer member identifies the part of the article that s/he found to be most significant and reads it aloud to the group. This person says nothing about why s/he chose that particular passage.
4. The other 3 participants each have 1 minute to respond to the passage - saying what it makes them think about, what questions it raises for them, etc.
5. The first participant then has 3 minutes to state why s/he chose that part of the article and to respond to - or build on - what s/he heard from his/her colleagues.
6. The same pattern is followed until all four group members have had a chance to be the presenter and to have “the last word.”
7. Optional open dialogue about the text and the ideas and questions raised during the first part of the protocol.
8. Debrief the experience. Was this a useful way to explore the ideas in the text and to explore participants' own thinking?

Developed by Patricia Averette.

protocol called Save the Last Word for Me (Table 5). This protocol first asks each group member to identify silently what s/he considers to be the most significant idea addressed in the article and highlight that passage. In successive rounds, each group member reads aloud his/her selected passage, listens while group members individually respond to that passage, then gets the “last word” by responding to what s/he heard and/or explaining the reason why that passage was chosen.

Although some group members may not have been especially interested in “positive discipline,” the protocol provided the structure needed for them to have a substantive, thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the article, illustrating Kady’s ability to create the conditions needed for professional community including trust, safety, structure, and shared responsibility for everyone’s learning.

**DISCUSSION**

As the three vignettes indicate, although protocols vary in terms of their specific purposes and features, they are designed to structure professional talk by outlining a set of agreed-upon guidelines for the conversation and to clearly delineate what role each group member plays (e.g. facilitator, presenter and participants) (Allen & Blythe, 2004). Heather’s presentation of her student’s work illustrated that protocols “interrupt or slow down teachers’ usual responses to student work (to evaluate and grade it),” instead inviting teachers to consider what the work can tell them about the
student’s understanding and/or the teacher’s instructional practice (Little et al. 2003, p. 188). Thus, rather than acting as a support group where educators swap stories or offer moral support, CFGs promote an inquiry-oriented, practice-based, self-disclosing form of conversation that creates opportunities for teachers to raise questions about and carefully examine their practice and students’ learning (Lord, 1994).

The powerful learning opportunities created through protocols are more fully realized when teachers bring to them a genuine sense that some aspect of their practice or students’ learning is worth closer examination. Each vignette highlights our shared commitment to inquiry and reflection. Pat hoped to strengthen her ability to help teacher candidates discern the capacities and needs of children as well as give and receive constructive feedback. Heather wanted to improve her ability to describe and analyze students’ mathematical understanding and skills, and Kady felt a desire to learn how to create the conditions that would enable her CFG to become a true learning community. Each of us had experienced a felt need to enhance some aspect of our practice then used CFG protocols and processes to move our practice forward.

Introducing undergraduates to the importance of inquiry and professional learning community as well as providing practice in the use of protocols positioned teacher candidates to be “model” CFG participants during their year-long internships in the Professional Development School. Not every CFG member at Walzem shared an initial investment in inquiry or protocols. Having experienced first-hand the power of protocols to create focused, substantive, equitable dialogue as undergraduates, the interns were then able to help establish a culture of joint inquiry with their teacher colleagues in the school’s Critical Friends Groups.

Beyond positioning teacher candidates to be risk takers and model participants in their school-based CFG, their engagement in CFG work both at the university and Professional Development School offered them a vision of the kind of professional learning community that is not only desirable but achievable in schools. This vision, along with their commitment to enacting it, has the potential to create greater continuity between their formal preparation and induction years. Recent statistics paint an alarming picture of how poorly schools retain novices once they begin teaching. Almost half of all teachers leave the classroom within their first five years (Ingersoll, 2002). High teacher turnover limits a school’s ability to create and sustain a strong professional learning community (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003).

The culture of inquiry and professional community that gets established through the work of Critical Friends Groups at Walzem creates an atmosphere that makes graduates of Trinity’s teacher preparation program want to continue to work there. It also instills in graduates who seek employment elsewhere the desire to bring these practices to their new settings. For example, one intern who was recently hired at a non-Professional Development School has already asked his building principal to be trained
as a CFG coach so that he can further support the school’s early efforts to establish CFGs. In this sense Critical Friends Groups have both strengthened the conditions at the Professional Development School and created a vision for the kind of professional learning community that novices are committed to developing and sustaining once they enter their own classrooms.

REFERENCES


