

# Critical Friends Groups: The Possibilities and Limitations Embedded in Teacher Professional Communities Aimed at Instructional Improvement and School Reform

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**Background/Context:** *This study builds upon research on teacher professional communities and high school restructuring reforms. It employs a conceptual framework that draws upon theories of “community of practice” and “community of learners.”*

**Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:** *This study analyzes how teachers’ professional inquiry communities at the high school level constitute a resource for school reform and instructional improvement.*

**Setting:** *This research focused on a reforming, comprehensive urban public high school with site-based management.*

**Population/Participants/ Subjects:** *This study investigates the practices of six school-based oral inquiry groups known as Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), which were selected as cases of mature professional communities. Twenty-five teachers and administrators participated as informants.*

**Research Design:** *This research involved a video-based, qualitative case study.*

**Data Collection and Analysis:** *Data included observations of CFG meetings, interviews with teachers and administrators, and document collection. Analysis entailed coding with qualitative software, development of analytic cross-CFG meta-matrices, discourse analytic techniques, and joint viewing of video records with informants.*

**Findings/Results:** *The author explores four particular design features of CFGs—their diverse menu of activities, their decentralized structure, their interdisciplinary membership,*

and their reliance on structured conversation tools called “protocols”—showing how these features carry within them endemic tensions that compel these professional communities to negotiate a complicated set of professional development choices.

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** The findings demonstrate how the enactment of design choices holds particular consequences for the nature and quality of teacher learning and school improvement. Although CFGs enhanced teachers’ collegial relationships, their awareness of research-based practices and reforms, their schoolwide knowledge, and their capacity to undertake instructional improvement, these professional communities offered an inevitably partial combination of supports for teacher professional development. In particular, CFGs exerted minimal influence on teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge. CFGs would benefit from regular and systematic metacognitive and process-oriented reflections to identify how their collaborative practices might optimally advance their “bottom line” goal of improving teacher practice to increase student achievement. Additionally, high schools might pursue multiple and complementary CFG-like professional development opportunities in subject matter departments and interdisciplinary grade-level academy teams.

*Mid-afternoon sunlight pours into Principal Alec Gordon’s living room on this early release day.<sup>1</sup> Lounging on chairs and the carpeted floor, 11 members of Revere High School’s staff—among them teachers, the principal, an instructional aide, and a counselor—are in the midst of a structured conversation about a collection of student pinhole photographs brought by Lars, an art teacher. As the group talks, some members hold and peruse the black and white matted images. One member muses aloud, “Not that Lars can answer this now, but I wonder what was the purpose of this assignment? Will doing pinhole photographs make students better photographers or is this just a fun exercise?” As required by the protocol structure, Lars sits silently listening to his colleagues’ attempt to make sense of his students’ products, as well as the instructional context that generated them. Prompted by a timekeeper, the facilitator eventually shifts the conversation. “Oh, it’s time? It’s time. OK, next in this protocol, we reflect on the process as a group. Share what you learned about the student, about your colleagues, about yourself. Use questions from the previous page.”*

*As the group concludes this conversation, their 3-hour monthly meeting comes to a close. They carry cups and plates to the kitchen and gather up the papers that have accumulated in their laps and on the coffee table. Several photocopies of student essays on violence prevention, as well as copies of a Michelle Fine article, get stowed away into briefcases and knapsacks. Lars collects his students’ work, putting pinhole cameras in a bag and rolling up a poster-sized enlargement of a playground shot.*

*Some members assemble on the deck over the water chatting; their laughter floats into the living room. Others congregate by the fireplace to share lingering ideas with Shelby, the health teacher who brought the violence prevention essays. In the dining room, a veteran math teacher approaches a first-year chemistry teacher and asks how his year is going. Meanwhile, some members scurry off, thanking their host and bidding farewell to the group.*

This vignette depicts a Critical Friends Group (CFG), a particular type of school-based professional community aimed at fostering members' capacities to undertake instructional improvement and schoolwide reform. Together, CFG members seek to increase student learning and achievement through ongoing practice-centered collegial conversations about teaching and learning. By focusing on the triangle of learning (the relationship between student, teacher, and subject matter), CFGs rest on the premise that classrooms ought to be the center of school reform efforts and that teachers should lead educational change. Undergirding CFGs is the proposition that schools cannot be intellectually engaging places for students unless their teachers are likewise actively engaged in learning, thinking, reading, and discussing. Given these philosophical orientations, CFGs stand apart from high stakes accountability reforms, which tend toward top-down mandates and the treatment of teachers as technicians to implement the ideas of others.

The characteristics of CFG practice captured in the foregoing sketch—in particular, the group's diverse membership as evidenced in the interdisciplinary and multirole composition of the group, its teacher-driven management, its close attention to classroom practice, its relaxed and collegial ethos, and its reliance on structured conversation guides called protocols—represent an anomaly in the occupational landscape of the high school and in the arena of traditional professional development. Indeed, high school teachers rarely attend to what their colleagues do in their classrooms (Goodlad, 1983; Little, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), let alone collaborate monthly to examine artifacts of classroom practice. When high school teachers do meet, they often converge in departmental configurations or in grade-level collaborative teaching teams organized to accomplish work-related tasks, rather than in inquiry-oriented collectives comprising staff members from different departments and from administrative and support ranks.

CFGs are also anomalous as teacher professional development initiatives. Traditional professional development offerings typically involve outside experts coming into schools and "in-servicing" staff by dissemi-

nating generic content with little attention to local contexts and practices (Lieberman, 1995; Wilson & Berne, 1999). CFGs depart from this sort of “drive-by” staff development by asking school insiders to construct their own learning through a cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action. As such, CFGs, like the one from Revere High School portrayed in the opening vignette, constitute a unique and relatively rare professional development phenomenon. Indicators from the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF, 2006) suggest that CFGs exist in less than 2% of U.S. schools (K–12).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, CFGs have gained increasing visibility as a promising reform strategy through practitioner journals, conferences, Web sites, and reform organizations (Arizona Education Association, 1998; Bambino, 2003; Bloom, 1999; Cushman, 1998; Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000; Olson, 1998).

Certainly, the idea of fostering collaborative professional communities in schools as a means of improving teacher practice and thereby raising student achievement has gained currency in recent years. Advocates of teachers’ collaborative inquiry argue that “true reform depends on members of the teaching profession developing their own systematic and intentional ways of scrutinizing and improving their practices” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1996, p. 110). Embedded within this argument is the proposition that inquiry-driven teacher communities foster collective responsibility and internal accountability that will, in turn, advance the cause of powerful teaching and learning within schools. Proponents of CFGs conceive these groups as the embodiment of precisely these kinds of propositions and credit these communities with reaping huge benefits for teachers, schools, and students. Reflective of this enthusiasm, Dunne and Honts (1998) reported that “[CFG] coaches and participants all over the country have said again and again that CFGs have provided them with the most powerful professional development experiences they have ever encountered” (p. 8). In a similar vein, Bambino (2003) claimed that “Critical Friends Groups help teachers improve instruction and student learning . . . [and] have been the catalyst for changes in the teaching, learning, culture, and climate of learning communities in a variety of schools” (p. 25). The ebullience for CFGs evident in these anecdotal testimonies reflects a growing conviction among reformers that teachers, schools, and ultimately students benefit from the kind of sustained and deliberate inquiry undertaken by CFGs.

And yet, very little is empirically known about how the talk, reflection, and practices undertaken by CFGs might create the kinds of conditions necessary to carry over into actual and salutary changes in classroom teaching and/or school policy. To date, only a handful of scholars have undertaken research on CFGs (Dunne & Honts, 1998; Dunne et al.,

2000; Matsumura & Steinberg, 2002; Nave, 2000), and only one of these studies (Dunne et al.) has been published. Without grounded accounts of how teachers in schools experience and make sense of professional communities like CFGs, both researchers and practitioners are poorly positioned to understand the mechanisms, conditions, and contexts, which support or undermine the efforts of teacher communities to bring about instructional improvement and school reform. In addition, educational reformers advocating collaborative teacher inquiry run the risk of oversimplifying how teacher communities function, thereby obscuring the complex cultural, organizational, political, and interpersonal dynamics at play within different kinds of teacher communities. Under these circumstances, Westheimer (1998) pointed out the danger that “school reform efforts end up rudderless and the rhetoric of ‘community’ is rendered ubiquitous and shallow” (p. 148). The study reported here seeks to contribute to an empirical understanding of the role that CFGs play in advancing the cause of instructional improvement and school reform.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAME

This research arises from a thin but growing body of research illuminating the complexity of teacher communities (Achinstein, 2002; Clark, 2001; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Little, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Stokes, 2001; Westheimer, 1998). Throughout this article, the term *professional community* refers to various configurations of school staff (most prominently teachers) characterized by some measure of interdependent joint work and some level of shared values, norms, and orientations toward schooling, teaching, and students (definition adapted from Achinstein). Under this definition of community, an entire school faculty may be considered a macro-professional community holding within it micro-professional communities (e.g., departments, collaborative teaching teams, and inquiry-based study groups like CFGs) that feature overlapping membership.

Community as a metaphor reflects an emphasis on the human dimension of schools as places where people gather to forge meanings, identities, and purposes. As McLaughlin (1993) observed,

The community metaphor draws attention to *norms and beliefs of practices, collegial relations, shared goals, occasions for collaboration, and problems of mutual support and mutual obligation* [italics added]. The community metaphor also draws policy attention to *conditions in the school context* [italics added] that enable the

community and stimulate the up-close professional contexts that support and stimulate reflective practice. (p. 99)

Implicit in McLaughlin's observations is the notion that researchers must readjust their lines of inquiry to investigate how teacher professional communities alter (if at all) the work of teaching and the processes of schooling. More specifically, in the case of this study, McLaughlin's remarks beg the question of how CFGs as particular kinds of professional communities might serve as resources for instructional improvement and school reform.

For researchers seeking to answer these questions and understand the processes by which teacher professional communities stand to influence occupational norms and organizational structures, the theories of "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and "community of learners" (Brown & Campione, 1994; Rogoff, 1994) illuminate how the dynamics within communities constitute strategic sites for transformational learning. Common to each of these theories is the premise that teachers learn through situated and social interactions with colleagues who possess distributed expertise and with whom they have opportunities for sustained conversations related to mutual interests. Stein, Silver, and Smith (1998) deftly laid out the implications of these theoretical perspectives for researchers interested in pursuing teachers' professional development through professional community.

The result of this new analytic viewpoint is that the unit of analysis shifts from the individual teacher to the social practice or the activities in which groups of teachers engage. . . . This perspective on learning suggests that teacher development should be examined in relationship to the community of practice in which the teachers participate. (p. 17-18)

This research, then, responds to this call to locate research inside teachers' communities of practice. I approach this endeavor mindful of the romanticized, magical thinking commonly associated with such communities. As Wenger (1998) asserted,

Claiming that communities of practice are a crucial locus of learning is not to imply that the process is intrinsically benevolent. In this regard, it is worth repeating that communities of practice should not be romanticized; they can reproduce counter-productive patterns, injustices, prejudices, racism,

sexism, and abuses of all kinds. In fact, I would argue they are the very locus of such reproduction. (p. 132)

Given this cautionary advice, I seek to examine both the possibilities and the limitations embedded within CFG teacher communities.

## THE STUDY

This article arises from a 3-year study (1999–2002) of six CFGs at Revere High, an urban school located in the Pacific Northwest that was selected for its mature professional inquiry communities. I employed a qualitative case study approach in an effort to capture both the lived and enacted practices of CFGs within a particular setting, as well as the meanings that members attached to their CFG experiences. The broader study (Curry, 2003) investigated the following research questions: (1) At the descriptive level of practice, how do CFGs conduct their joint work? In particular, what structures, processes, and norms characterize CFGs? (2) What kinds of teacher professional development opportunities are constructed through CFG practices? and (3) What possibilities and limitations reside in CFG practices that might influence the potential of these groups to serve as engines for instructional improvement and/or schoolwide reform? This article, however, concentrates exclusively on findings related to the third question and cites as evidence illustrative examples culled from patterns and trends that surfaced repeatedly in the data corpus.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data collection occurred over the course of eight site visits (December 1999, April 2000, January 2001, March 2001, April 2001, November 2001, February 2002, and March 2002), each of which lasted 2–5 days. During these visits, a research team and I observed and videotaped nine CFG meetings (seven of a focal group) and two CFG coaches' meetings, which we also documented with field notes. In total, 30 hours of the resulting 35 hours of video records were transcribed. In addition to these observations, we conducted a total of 42 semistructured interviews with a total of 25 Revere teachers and administrators. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. Initial interviews focused on understanding these educators' professional backgrounds and goals, experiences in CFGs, beliefs about Revere's reforms, and other professional development opportunities. Subsequent debrief interviews elicited participants' impressions of and reflections on particular CFG meetings.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis occurred through four iterative and recursive phases. In the first phase, I used qualitative software (QSR•Nu\*dist 4) to code transcripts of interviews and CFG meetings, thus identifying a wide range of analytic themes and descriptive codes. In the second phase, I formulated “meta-matrices . . . [which are] master charts assembling descriptive data from each of several cases in a standard format . . . on one very large sheet or wall chart” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 179). The matrices relevant to this article examined the use of CFG meeting time, the enactment of protocols, and the instructional suggestions, critiques, and questions offered or posed across protocols. In addition, another matrix displayed the possibilities and limitations of CFG practices as either reported or observed across the six CFGs in an effort to determine which were most salient and pervasive. Each of these matrices allowed me to detect patterns and discrepancies running across cases that guided further investigations. A third phase of analysis involved discourse analysis in the tradition of interactional ethnographers, who focus on the sociocultural production of language (Green & Bloome, 1997; Green & Dixon, 1993). Rather than focusing on micro-instantiations of talk, I followed language in use over periods of time to uncover patterns in how members communicated, interpreted, and developed their joint sense-making efforts. For this endeavor, I repeatedly viewed the video records of CFG meetings in conjunction with transcripts, tracking participation rates and sequences, ritualized patterns of discourse (the repetition of particular questions and/or instructional suggestions) across meetings, and the use of physical artifacts like protocol scripts. Finally, the fourth (and briefest) phase of analysis involved the collaborative analysis of video records with study participants in a 6-hour event (June 2001), which I refer to here as the “coanalysis.” Undertaken midway through the study, this coanalysis helped to triangulate emerging claims and expand my perspective on what was important to capture and investigate, and why.

## A CAUTION

Several limitations of these data deserve attention. First, these data do not allow me to explore the relationship between teacher professional community, actual teacher practice, and student learning. Another limitation of these data is that they concentrate almost exclusively on teachers’ experiences within CFGs. Fortunately, I did conduct interviews with 4 informants who identified themselves as being on the margins of CFGs and aligned themselves with others in the school who opted to not

participate in CFGs. These interviews provided critical perspectives on CFGs that balanced the accounts offered by CFG insiders. A third limitation of these data is that Revere's CFGs participated in a national teacher action research initiative from 1998 to 2001 and a national study looking at student work practices (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003), which likely heightened their focus on instructional improvement. As such, these CFGs may not be representative of "typical" CFGs elsewhere, so readers should take this into account before generalizing from my findings. In fact, the idea of a "typical" CFG is specious because these groups design themselves differently to suit specific contexts. Finally, this study was not an ethnography. Therefore, I do not have robust data accounting for what happened at Revere High outside CFG meetings or during the periods between site visits. The absence of this data limits my ability to understand the full scope of how CFGs factored into Revere's school reform endeavors.

There are, however, a number of key aspects of this study that serve to mitigate the effects of these limitations. First, having amassed a rich and deep data set featuring several sources and types of data, data were triangulated and rigorously examined. Second, findings were reviewed and validated by member checks with 3 participants from Revere's CFGs. Third and most important, the data capture a mature case of professional community, free from both the halo effect of teachers' initial start-up enthusiasm and the "implementation dip" (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991) that inevitably occurs during the bumps and blunders of establishing a professional community. In addition, this case situates itself within an innovative professional development context that is teacher centered, job embedded, practice focused, and ongoing. As such, these data lend themselves to valuable theory building.

## SCHOOL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Revere High School is a comprehensive urban-fringe high school serving 1,050 students who are ethnically diverse: 11% African American, 18% Asian, 6% Hispanic, and 62% White. A site-based managed school affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES)<sup>3</sup> since 1997, Revere's reforms include a block schedule, a schoolwide mentorship program, a junior service learning project, a senior exit project, CFGs (instituted in 1997), and detracked (or what Revere staff refer to as "inclusion-based") 9th- and 10th-grade academies aimed at personalization and project-oriented learning. CFGs were initiated by teachers and enthusiastically embraced by Revere's administration as the school's primary means of teacher professional development. These professional inquiry

communities have persisted through teachers' own initiatives up through the present. Although CFG membership was initially voluntary, membership has become a mandatory condition for new hires. Thus, at the conclusion of this study, 85% of the faculty participated in CFGs.

The six CFGs, which contain 8–10 members each, meet once a month for 3 hours. Trained coaches, who are Revere teachers or administrators, facilitate these monthly meetings.<sup>4</sup> Typical CFG sessions start with a personalized check-in phase called “Connections.” Next, members engage in one to three conversations about teaching, learning, and/or schooling. These discussions, referred to by members as “protocols,” are formally structured by conversation tools also called “protocols,” which outline and, to some extent, script the oral inquiry process.<sup>5</sup> A hallmark of CFG work, protocol-guided conversations seek to create focused opportunities for members to deliberately and critically explore issues of teaching and learning through the close examination of either published texts or artifacts of classroom practice. “These carefully structured formats for response, facilitated by someone trained in such discussions, aim to create a sense of emotional safety for the presenter, at the same time encouraging the new perspectives and probing critiques of their peers” (Cushman, 1998). To ensure equitable participation and careful attention to presenters' concerns, most protocol structures stipulate a sequence of timed phases that regulate what should be discussed in what order, as well as who can participate in any given phase. Protocol guidelines also often restrict or delay the presenter of a given artifact from responding directly to the group's discussion in an effort to minimize teacher defensiveness and encourage active listening. Additionally, these guidelines frequently strive to interrupt teachers' tendencies to leap to judgments and/or to rush in and offer quick fixes; instead, protocol phases emphasize detailed analyses of classroom artifacts or texts prior to speculating about instructional implications (Cushman, 1996). In addition to protocol-guided discussions, Revere's CFG meetings periodically include peer observation updates, action research progress checks, and reflective journaling.

#### THE FOUR DESIGN CHOICES

This article analyzes how four particular design features of CFGs—their diverse menu of activities, their decentralized structure, their interdisciplinary membership, and their reliance on protocols—carry within them endemic tensions that compel these professional communities to negotiate a rather complicated set of professional development choices. Although these four design features interact with each other in

inextricable and complicated ways, I treat them here separately for heuristic purposes. Ultimately, I seek to demonstrate how the enactment of these choices holds particular consequences for the nature and quality of teacher learning and school improvement.

### THE “DIVERSE MENU”: JUGGLING MULTIPLE AIMS AND AGENDAS

The CFG model as conceived by its designers offers participants a “diverse menu of [inquiry] techniques from which to choose,” each with a different purpose and process (CFG training materials). In fact, CFG resource materials provide over a dozen inquiry protocol structures.<sup>6</sup> This diverse menu of CFG activities immerses members in a varied array of professional development opportunities, namely practice-based conversations targeted at instructional improvement at the classroom level; school-based discussions focused on teachers’ collective practices and commitments in a reforming school; and group-based team building aimed at cultivating a sense of professional community grounded in notions of decency, trust, and care.

### WHAT THE CFGS’ “DIVERSE MENU” ENABLED

The sheer variety of CFG activities (“Connections,” text discussions, protocols on student/teacher work, peer observation and action research progress updates, team building, and journaling) appeared to attract and hold a diverse membership. Asked which core CFG activities they valued most, CFG-ers routinely differed in their responses, suggesting that the eclectic menu of activities appealed to a broad range of teacher needs. A few teachers said that they benefited most from the intellectual stimulation and knowledge gleaned through text-based seminars, and others confessed to placing text-based seminars last on the agenda so that these conversations might get tabled if time ran short. Likewise, some teachers indicated that they valued “Connections” most because it allowed them to connect with peers and get support around pressing professional frustrations, whereas others admitted to thinking, “This [“Connections” phase] is such a waste of time.” Splits of opinions also emerged with regard to protocols on student work and teacher work. Many teachers felt that protocols were the single most important CFG activity because of their immediate relevance to the classroom and the insights that they provided into “what the kids [at Revere] are doing.” In contrast, a handful of members wondered whether protocols were actually productive professional conversations. Emblematic of this perspective was one math teacher who said, “I almost feel like I can’t get too much help from them

[my CFG]. So then, if I can help them [in a protocol] so good, I'll be there. You know? But I'm not sure I can do that either sometimes. So then I'm sitting there wasting my time." Clearly, the variety of opinions expressed with regard to the different CFG activities highlights the diverse needs and expectations that CFG members brought to these professional communities.

In this manner, Revere's CFGs corroborate Grossman et al.'s (2001) emphasis on the importance of multiple corridors for teacher learning within the professional community. These researchers argued that "Given the diversity of experience, educational level, background, and individual tastes among teachers in the urban high school, a project that offers only one corridor for professional development, by necessity ignores the needs and interest of many other groups" (pp. 20–21). In the final analysis, the CFGs' eclectic menu of activities appealed to a wide range of interests and exerted considerable holding power on the diverse membership of these professional communities. Evidence of this holding power surfaced in Revere's CFG's growing and stable membership from their conception through the duration of this study. In this sense, the menu approach served as a bridge toward broad participation.

The menu of CFG activities (especially the combination of text-based seminars and protocols on student/teacher work) also brought together issues of instructional practice and school reform in a manner that allowed school-level and classroom-level concerns to converge and in some cases even merge. This joining of the schoolwide reform agenda with the kind of practice-grounded teacher development available within CFGs represented a marked departure from other restructuring schools, where "the reform focus was often stated so broadly and abstractly that its [learning] demands on teacher practice went unacknowledged" (Little, 1999). At Revere, CFGs routinely addressed the learning demands encountered by individual teachers as they contended with reform strategies like the establishment of detracked academies, advisory periods, senior exit projects, project-based learning, and block schedules.

One consequence of this dual attention to reform and practice was that teachers in CFGs developed an appreciation for the relationship between their classroom and the broader school context. Jim, a CFG coach, spoke passionately about this dimension of CFG work, saying that in his CFG,

We are still working on individual stuff that we are doing in class—of course, teacher practice, but teacher practice in relation to what's happening at the school at large is really important. I think that's always been the big problem in teaching—is

everyone's just been focusing on their own classroom and not focusing on what they're doing in relation to everybody else.<sup>7</sup>

Here, Jim highlights the way in which issues of classroom practice and school reform became intimately linked.

The coupling of schoolwide macro issues with classroom-level micro concerns surfaced across all nine of my CFG meeting observations. One example of how the boundaries between the school and the classroom merged during CFG meetings involved an English teacher's protocol on senior exit projects. Dan prefaced his senior project protocol by saying that he brought this student work because it was "something in the school that I think the whole school really needs to think about." During this discussion, the members of his CFG collectively reflected on the skills that students needed to develop in Grades 9–11 so that they could accomplish rigorous, culminating exhibitions of their high school learning. Dan's senior project protocol also brought several systemic problems to the attention of the CFG. First, it became apparent that the senior projects were not well coordinated across senior teachers. Second, this lack of coordination was exacerbated by the fact that many senior teachers taught only a single period of 12th-grade language arts and felt pulled to concentrate their energy on the intensive team teaching demands of the 9th- or 10th-grade academies, where the bulk of their teaching occurred.

In this manner, the CFG attended to both classroom practice and systemic school issues within the same protocol. In doing so, the CFG engaged in the politics of negotiating the meaning and application of a reform idea (CES's Principle Six on the importance of students demonstrating mastery for graduation). This work was political because it involved various stakeholders within the organization working to further their individual and mutual interests. Dan wanted the school to embrace standardized expectations and assessment rubrics for the senior project, and he used his students' work as artifacts to push this agenda and uncover the negative consequences of not having standards. It is important to note that an interest in student learning was a central concern in this negotiation.

This kind of bridging between the micro and macro was typical across protocols. This pattern represents a promising trend inasmuch as teachers at Revere were able, through these professional communities, to think about and inquire into the implications of restructuring for their classrooms and ultimately for student learning. Notably, this pattern departs from documented accounts of other reforming schools (Little, 1999) where "doing" restructuring displaced attention from the

professional development needed to make the restructuring work in practical terms at the level of the classroom.

#### WHAT THE CFGS' "DEVERSE MENUE" CONSTRAINED

Although the eclectic array of CFG activities appealed to a diverse membership and heightened teachers' awareness of the relationship between reform and practice, one consequence of the "menu" approach to CFG activities was that these groups faced the challenge of balancing the learning preferences of individual CFG members and still keeping track of the "big picture" of improving teacher practice as a means of boosting student achievement. Maxine, the veteran teacher coach of my focal CFG, who also acted as the school's CFG coordinator, spoke pointedly to this dilemma.

People like different things in CFG. . . . So I guess maybe the variety [of activities] was a chance for us to meet, to meet [CFG members'] needs on a more balanced basis. *But we do lose the focus of the larger picture. I mean it's like we're trying to do everything* [emphasis added]. I mean it's not supposed to be everything, but the examination of student work should be linked to peer observations. And as far as I'm concerned we could leave out "Connections." That'd be fine with me. What I like about the text-based discussion is it is a more intellectual activity and I think a lot of times teachers don't ever read things outside that have to do with education, so I think that's good. The [individual] journaling I could do without, but I know reflection is really important. So it makes it hard. There are just so many things to do.

In this statement, Maxine acknowledges the difficulty she has encountered trying to reconcile the different activities that members "like" with her own convictions about what professional development opportunities are most important in terms of achieving the "big picture." Her admission that "we're trying to do everything" suggests that CFGs are perhaps overburdened as the primary vehicle for professional development at Revere.

Evidence of CFGs being overtaxed by the "diverse menu of CFG techniques" also surfaced in the enacted practices of these groups. One of the ways in which this pattern manifested itself was in the diminishing returns accrued to presenters who conducted protocols on days when the agenda was packed. The agenda of four of the nine observed CFG

meetings included three major substantive conversations (either three protocols on teacher/student work or a combination of one text-based seminar and two protocols on teacher/student work). In each of these meetings, the last protocol was viewed by members and by the presenters themselves as less than productive. Regarding one of these meetings, Maxine said, “I really pushed it” in reference to the fact that she had squeezed three protocols into one meeting. Reflecting on the crammed agenda of her CFG’s January 2001 meeting, Shelby, a health teacher, observed,

I think the protocols have been shortchanged in the past and I don’t know if it would be worth looking at changing the schedule so the protocols come earlier and things like text-based discussion or um, and we always miss the journaling—or not always, but you know, we made a re-commitment to do the journaling and that has fallen off again. . . . Last night, I was watching the clock and trying to make the 10 minutes happen [for journals], but then realized it wasn’t going to [happen].

These remarks suggest how the CFGs struggled to accomplish the full package of CFG core activities and how the effort to cover so much terrain resulted in protocols being “shortchanged.” Shelby’s impression that protocols were shortchanged was borne out in time analyses that showed that the last protocol on these four meeting occasions was, on average, 12 minutes shorter than the foregoing protocols or text-based discussions.<sup>8</sup> Given that Nave (2000) credited the examination of student and teacher work as being the most influential practice in the CFG core repertoire, this tendency to shortchange protocols may have compromised the efficacy of Revere’s CFGs. Of particular irony is that as a CES affiliate, Revere teachers frequently encouraged each other to adopt the “less is more” principle with regard to their instructional practices in classrooms, but infusing this same philosophy into the adult learning environment of the CFG proved challenging.

Another sign that the overly ambitious menu of CFG activities impeded the coherence and depth of the professional development opportunities offered in these settings surfaced in the randomness of protocol practice. Over my nine CFG meeting observations, I observed these groups conduct protocols on a wide-ranging scope of classroom artifacts/issues, including standardized test prep for math, students’ creative writing, senior exit projects, pinhole photography, writing assessment in chemistry, test modification for detracked classrooms, strained relationships between team teaching colleagues, and simulation activities immersing

students into slavery and the Holocaust. These protocols came and went and were rarely revisited in subsequent CFG meetings; as such, they were one-shot deals involving little follow-up response from the CFG. Maxine acknowledged the somewhat haphazard and scattered nature of this protocol practice when she distinguished protocols from her CFG's 3-year involvement in a national action research initiative.

[Action research] added a *depth* to the work. . . . The protocols are really good and we love them, but the action research I guess gives that additional *impetus for change* over a long term. I mean, examining something over a long term, not just saying, "Well this is my lesson what should I do?". . . I think the CFG techniques are, I mean, we've always said, "Improving teacher practice, improving teacher practice, that's our only reason for doing it." And increasing student achievement. But the action research maybe gives a *focus* for a particular part of your work that you want to examine *long term* and really work on that particular thing, whereas *prior to that, probably we were doing more just random [protocols], you know, "I want you to look at this, or I want you to look at this or I want you to look at this." And they were more random things rather than a focused [emphases added] "I'm researching this. I'm looking at writing and . . . [so on]."*

Here, Maxine associated action research with the descriptive words and phrases *depth*, *focus*, *long term*, and *impetus for change*. In contrast, she characterized the CFG's protocol practice as a "random" revolving door affair involving various members conducting protocols on whatever strikes them during a given month. This finding echoes Matsumura and Steinberg (2002), who also cited CFGs' lack of continuity and follow-through from meeting to meeting as a condition that impeded CFG success.

It is interesting that Revere's CFGs abandoned their action research efforts when funding for the national initiative ended. Their return to the previously established set of core activities holds significance for their professional development in at least two ways. First, Maxine's admission that CFGs' practices prior to the action research component were "random" and short-term in scope and focus suggests that the professional development opportunities residing in the CFGs' regular joint work lack some measure of continuity and coherence. Second, the failure of the action research component to stick raises questions about how many different types of learning activities a CFG can productively juggle at once. In this manner, the diverse menu approach does appear to pose

barriers that limit the focus, coherency, and depth of CFGs' professional development.

In sum, the diverse menu of CFG activities succeeded in attracting a diverse membership to CFGs and exposing that membership to a wide range of instructional practice and reform issues. In enacting this variety of activities, these professional communities developed an awareness of the relationship between their classrooms and the broader context of Revere's reforms. Alternately, this same design feature also carried with it certain limitations. Specifically, CFGs struggled against the temptation "to do everything" and to construct coherent and professional development opportunities that stayed focused on the "big picture."

### THE DECENTRALIZED STRUCTURE

Envisioned as engines of reform, Revere's CFGs were a decentralized and loosely coordinated constellation of mini professional communities detached from formal decision-making bodies. Confidentiality agreements aimed at making CFGs safe spaces to raise issues meant that group discussions were not to be publicly shared. That said, CFG coaches did meet monthly for an hour to discuss developments within their groups and to brainstorm possible activities for upcoming meetings. Five years into their existence, when the school managed to secure half-day release time within the school day for CFG meetings, the Professional Development Committee stipulated that CFGs focus their joint work on a set of three focus areas: collaboration, inclusion, and technology. This set of umbrella issues linked the professional development in CFGs to Revere's overall reform agenda but still provided ample discretion for teachers to pursue issues they deemed compelling. It is important to note that there was never a formal mechanism established to check if CFGs adhered to the three focus areas or to extrapolate lessons from across the CFGs in a systematic fashion.

### WHAT DECENTRALIZATION ENABLED

The CFGs' structural detachment from formal decision making enabled these professional inquiry communities to be informal and intimate places to discuss contested and politically sensitive school issues in a civil but still critical manner. As one CFG-er explained,

The reform aspect of it [the CFG] is that it's a nice forum to discuss ideas and philosophies. It doesn't have any kind of legislative or political function. It doesn't have any official status or

standing as a decision making group, but it is a place to batter about ideas . . . the CFG is not the place for action. There needs to be a place for discussion.

Noah felt that the CFG was “a good place for ideas to become part of the school culture . . . [through] a Darwinian process [whereby] ideas may or may not float.” The time-bounded nature of such reform conversations, coupled with sustained opportunities to return to issues in subsequent discussions, provided a chance for members to process and digest reform proposals in a thoughtful manner distinct from the pressure of whole faculty meetings, where reform votes force decisive position taking. In these latter front-stage public forums, teachers’ participation is more performative and involves role casting that locks them into one faction or another (cf. Goffman, 1959). In contrast, teachers in the context of CFG meetings were able to confront and reflect on thorny reform matters in a less pressured environment.

Protocol guided text-based seminars were particularly ripe forums to examine controversial issues in a systematic fashion. Recounting one such discussion centering on the text of a letter rejecting a proposal that Revere teachers had written to be recognized as a New American High School,<sup>9</sup> Irene said,

We really enjoy the text-based discussions. And going over this [rejection] letter . . . helps a lot of us understand—try and figure out where this particular [New American High School] group is coming from. And, maybe help us break—maybe give us some breakthroughs on some real touchy areas, some things that have been real touchy . . . seeing this in paper from somebody outside gives us, I think, some place to start, someplace to go through. So, I’m glad that we did go through it. Doing text-based discussions sometimes helps us find—or helps me find—something new, a new way of looking at something that I might not have picked up had I not sat down and talked about it with somebody.

Irene’s testimony shows how reform discussions in CFGs helped teachers acquire new ways of looking at “real touchy” issues.

Another example of a text-based discussion that opened up a politically polarizing issue occurred when members read a Michelle Fine article entitled “The Politics of Urgency” (2000) and used the text as a springboard to explore whether tracking at the 11th- and 12th-grade levels was an urgent problem at Revere.<sup>10</sup> In the conversation that ensued, CFG members articulated different ideological stances on important issues,

like how to define and provide “academic rigor” for all students; the place of honors and AP options within the academic program; the need for data-based and research-based reform; the evidentiary warrant of the texts and biases of the author; and finally, the obstacles to reform at Revere and possible strategies to overcome them. It is important to note that these issues were connected to broader societal concerns of racism and classism, and structural concerns about the school district’s stance toward social promotion. During the discussion, a debate erupted over whether the article should be distributed to the entire staff prior to an upcoming vote on untracking the upper grades. Participation analyses revealed that all members, regardless of their espoused orientation toward the reforms at Revere High School, engaged in these text-based discussions. By classifying CFG members as reform enthusiasts, agnostics, and dissenters (based on statements made in interviews and during meetings) and then tracking the turns taken by these clusters, I found that although reform enthusiasts tended to dominate slightly (accounting for two thirds of turns taken), participation rates roughly paralleled each constituency’s representation in the group.<sup>11</sup> As such, these conversations were not “preaching to the choir” events, but rather democratic and dialogic discussions.

Many other CFG-ers also noted that CFGs offered them the chance to become informed about school reform choices and commitments. Dave, a new teacher to Revere, commented,

One of the things we end up discussing a fair bit in CFG are the sort of larger roles that our school plays. For example, if we want to be a school where we teach kids to be responsible people in a democratic society. Well, our CFG has actually thought about how might we do that as a school because I know that’s one of our goals, but I didn’t even realize it until I was in a CFG. Or, whether or not we should loop and how that works.<sup>12</sup> And [we had] a large discussion of inclusion and so I can ask questions like, “Well, it seems like there’s partial inclusion here. And how come that’s the case?” . . . Here we are this inclusion school, but then there’s all these kids who are excluded, so I just wonder. So I am able to get answers to larger things. . . . So I find that to be valuable for me, to learn more than anything else about how our school functions. And it’s helped me to understand why we do certain things now.

Dave’s remarks speak to how the CFGs at Revere were a vehicle to grapple with the CES’s 10 Principles and the reform commitments of the

school, and a means of socializing teachers into a professional culture of critically examining school policies. These examples illustrate how CFGs created a low-stakes and democratic forum in which to explore politically charged reform topics over time.

The existence and institutionalization of such regular forums also encouraged what Achinstein (2002) called “constructive controversy”—a condition wherein community members embrace conflict and “engage in critical reflection and openly explore dissent” (p. 448). Indeed, the political nature of CFG conversations often precipitated disputes that required members to articulate positions, unpack assumptions, clarify terms, and challenge each other’s reasoning. These exchanges often bristled with palpable tension, and yet, the groups I observed exhibited considerable comfort with disagreement. Shelby, for example, believed that the explicit discussion of controversial issues within CFGs invigorated and deepened the school’s reform commitments. She asserted that these discussions were,

How change actually happens, where you talk in small groups before the vote is taken, the politics. That’s the lobbying-ism and convincing your constituents or convincing your other voting members that one side is better than another, and I think it’s valuable. I think it’s important to keep talking about it, and it’s important to keep hearing it.

The CFGs’ process of negotiating highly contested issues in a rational and judicious manner through protocol-guided discourse contributed to a broader culture of collegiality marked by decency and trust that partially tempered some of the tensions and conflicts apparent in schoolwide reform debates. Moreover, the participation of administrators (who happened to be active listeners willing to hear critique) as CFG members in two groups meant that controversial institutional issues also received the careful consideration of those people responsible for guiding the school’s reform efforts.

Another positive dimension of decentralization was that this arrangement allowed educators to exercise considerable professional discretion over their learning, thereby honoring teachers’ and groups’ different interests. In the initial years of CFGs, the coaches tended to plan and engage in the same activities, but as the groups matured, coaches increasingly tailored agendas to the interests and needs of their particular groups. As such, these groups have evolved with their own personalities and focus areas even as they have pursued many of the same nominal

activities. Speaking to the unique evolution of each group, one coach, Jim, remarked at a coaches' meeting,

I am very interested myself, in groups, in individual groups' evolution. I am much more interested in that than keeping [CFGs] somehow standardized. Because I want my group to get as much out of it as possible, and I think they do that when they feel comfortable and they like what they're doing and they think it's worthwhile. And the more I see, the more I see myself allowing what, what I think we're supposed to be doing as a CFG group, and what I learned as a coach develop in relation to the people in my specific group, the better it works. And that's just — that was my original reason for getting into CFG — is teachers being able to support each other. Not some overarching thing that would be organized one way and have to be that way.

Jim's remarks convey how decentralization provided differentiated learning opportunities responsive to individual and group needs.

#### WHAT DECENTRALIZATION CONSTRAINED

One drawback to decentralization was that many ideas and proposals raised in CFG meetings were never systematically documented or pursued, making it unclear how the talk in CFGs fed back into or benefited the school's other organizational structures. This was the case for the senior project protocol mentioned earlier. In this instance, no one followed up on proposals to appoint a senior project coordinator or to reconsider senior teachers' teaching loads. In fact, all nine of my CFG meeting observations featured exchanges in which schoolwide concerns were raised for discussion but were not subsequently revisited either within the CFG or beyond.<sup>13</sup> Complicating matters further, the confidentiality agreement technically prevented these groups from formally publicizing and pursuing issues that emerged from within these professional communities.

Several teachers expressed worries about the impotence rendered by CFGs' structural detachment and decentralized configuration. Similarly, Sam, a vice principal and CFG coach, observed at a coaches' meeting,

The thing I think is missing [from CFGs] is that we don't always share from group to group except among the coaches, what we're getting out of it. So you know, what was talked about

before, the discussion in my group about looping last month, and, you know, *the benefit of that discussion doesn't extend beyond my group* [emphasis added]. At least not in a structured way. I'm sure that people in my group went and talked to other people who they work with about what we talked about, so that's a few more people. But we don't have any kind of system for sharing.

Rachel, another coach, echoed this concern, expressing her doubts about the efficacy of such a loosely coordinated constellation of CFGs.

Well, we're certainly aware of each other, but I don't know how connected to each other we are . . . this year it feels like all of the groups are scattered . . . I don't know if that's good or bad. . . . So, I mean, I don't know how we affect each other if we're not on the same page.

The absence of a structured "kind of system for sharing" meant that the reform conversations undertaken by CFGs did not translate necessarily into collective or systematic action aimed at the vigorous pursuit of reform ideas. In this manner, it remains unclear how these professional communities might readily close the gap between their reform talk and the school's overall reform agenda.

One outcome of decentralization, then, was confusion about the CFGs' role vis-à-vis whole-school reform. There was tremendous structural ambiguity about how CFGs as confidential, relatively uncoordinated groups might systematically influence the direction of school reform. A fundamental tension existed between CFG-ers, who believed that meetings were a place to "batter ideas about," and those who believed that meetings were the place to assert a particular reform agenda and move the school toward collective action. Some teachers like Leta expressed deep frustration with just having CFGs be a place "to batter about ideas."

The complaint I have about CFGs is that it's all talk and no action. . . . So I think that anything we do that we can take action on to improve is the most important thing we can do. If we sit around and talk and talk and nothing comes of it, then it's useless in my mind.

In stark contrast, others shunned the politicization of CFGs. Lars, the teacher who presented the pinhole photo protocol in the opening vignette, left the group at the end of the year, citing among other things

his aversion to the political stakes attached to reform conversations.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting on this, he commented,

When it [the CFG] starts getting political . . . then it turns me off because I believe that diversity, that mental diversity, intellectual diversity is the only real diversity we have. And I don't care what you look like or where you come from, if everybody thinks and acts the same, then you're not diverse. So as long as there's academic and intellectual diversity and that's respected by everyone or it doesn't become a political kind of debate. Then they're [the CFG groups are] fine.

Lars stresses here that his personal commitment to intellectual diversity and his antipathy toward conversations that become a "political kind of debate." Another teacher, Joan, shared this perspective, noting her feeling that text-based discussions were frequently used to assert a particular reform agenda. "I feel like it's sort of this doctrine that we're, that's being pushed. And I don't want to hear it. I think it's valid to examine all the different issues, [but] I've just felt a little forced about it." These teachers and a handful of others felt pressured by what they perceived to be a particular reform orthodoxy being pushed through CFGs. Ultimately, the structural ambiguity embedded in CFG's decentralized organization constrained just how constructive the "constructive controversy" of CFG talk was in terms of advancing the cause of school reform.

In sum, the decentralization of CFGs allowed these communities to explore contested reform ideas in a sustained manner and to also engage in some degree of constructive controversy. In addition, decentralization gave teachers considerable professional control over the nature and direction of their professional development. Nevertheless, the ambiguous structural relationship between CFGs and reform undercut the ability of these groups to galvanize school reform through collective action. The absence of structural mechanisms to link these "political kinds of debates" more systematically to other institutional structures or school-wide conversations most likely compromised the ability of CFGs to serve as engines of reform.

#### "THEY'RE THE EXPERTS": CFGS' INTERDISCIPLINARY MEMBERSHIP

Principal Alec Gordon firmly believed that "the most important form of professional development for teachers is the work they do themselves [in CFGs] and the fact that they are controlling their own professional

development . . . [because] they're the experts." His faith in teachers' capacity to lead and manage CFGs without external assistance rested on the assumption that the expertise needed to construct meaningful professional development opportunities resided within the interdisciplinary membership of these groups. Several researchers (Huberman, 1993; Kennedy, 1999; Little, 1999) have questioned the soundness of this assumption. Huberman, for example, queried, "How much collaboration can we expect between 9th grade physics teachers, 11th grade English teachers, and physical education instructors? Why are we putting these people together to draft objectives, plan curricula, and monitor one another's test results when their actual instructional contexts are so different?" (p. 45). In the context of Revere's CFGs, Huberman's questions reverberate with some impact given the extreme subject matter and role diversity represented within these inquiry communities. Take, for example, the varied membership of the CFG featured in the opening vignette. This group included an administrator, an instructional aide, a child development teacher, an art teacher, a science teacher, two social studies teachers, a math teacher, two English teachers, a health teacher, and a drug counselor. This wide range of expertise significantly influenced the nature, scope, and direction of CFGs' efforts to influence instructional improvement and school reform.

#### WHAT CFGS' INTERDISCIPLINARY MEMBERSHIP ENABLED

The combination of the CFGs' interdisciplinary configuration and extensive participation meant that these professional communities enabled sustained and extended opportunities for communication between people from programs across the school. At the school level, then, the interpersonal and interdepartmental connections established within CFGs promoted collegiality. Maxine reported this outcome, sharing,

Our theme has been going from congeniality to collegiality . . . I don't know if prior to CFGs if we'd even really talked about professional community and what a professional community is. And even though we said we got along really well, I think there were lots of people who didn't necessarily like each other. And one of the things that I think the interdisciplinary [CFG] groups has done is allowed us to get to know each other well enough and gain a respect for each other on a professional level and that has helped to close the kinds of gaps or the kinds of issues that used to be around. It's amazing to me how some of that has created just a different view of each other. And I like that.

The powerful ethos of collegiality engendered by CFGs went some distance in alleviating the isolation so well documented in the occupational literature on teachers' work (Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1975).

Perhaps the most compelling account of how CFGs created bridges between people and programs came from Ursula, an electives teacher who initially joined a CFG "to find out what the enemy was doing" but who later described herself as a "dyed-in-the-wool [CFG] supporter." Sharing how her CFG had fundamentally altered the conditions of her work, Ursula recollected,

I was all by myself [before the CFG]. I felt all by myself. I was by myself. As a journalism teacher, the only people who knew what I was doing were other journalism teachers around the state. And the district never allowed us to participate in the statewide in-services, so you know, I was out there . . . there wasn't anybody here. There were people who were maybe personal acquaintances that you know, when I was in near tears about something, would say, "Oh what?" And they'd look at me blankly because they had no idea. And all they would say is, "I feel for you." Because we didn't have any tools for resolving situations. We didn't have protocols of ways of looking at things . . . [the CFG] gives so many other people in the building an opportunity to see what I actually do and learn what other kinds of things are going on. So now more people are aware of my program and they're more supportive of me in places of me other than the CFG. And I'm more supportive of what other people are doing now that I can see what's going on.

For Ursula, as a once-isolated electives teacher teaching in a program frequently in jeopardy from district threats to make journalism an after school-offering, the CFG fortified her with a collegial base of support. As a consequence of her participation in a CFG, Ursula reported having developed strong ties to a set of colleagues who understand her, believe in her program, support her classroom practice, and will go to bat for her in a crisis. For Ursula and many other teachers, CFGs offered a welcome reprieve from the occupational norms of isolation and privatism.

Yet another outgrowth of the interdisciplinary membership structure of CFGs was the faculty's willingness to take collective responsibility for student learning. Maxine remarked on this in a CFG coaches' meeting, and at least three of her coaching peers verbally concurred.

The CFGs [have] had a huge impact. . . . One of the big differences is that we talk about improving our practices and it isn't, I no longer hear, at least I don't hear it from anybody in my CFG, "Well the kids, it's the kids, the kids are this, the kids are that, the kids are this." Now the focus is on, how can *I* improve my practice to help kids achieve? . . . Because even at the beginning of CFG when we talked about what are problems, the first year, because we've been doing this five or six years now, in my group I would hear the complaint, "Well the kids are this, the kids are this, they're not motivated, they're not this, they're not this." And now we're talking about how do we change *our* practice to do that. And I think that's a big switch in perception or tone or attitude or whatever.

This "big switch in perception" away from blaming students toward taking collective professional responsibility for student learning also surfaced in CFG members' schoolwide orientation to their work.

In fact, CFG members tended to see themselves as team players rather than as what Huberman (1993) termed "independent artisans" or "lone wolves." Ursula underscored how CFGs cultivated a sense of mutual responsibility among the staff. Recalling a CFG colleague's distress over a departmental problem that was potentially eroding student learning, Ursula described how her CFG treated this issue as a collective concern rather than as this teacher's individual problem. In this manner, the CFG's response to their colleague's predicament reflected a deeply felt sense of mutual responsibility. As Ursula said, "It's a matter of we're all together. We're a team. This is a problem . . . whatever [is] happening affects every single one of us. If there's a problem we need to fix it right now or it's going to infect the whole school with whatever it is." Ursula's ecologically inspired perspective reveals how the interdisciplinary structure of CFGs fostered teachers' awareness of how the different parts of the school—even different departments—were deeply intertwined and mutually interdependent when it came to delivering quality education to students.<sup>15</sup>

At the level of instruction, the interdisciplinary membership configuration fostered curricular coherence and cross-fertilization while also heightening teachers' awareness of general pedagogic "best practices" (e.g., classroom management strategies, rubric-based assessment, modeling, process writing, and so on). Many interviewees noted that their participation in a CFG had helped them acquire a common language of practice with regard to academic rigor, rubrics, and writing assessment. In one CFG meeting, Dan drew attention to the importance of this

shared knowledge, claiming that “when we have a common vocabulary and the kids have it, it’s all clear.” This statement suggests how having teachers on the same page likely improved curricular coherence for students.

In terms of curricular cross-fertilization, Jim was just one of 16 teachers who testified that

it’s really good to find out what people are doing in other disciplines and understand what their challenges are and especially to seek commonalities and even get help by getting ideas from other people. It’s cross-fertilization. And, it also . . . ties the school together. I always think in terms not just of how this is going to help my class, but it’s, how is this going to help the school? Because helping the school helps my class. It’s like it’s constantly tying the school together tighter.

One concrete example of curricular cross-fertilization “tying the school together tighter” occurred in the spring of 2002, when the members of 11th-grade humanities team each went to their individual CFGs and conducted a protocol on their team’s plan for an upcoming “video quilt” unit on the civil rights era. Through this course of action, the 11th-grade team succeeded in apprising virtually the entire staff of their efforts and garnering expertise, technical assistance, and support for their ambitious endeavor.

A final benefit associated with the interdisciplinary structure of CFGs rested in how these professional communities heightened teachers’ awareness of a repertoire of general pedagogic “best practices.” Discourse analysis of the 12 protocols on teacher and student work revealed that teachers converged around a privileged set of “best” instructional practices that included modeling, process writing, explicit task formulation, less is more, rubric-based assessment, and essential questions. For novice teachers, this general pedagogical support proved invaluable. Two science teachers new to Revere praised their interdisciplinary CFG peers for helping them navigate the uncertainty and challenges of day-to-day teaching. Stan, a chemistry PhD, said,

If I had my pick, I would have chosen a non-science group because the science people, we’ve already done this in labs anyway. It’s really easy to know something so well that you miss the simple things that people who are not as aware of the subject matter don’t know and really need to do well. So, this was a perfect [CFG] group for me. As far as spending more time with this

group without science people, the things we talk about are not subject specific. I'm not really concerned about the subject matter. I've had lots and lots of that. What I need is the stuff from them that applies to all the subjects. You know, how the kids work, how they think, and better ways to present things to the kids—that definitely applies to all the subjects.

For Stan, who was extremely well prepared to teach the content of chemistry, the prospect of learning “how kids work, how they think, and better ways to present things to the kids” was an overarching concern. For his science department colleague, Dave, who confessed that his knowledge of physics was “pretty stinking low,” the CFG still provided critical curricular support. When asked in an interview if he could imagine bringing either his student or teacher work from his physics class to his CFG, Dave responded,

Oh, absolutely . . . teaching is teaching and so [we focus on] the way that you do things. I did bring in all this [to my CFG], this is what we're doing in physics and they helped me out in numerous ways. “How about if you start the unit like this? How about if you do that? How about if you do this?” They [my interdisciplinary peers] can have good ideas. They don't have to understand what impulse is in order to do that. Clearly, they can help me . . . they're not necessarily going to help me out with the what and how, what impulse is, or what or how momentum works or whatever, Newton's laws, but they could certainly help me in the ways that I deliver the things I do. The constructs are the things that I think they can help me with. And that's the thing that I think I really need a lot of help with is constructs, the way to do things.

Both Stan's and Dave's testimony suggests the ways in which the CFGs' tendency to concentrate on matters of general pedagogy especially helped new teachers learn the ropes of teaching.

#### WHAT CFGS' INTERDISCIPLINARY MEMBERSHIP CONSTRAINED

Although the interdisciplinary membership structure of CFGs enabled collegiality, collective responsibility, and a certain measure of cross-curricular coherence and interdepartmental collaboration, the shallow distribution of content expertise within these professional communities left them less prepared to provide the kinds of content-specific help that would support members in improving instruction in their subject areas.

The absence of deep disciplinary discussions in CFGs was an especially prominent concern for veteran teachers. Eight of 16 veteran CFG teachers interviewed for this study indicated that their CFG groups fell short of deepening their content and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). Given that Revere's CFGs were fundamentally concerned with boosting student achievement, the interdisciplinary membership configuration constituted a structural limitation that resulted in the systematic neglect of teachers' capacities to teach their content and subject matter well.<sup>16</sup>

Discourse analyses of protocols uncovered how CFG members were weakly positioned to assist their peers, and grappled deeply with content matter concerns. Often members prefaced their feedback with disclaimers about their lack of subject matter expertise (e.g., "I don't know anything about any of this stuff, but if a student could put the camera and say, 'Well this is what it looks like at 30 minutes, 40 minutes [etc.],' could they see what the impact is?"). Another sign of CFGs' shallow treatment of content matter surfaced in how protocol-guided conversations were dotted with questions that revealed members' lack of technical or content knowledge (e.g., "What are the elements of a persuasive essay supposed to be?" or "What does contact printing mean?"). Yet another indication of CFGs' thin attention to content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge emerged in the generic formulation of advice offered to protocol presenters (e.g., "Use a model," "Develop a template," "Ask for a rewrite."). These suggestions gravitated toward matters of general pedagogy, generally ignoring subject-specific ways of implementing these strategies.

Evidence of how the interdisciplinary membership expertise of the CFG constrained teachers' subject matter professional development also surfaced in interviews. For instance, Lars, the art teacher from the opening vignette, said that he was "not sure that people who teach other disciplines can help" him. Mary, a veteran science teacher in another CFG, also reported her own disappointment with an ATLAS protocol on her students' lab experiment posters.<sup>17</sup> Reflecting on this occasion, Mary recalled,

I presented some student work that I was very disappointed with and everybody thought it was wonderful and saw different things in it that I saw. I thought well, this isn't really helping me to either alter my expectations, what the expectations for what the work should be or to alter the directions that I give the students so that the work will come up to my expectation. Something needed to be changed . . . I think they were looking at the

format. It was a poster presentation of student experiments. So it had been a student-designed experiment that they presented in the poster and I think they [the CFG] saw the poster and the format, but *they didn't see what was lacking in the science . . .* They were looking at color. They were looking at layout. They were looking at glitz and not the substance and *it was the substance that I was really disappointed in.* I think my response was I think you saw a whole lot of things in here that I wasn't even looking at. And, *what I was focusing on was the science and that was the part I really wanted to get improved and that part didn't get improved, but maybe I was expecting too much* [emphases added]. Maybe I need to take into account these other types of things, which are partly communication, but it's also touchy-feely. I mean whether you use really good color shouldn't matter on a science presentation, but you know it does help if you can read it and it's articulate.

Mary's earnest desire to make improvements and alter her expectations with regard to her science instruction went unfulfilled in this protocol. Instead, she perceived that her CFG colleagues were more focused on the "glitz and not the substance" of her students' work and were unable to "see what was lacking in the science." This inattention to subject matter left Mary characterizing her CFG as less than satisfying.

Mary was definitely not alone in this regard. Of the 21 teachers I interviewed, 8 (from departments as diverse as social studies, science, math, and art) expressed uneasiness about the absence of deep and systematic attention to content in CFGs. This perspective was especially pronounced with the math and science teachers. When interviewed, more than half indicated the subject matter shortcomings of CFGs.<sup>18</sup> Marge, a math teacher, was particularly adamant about the importance of academic content:

I don't have anyone in my content [in my CFG]. I'm not improving how I approach a certain topic to get it better. Maybe a little, but nobody's helping me. Nobody's even thinking about it. *You know, what I teach, how I teach. You know, the subject itself. To me, that's what I'm here for. It's the whole subject. It's not really being addressed* [emphasis added]. I guess . . . that's the problem, when we talk about math I don't think the other teachers are that happy. And when we don't talk about math I'm not sure how happy I am.

For Marge, the constraints imposed by the interdisciplinary membership structure of CFGs led her to question continued participation in a CFG. “Maybe I’m not going to stay [in my CFG] very much longer. Maybe at the end of next year, at the end of this year I might [leave]. . . . The thing that bothers me is that I wish I had more time with math teachers.” The CFG experiences of Lars, Mary, and Marge underscore the endemic tensions that reside in CFGs as interdisciplinary professional communities that purport to improve instruction.

In summary, the interdisciplinary membership expertise available in CFGs contributed to Revere staff’s collegiality and to their willingness to take collective responsibility for student learning outcomes. In addition, this membership configuration oriented these professional communities toward general pedagogic concerns and cross-disciplinary teaching strategies that supplied valuable insights into how teachers might engage in powerful teaching and learning. However, the CFGs’ interdisciplinary membership configuration meant that in-depth examination of content-specific issues was not an avenue by which these professional communities spurred instructional improvement. The absence of a content focus was disappointing for many teachers and also likely carried with it consequences for classroom instruction and student learning outcomes. Taken together, these trade-offs once again highlight the tough choices that schools like Revere face as they embrace CFGs as a primary means of professional development.

#### THE CFGS’ RELIANCE ON PROTOCOL-GUIDED TALK

The fourth and final design feature examined in this article centers on the possibilities and limitations that arose as CFGs opted to adhere to, transform, and/or resist the protocol structures that they used to guide their conversations. This dimension of practice distinguishes CFGs from many other professional development and professional community settings and yet, the use of such conversational tools has been largely ignored in the existing empirical literature.<sup>19</sup> Instead, researchers have concentrated on the “authentic conversations” of teacher inquiry communities (Clark, 2001; Grossman et al, 2001; Horn, 2002; Little, 2001), and some researchers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994) have intimated their reservations about how scripted professional development in the context of teachers’ professional communities might lead to contrived opportunities for professional growth. For example, Cochran-Smith and Lytle argued that “when professional development is scripted in certain ways it becomes a substitute for grassroots change

efforts” (p. 55). These same researchers, however, explained that oral inquiry processes “often follow specific theoretically grounded procedures and routines, require careful preparation and collection of data, and rely on careful documentation that enables teachers to revisit and reexamine their joint analyses” (p. 30). From this vantage point, the protocol guidelines are resources to systematize and elevate the quality of CFGs’ oral inquiry. The CFGs’ reliance on protocol structures is an interesting phenomenon because these groups see themselves as teacher-driven grassroots entities even as they incorporate these tools designed by reform activists external to their schools. This paradox steered the CFGs at Revere into a vexing set of tensions that both enabled and constrained the professional development opportunities constructed in these professional communities.

#### WHAT A RELIANCE ON PROTOCOL STRUCTURES ENABLED

Protocols as enacted at Revere enabled CFG members to engage in focused conversations about practice that ran counter to traditional occupational norms of teaching, like privacy, noninterference, conservatism, and congeniality (Glidewell, Tucker, Todt, & Cox, 1983; Huberman, 1993; Jackson, 1968; Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975; Sarason, 1971; Woods, 1984). Specifically, protocols encouraged the deprivatization of practice by requiring CFG members to bring artifacts of their teaching or of their students’ learning for collective and public review. Protocols also gave CFG members permission to ask challenging questions, critique the practice of their peers, and offer explicit instructional advice. The majority of my interviewees (18 of 25) agreed that the use of protocols significantly enhanced the level of discourse and meaning constructed in CFG meetings. Emblematic of this strong endorsement of protocol processes was Joan, who said,

When we do the protocols people really do examine very closely what you’re doing and question. And it’s led me to question what I’m doing and to really rethink things. And light bulbs have gone off from different things that people have said, so I think it’s a real positive thing. And I’ve learned a lot from it . . . I really started doing rubrics more as an outgrowth of CFG. And I really hadn’t done too many before that and in teaching art. And this is my 31st year. We just didn’t do, rubrics were just not something that was done. And I had never really learned much about them. And I’d say that has probably been the most beneficial thing for me. And seeing other people’s rubrics and seeing how they

evaluate things. And I also started using writing more directly in my classes as a result of things we discussed in CFGs.

Joan's positive regard for protocols stems from her belief that these processes enabled her to "learn a lot." Her concrete examples of how protocols have influenced her teaching practice, specifically her references to incorporating rubrics and writing into her art instruction, testify to how these protocol processes have equipped her to improve instruction.

Another example of protocol use fostering critical and generative professional conversations surfaced in Mai's account of a protocol that allowed her to critique a 10th-grade integrated studies unit developed by her fellow social studies department member, Sharon.

There were problems with the [unit] project, but I didn't talk to Sharon and I didn't talk to her two other colleagues because I didn't want to offend anyone. And I appreciated that she brought it in [to the CFG] because it gave, it was good to use something like a protocol to really talk about some of your concerns without being personal. You know? She brought it in and she was concerned about it and we talked about it. So I was glad because I had some concerns that I spoke up about when we were there [at the CFG meeting], but I wouldn't have if we weren't there and that's due to not having enough time. She is my critical friend [peer observation partner]. I should be able to do it. But I think we have to do it in such a way that it's a formal protocol, or not necessarily a formal protocol, but it is a protocol. Because when we say, "Oh, Sharon this is, I see this wrong with it or that wrong with it," you know she can take it personally. But if we say, "Let's do a protocol. Let's really look at this." Then I think it will be more effective. But we usually don't do that. We don't have time in the day to do that.

Mai's remarks underscore how "doing a protocol" gave her a platform from which to assert a set of concerns that she would not have otherwise risked sharing given the intensive work demands of teaching in a reforming school and the chance that a team colleague would be "offended." Mai emphasized this point, saying,

I think that the protocols allow us to really analyze or really critique teacher work or student work without being personal. And because we all bring it to the table, it doesn't seem like we're

really criticizing the teacher per se, but we're helping the teacher and this is something that everyone wants.

In addition to enabling positive, practice-focused professional development opportunities within CFGs, my data set provided some evidence that protocol processes were enhancing other arenas of professional discourse at Revere. For example, Mai reported seeking out Maxine for help with some difficulties she was encountering developing fair tests for her detracked academy class. Aware that students' grades corresponded to their designation as honors (As) or special education (Ds and Fs), Mai "sat down [with Maxine] and kind of did a protocol. Not an official protocol, but we really looked at it [and asked] 'What's wrong with this test? Is it the test? Is it the instruction? Or what's going on?'" In this manner, protocol-like processes spilled over into this mentorship relationship.

Yet another example of protocol processes permeating the professional discourse of Revere High surfaced in the story of how a contentious decision over looping between the 9th- and 10th-grade academy teachers in the spring of 2002 was made much easier by the institution of a protocol to guide the deliberations and decision-making process. Heidi, a special education teacher who attended this meeting, shared this retrospective reflection with her CFG during "Connections":

I was wondering if the looping conversation would have gone as well if we hadn't been doing CFGs for quite some time and protocols because people really, you know, worked with the structure we had wanted to use or were trying to use, which might have been harder if we hadn't been using protocols.

Although limited, these data suggest that the CFGs' use of protocol structures carried over into other venues within the school in ways that helped promote thoughtful and focused conversations about teaching, learning, and school policy.

#### WHAT A RELIANCE ON PROTOCOL STRUCTURES CONSTRAINED

It would be a mistake to infer, however, that the CFGs' reliance on protocols enabled these professional communities to consistently extract maximum benefit from the 3 monthly hours they spent engaged in such processes. In fact, the CFGs' reliance on protocols constrained their learning opportunities in at least two ways. First, the CFGs' enactment of protocol guidelines limited their pursuit of important emergent issues. For example, in the meeting introduced in the opening vignette, the two

protocols (one on pinhole photos and the other on violence prevention essays) raised a host of instructional dilemmas and questions worthy of further investigation: How can teachers and aides assist “at-risk” students to translate their passion and voices into writing? How much and what kind of instructional support should teachers and aides provide to struggling students? How effective are models and templates pedagogically? How can teachers manage individualized instruction in heterogeneous classes without shortchanging advanced students?

These topics, elicited through protocol-guided conversation, represent rich lines of potential inquiry for these professional inquiry communities. However, the CFGs I observed often uncovered such meaty topics, only to drop them to carry out the next phase of the protocol. Although adhering to protocol scripts in this manner meant that the groups’ talk moved forward and did not get bogged down, I contend that this feature of their practice weakened their capacity to deeply and collectively push on critical and commonly shared matters of practice. Moreover, the CFGs’ oral inquiry practices often sidestepped the recommendation in many protocol guidelines to undertake the kind of careful documentation, which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1996) outlined, that would have enabled teachers to revisit and reexamine their joint analyses at a later date.

Second, the reliance on protocol structures to guide conversation (at least in the focal case) appeared to engender and reinforce ritualized patterns of discourse that potentially narrowed the depth of CFG inquiry. Evidence for this surfaced most prominently in the focal CFG’s generic question posing and in their pattern of giving advice from a privileged repertoire of oft-repeated instructional suggestions. Members’ desire to help solve their colleagues’ problems of practice led them to treat the classroom implication phases of protocols as troubleshooting brainstorm sessions during which they enumerated numerous suggestions. These recommendations (e.g., modeling, direct instruction, and rubrics), however, were frequently treated as self-evident pedagogic strategies. Therefore, in the meetings I observed, the CFG rarely investigated the nuances, learning demands, and consequences of adopting and implementing such recommendations.

One illustration of this phenomenon surfaced in Shelby’s violence prevention essay protocol. Among the suggestions Shelby received were ideas about modeling and using templates to support students’ writing development. Surfacing in four of six protocols on student work, modeling and using templates were frequent candidates in this CFG’s repertoire of privileged instructional suggestions. In Shelby’s case, the group’s recommendations implied that the kind of persuasion used in law or

journalism would be appropriate for her assignment, but they did not entertain how persuasion in these fields might differ from the kind of persuasion used in an essay. Similarly, the CFG did not examine how the proposal to use a template could discourage students from offering divergent solutions. Additionally, there was no discussion of how templates might result in the kind of formulaic (“doing school”) writing that the group noticed and found wanting in the student essay that Shelby brought for review. In short, Shelby’s CFG did not unpack or scrutinize the viability or relative desirability of the various pedagogic strategies that they advocated. Protocol structures, then, carried the risk of becoming habitually enacted in ways that undercut deep investigations into practice.

In sum, the practice of doing protocols helped Revere’s CFGs develop alternative norms and engage in substantive conversations about issues of teaching, learning, and reform. Protocol structures, however, were not self-implementing, straightforward, easily managed tools. As such, their use constricted the pursuit of important emergent issues related to student learning and school reform. In addition, protocols as enacted at Revere generated and reinforced ritualized patterns of discourse that potentially narrowed the depth of CFG inquiry.

#### DO THE POSSIBILITIES OUTWEIGH THE CONSTRAINTS?

In the foregoing sections, I have examined how four design features of CFGs—their diverse menu of activities, their decentralized structure, their interdisciplinary membership, and their reliance on protocols—held particular consequences for the nature and scope of teacher professional development within the professional inquiry communities at Revere High. My analysis, summarized in Table 1, shows how each design feature created both possibilities and limitations in terms of advancing the causes of instructional improvement and school reform.

From CFG insiders’ perspectives, the answer to the question posed in above section heading would be, “Yes!” According to my analysis of CFG members’ views of their CFGs as reflected in interview comments, observed levels of engagement, and attendance records, I submit that roughly two thirds of my sample of 25 interviewees perceived CFGs in a strongly positive manner. Emblematic of this contingent was Maxine, who claimed, “from my viewpoint, it’s the most significant professional development we have ever done in this building.” Roughly a fourth of the sample displayed mixed views on their CFGs. These participants, like Leta, Noah, Joan, and Mary, reported that they extracted high value out of some aspects of the CFG but felt constrained by other aspects. Finally, I

**Table 1. The possibilities and limitations of CFGs with regard to instructional improvement and school reform**

CFG Design Choices as Enacted at Revere High	Consequences for Instructional Improvement & School Reform	
	Possibilities	Limitations
Diverse Menu of Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attracted and held a diverse and growing membership over 5 years</li> <li>• Linked instructional practice with school reform goals in tangible ways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undermined the coherence and depth of professional development opportunities</li> </ul>
Decentralized Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created a low-stakes forum in which to explore politically charged reform topics over time</li> <li>• Encouraged “constructive controversy”</li> <li>• Honored teachers’ and groups’ different interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hampered systematic and collective political action</li> <li>• Mired CFGs in ambiguity in terms of their relation to schoolwide reform</li> </ul>
Interdisciplinary Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthened schoolwide communication</li> <li>• Contributed to cross-curricular coherence and cross-fertilization</li> <li>• Curtailed teacher isolation</li> <li>• Fostered shared professional commitments &amp; collective responsibility for student learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oriented teacher learning toward general pedagogy rather than toward content or pedagogical content knowledge</li> </ul>
Protocol Reliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• De-privatized teacher practice and supported critical collegiality</li> <li>• Ensured substantive, focused conversations about teaching, learning, &amp; reform</li> <li>• Infiltrated and enhanced other arenas of school discourse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constricted the pursuit of important emergent issues related to student learning and school reform</li> <li>• Generated &amp; reinforced ritualized patterns of discourse that potentially narrowed the depth of CFG inquiry</li> </ul>

estimate that less than 10% of this sample (Lars and Marge) held their CFGs in a weak or negative light. By the accounts of CFG enthusiasts, these professional communities helped them to achieve enhanced collegial relationships; an awareness of research-based practices and reforms; deeper and broader knowledge of Revere’s educational program, reforms, and commitments; and finally, and perhaps most important, concrete ideas and insights for instructional improvement. This list of achievements in a sense supplies researchers with an “existence proof” that interdisciplinary, school-based, teacher-driven, protocol-guided professional development can indeed be a powerful lever on practice and reform.

Despite the endorsements of CFG participants from CFGs enthusiasts at Revere, the analysis presented in this article charts how CFGs have constructed an impressive, but inevitably partial, combination of supports for

teacher professional development. The inevitability of this partial combination of supports stems from the very design of the CFG model, which positions these professional communities in the midst of many endemic tensions and tradeoffs. As such, CFGs are by nature politicized entities. Likewise, CFGs are by nature places in which in-depth attention to subject matter is unlikely. And finally, CFGs are by design faced with choices of myriad protocol structures and activities, each of which significantly influences the kinds of professional development opportunities constructed in these settings.

Because all design choices entail necessary constraints, CFGs and their members must thoughtfully and explicitly consider which constraints significantly impede their “bottom-line” goal of improving teacher practice to increase student achievement. Remedies to these limitations may not reside in the CFGs themselves. As I have argued here, CFGs are already encumbered by trying to be all things to all people. Instead, solutions may have to come from elsewhere, perhaps in the form of multiple and complementary CFG-like professional development opportunities in subject matter departments and academies.

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## Notes

1 Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the school and all participants.

2 Actual statistics are unclear. This estimate is based on reports that, as of the year 2000, some 900 schools had adopted the CFG strategy (Harmony Education Center, 2001) and that as many as 14,000 people may have been trained as CFG coaches (Kevin Fahey, NSRF’s research director, personal communication, May 2006). Estimates are premised on statistics that there are approximately 100,000 schools in the United States (Westheimer, 1998).

3 The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) is a national school reform organization dating back to the mid 1980s, which emphasizes 10 Common Principles aimed at reinvigorating schools with serious intellectual and moral vitality and redressing the bureaucratic inefficiencies of schools. CES seeks to promote personalized, equitable, and intellectually challenging schools. For more information, see <http://www.essentialschools.org>.

4 Administrator membership in CFGs is not uncommon; for example, 9 of the 12 CFGs studied by Nave (2000) contained administrators. In 7 of these 9, principal members “fit smoothly” into “well functioning” groups. In 2 of the 9, the administrator’s membership “proved a problem” because of inconsistent attendance and fears that they were “spying on” their CFGs (pp. 20, 24).

5 The teachers in my study used the term *protocol* to describe the printed guidelines stipulating the order of and roles for these conversations, as well as for the event that occurs when they used these scripted protocol guidelines. In an effort to reduce confusion and distinguish between the protocol as a tool and the protocol as an enactment, I refer to the tool as a set of “guidelines,” a “script,” a set of “rules.” I refer to the enacted use of these tools as “protocols.”

6 Descriptions of these protocols are available online at <http://www.lasw.org/protocols.html> and <http://www.cesnorthwest.org/cfg.php>.

7 Quotes have been edited for readability.

8 Across nine meeting observations, protocols on texts or student/teacher work lasted an average of 41 minutes. The “shortchanged” protocols lasted an average of 32 minutes. Meetings were 3 hours.

9 The visiting team from the federally sponsored New American High Schools program, which recognizes cutting edge high schools that demonstrate “rigor and innovation” (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/promisinginitiatives/nahs.html>), rejected Revere’s proposal on the basis of the school’s failure to eliminate tracking and establish academy-like structures in the upper grades.

10 Curry (2003) includes a detailed analysis of this event in Chapter 6.

11 It should be acknowledged that members’ positions on reform were not stable over time, nor were they necessarily consistent regarding the various restructuring strategies pursued at Revere.

12 Looping refers to a system whereby teachers stay with their students as they advance through grade levels. Proponents of this strategy argue that it enhances the personalization of students’ learning and contributes to a seamless, well-articulated curricular sequence.

13 It is, of course, possible that these issues were taken up outside the CFG meeting. In interviews, I asked about follow-up action on various proposals and routinely heard that no subsequent action had been taken.

14 Although participation in CFGs became a condition of employment for new hires in 1999 (year 3 of implementation), veteran members of the staff still exercised personal discretion over their participation. Lars was a 20-year teaching veteran and exercised his prerogative to exit.

15 One noteworthy aspect of this story is that the colleague in question did not feel like he could turn to his department or to Revere’s administration to address his concern. In this respect, the CFG as an interdisciplinary and confidential professional community provided an important sounding board for him to process his concerns and contemplate appropriate action. CFGs also served a similar function regarding strained team teaching relationships in Grades 9–11 integrated academy programs. Teachers who could not broach topics with their immediate team teaching colleagues periodically sought the wisdom of the CFG before trying to confront or remedy problems that had surfaced in team settings.

16 Teachers reported that subject matter departments met rarely. Furthermore, Maxine said that professional development opportunities through Revere departments were “not functional.” In this sense, CFGs and interdisciplinary academies at the 9th- and 10th-grade levels supplanted the traditional prominence of subject matter departments. This trend is commonly reported in the literature of reforming high schools (Little, 1999; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996).

17 A version of this protocol is available at <http://www.smp.gseis.ucla.edu/>

18 Of the other 21 teachers interviewed, 3 of 5 math teachers, 3 of 12 humanities teachers, and 2 of 4 electives teachers expressed a concern about the CFG’s lack of support for subject-specific professional development.

19 To my knowledge, only two studies (Evans, 2001; Gearhart, Little, Curry, & Kafka, 2002) have paid systematic attention to how teacher inquiry communities use protocols for looking at teacher and student work.

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