Still Learning about Leading: A Leadership Critical Friends Group

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"Leadership programs can no longer just hand candidates a degree, a principal's license, wish them good luck, and expect them to be successful. We need to do something more." - TILE Superintendent, 2004.

The burdens placed on school leaders and leadership preparation programs are increasing (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Myerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). Aspiring leaders are called on not only to be good technical managers, that is, good budget builders, efficient schedulers, and rigorous followers of bureaucratic regulations, but also instructional leaders, reflective practitioners, and builders of collaborative cultures who can forge powerful visions for their schools and lead significant organizational change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Wagner & Kegan, 2006; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Leadership preparation programs are expected to be rigorous and scholarly, diverse, collaborative in a variety of ways, coherent, standards based, and able to systematically evaluate their practice (Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2007; Fry, O'Neil, & Bottoms, 2006). In addition, it is hoped that these programs can effectively and efficiently produce thoughtful, capable practitioners that are able to both

address the challenges posed by the nation's schools, and survive the job themselves (Fry, O'Neil & Bottoms, 2006; Levine, 2005; Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008).

To make this picture even more complicated, a recent national study suggests that "Leadership training should not end when principals are hired" (Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008, p. 8). Powerful leadership learning takes place, not only during preparation programs, but also as aspiring leaders' transition to formal leadership positions. Simply put, to be effective in such a complex, demanding environment, school leaders need to continue to learn about leading (Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008).

This case study examines how a group of early career school leaders used a particular model of professional learning, the Critical Friends Group (The School Reform Initiative, 2010), to continue to learn about leading. More specifically, this study offers an in-depth look at how the use of a structured conversation or protocol, designed to build collaborative professional

communities in schools, supported the learning of these principals. The study describes the context in which the Critical Friends Group (CFG) occurred and then considers (a) how the group used a CFG protocol to collaboratively learn about an ongoing leadership dilemma and (b) how participation in this collaborative learning model informed the members' leadership practice. The intervention described below was originally only intended as a short term support for aspiring leaders who were seeking their first administrative positions. It has grown into something more enduring. This case study offers a step in understanding a complicated, multi-year process of leadership development.

Context

In the fall of 2001, superintendents from three Massachusetts school districts met with professors from Salem State College to address two problems. First, the superintendents knew that there were fewer and fewer effective, well trained school leaders to lead their districts' schools. Second, these district leaders sought school leaders who could not only "run" their schools, but also build school communities that are persistently focused on learning. To address these issues the group developed their own college-district educational leadership preparation program: the Tri District Initiative in Leadership Education (TILE).

The TILE program is based on six principles:

- The fundamental work of school leaders is leading the learning of schools, adults, and students;
- The richest learning happens when learners are part of a professional community that is reflective, collaborative, and consistently focused on issues of teaching and learning;
- Leaders create the conditions that support powerful professional learning communities;
- While technical knowledge about law, finance, and supervision is critically important, leaders must also understand the adaptive, complex challenges that are at the heart of their work;
- There are specific, learnable strategies associated with meeting adaptive challenges and building professional community, and
- Effective leadership education synthesizes theory and practice

Twenty two candidates began the program as a cohort in the spring of 2002.

In 2004, each of the 22 candidates, after completing 39 credits of course work and a structured internship, finished the program and received both a M.Ed. and a school administrator's license. A post-program evaluation, including a written survey and interviews, indicated not only that the graduates felt well prepared by the program, but also that they (a) had a more complex and useful

understanding of leadership practice, (b) saw clear connections between organizational theory and practice, especially as it applied to building professional learning communities, (c) understood and valued the Critical Friends Group model, and (d) had improved their teaching practice.

Yet for the TILE district/college partners, one very important and troubling question remained: how would these aspiring school leaders continue to learn about effective leadership practice as they transitioned into formal leadership positions? To answer this question, the districts had typically provided mentors. However, the TILE superintendents argued that while mentoring was vital, especially with respect to the technical aspects of the position, something else was needed to support the candidates' continued learning. The superintendents also had concerns, confirmed by recent scholarship (Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008), about the quality and quantity of good mentors. They felt that the TILE program needed to do more.

The "more" was to offer the cohort the opportunity to continue to learn from each other. In the fall of 2004, 14 of the 22 TILE cohort members agreed to continue to work and learn together in an aspiring leaders' Critical Friends Group (The School Reform Initiative, 2010). The Critical Friends Group model was designed to build more reflective, collaborative, learning-focused schools through the creation of ongoing learning communities, and it depended on the intentional use of structured conversations or protocols and skilled facilitation to efficiently and effectively support the learning of the group's members (Dune, Naves, & Lewis, 2000).

Supporting Literature

The Critical Friends Group structure was selected as a vehicle to support continued leadership learning because the district members of the TILE college/district partnership were already interested in the notion of professional learning communities. However, the district partners easily admitted that they were unsure exactly what such learning communities were or how they could be built. Yet, the superintendents of the partner districts suspected both that collaborative learning communities leveraged improvements in teaching and learning and that it was the responsibility of formal leadership to build these learning communities. Substantial literature supports the hunches of these district leaders.

Professional Learning Communities

In general, considerable literature connects the notion of a professional learning community to gains in student learning (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Donaldson, 2008; Guskey, 2000; Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Peterson, 2002; Schmoker, 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Furthermore, various scholars make the argument that that building professional, collaborative, learning-centered school

communities and cultures should be the focus both of districts that wish to increase student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Wagner & Kegan, 2006; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Schmoker, 2006) and leadership education programs that wish to prepare their candidates to be effective instructional leaders (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2007; Fry, O'Neil, & Bottoms, 2006; Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008).

However, the work of building more collaborative, reflective professional communities in schools and school districts is not a straightforward or easy task. The literature not only highlights the potential of professional learning communities, but also suggests that most schools are far from being such communities (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Schmoker, 2006; Wagner, 2004; Wagner &Kegan, 2006). Many schools remain isolated, unreflective places that struggle with any degree of collaborative practice (Bryk et al., 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Stoll & Louis, 2007).

To complicate matters, there are a variety of meanings attached to the concept of learning communities. Some scholars talk about the potential power of "school wide professional cultures" (Newmann &Wehlage, 1995); others reference "collegial schools" (Joyce & Showers 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989); while others highlight "learning communities" (McLaughlin & Oberman, 1996). Ironically, DuFour, Eaker & DuFour (2005) who popularized the term "Professional Learning Community" laments that "In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning (p. 31)."

This study and the CFG model (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997) are grounded in the concept of professional community developed by Louis and Kruse (1995). They state that professional communities are characterized by (a) reflective dialogue, (b) deprivatization of practice, (c) collaboration, (d) a focus on issues of teaching and learning, and (e) shared norms and values. Further, their research suggests that schools that to some degree have these attributes are able to improve teacher practice and increase student learning (Newmann, 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Louis and Kruse (1995) define the elements of professional community as follows:

- Collaboration: " … the ability to call on one another to discuss the mutual development of skills related to new accomplishments in practice or to generate knowledge, ideas or programs that will help advance their expertise or contribute to school performance" (p. 33).
- Deprivatization of Practice: "Teachers within professional communities practice their craft openly" (p. 31). "By sharing practice 'in public,' teachers learn new ways to talk about what they do, and the discussions kindle new relationships between the participants" (p.2).

- Focus on Student Learning: "…at the core of school-wide professional community, the emphasis shifts to how pedagogy is linked to the process of student learning, and professional actions increasingly focus on choices that affect students' opportunity to learn and provide substantial student benefit" (p. 32).
- Reflective Dialogue: "Reflective practice denotes a self awareness about what one does" (p. 30).
- Shared Norms and Values: "…core of shared beliefs about institutional purposes, practices and desired behavior" (p.29).

In summary, the building of collaborative, reflective professional learning communities seems connected to gains in student learning, and therefore an important focus of both school districts and educational leadership preparation programs. This work is challenged both by a lack of clarity around the nature of work, and the isolated, unreflective context in which it often occurs. Moreover, it is not entirely clear how such learning communities are built.

Leadership and Professional Community Building

The literature on professional community also notes both that (a) school leaders have a critical and unique role to play in building and supporting professional learning communities (Fullan, 2008; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Sparks, 2005) and (b) they are frequently ill equipped to do so (Darling-Hammond et. al. 2007; Fry, O'Neil, & Bottoms, 2006; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levine, 2005). Scholars that support the claim that professional learning communities can be powerful vehicles for improving teaching and learning also maintain that school leaders, especially school principals, have a critical role to play in the process (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, 2008; Wagner, 2004; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Mitgang & Maeroff (2008); for example, note both that " Leadership is not about one person, it's about building a shared commitment and building a leadership team" (p.2) and that there exists a "chronic mismatch between the daily realities of school leadership and the training those leaders typically receive" (p.4).

Research in school leadership suggests that there are two additional barriers to principals' continued learning: (a) principals work in fragmented, isolated cultures that are very different from professional learning communities (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008; Wagner & Kegan, 2006), and (b) they often have little district support for their professional learning (Elmore 2000; Fullan, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Tucker & Codding, 2002). This means that the day to day experience of principals, even those who were trained in a program that very much focused on the work of building of professional community, leaves little time for reflection, collaboration, or a focus on teaching and learning.

Principals are expected to build school-wide professional communities without participating in such a community themselves. The culture in which principals work generally conspires against this work.

Scholars who study the transfer of learning in organizations also wonder about the degree to which any dispositions, skills, or knowledge learned in any training program might be easily transferred to actual practice (Wexley & Baldwin 1986; Holton, Bates & Ruona, 2000; Holton, Chen & Naquin, 2003). For example, Holton, Bates, and Ruona (2000) found that participants in even the most well designed and implemented training programs were constrained by a variety of factors when they attempted to transfer their learning to a real work setting. These factors include the personality of the learner, support from peers, support from supervisors, the openness to change of the new context, and the nature of feedback that the learner receives. Simply put, because a candidate has learned about building professional communities in their formal training does not mean they will easily transfer that learning to a real school.

Overall, the literature suggests that principals have a critical role to play in building professional communities that support good teaching and increased student achievement; however, there are a number of factors that conspire against them performing this complicated leadership task. The literature also suggests that even principals trained in programs that focus on building such communities might struggle to transfer

what they have learned in their preparation program to a school setting.

Critical Friends Groups

The Critical Friends Group model offers a concrete and deliberate answer to the question of, "What does a professional learning community that is reflective, collaborative, focused on teaching and learning, built on shared norms and values, and able to deprivatize practice look like?" The CFG model is characterized by two essential elements**:** (a) regular, intentional use of protocols that build the skills of collaboration and reflection as well as focus on teaching and learning and (b) skilled facilitation that supports the professional learning of the group (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997).

CFGs are based on a theory of action that holds that educators learn the skills of professional community by participating in structured conversations in which they are encouraged to collaborate, share and reflect on practice and focus on teaching and learning (The School Reform Initiative, 2010). For example, when educators use a Tuning Protocol, they learn to deprivatize their practice by sharing their work and getting feedback in a structured and safe way (Blythe & Allen, 1999). Similarly, when educators use the Consultancy Protocol they learn to be more collaborative and reflective by sharing actual dilemmas of practice, working on them together and reflecting on the results (MacDonald et al., 2007). In other words, CFGs help practitioners learn to collaborate, be reflective, give and receive useful feedback by using

structures that intentionally ask them to collaborate, reflect, and share practice.

CFGs are led by trained facilitators who are skilled in developing a learning community that supports changes in educator practice and student learning. Because school communities that are reflective, collaborative, and focused on teaching and learning are so rare and difficult to create (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Stoll & Louis, 2007), the CFG model argues that effective facilitation is essential.

Facilitators help to promote reflection, collaboration, and a focus on teaching and learning (MacDonald et. al., 2007). They focus on the learning of both the individuals and the group, and shape the process and protocols that the group uses to build a more effective learning community (Allen and Blythe, 2004). They oversee and coordinate logistics, and they help insure the longevity and authenticity of the CFG's work (Allen and Blythe, 2004). Most CFG coaches are trained in a week long institute by the School Reform Initiative (SRI). In the case of the TILE program, principals, were trained as CFG coaches as part of the TILE program.

In general, the literature suggests building reflective, collaborative, school-wide learning communities can leverage improvements in teaching practice and student learning. However, building such learning communities is a very complicated and daunting leadership task especially for school leaders who work in isolated, non-reflective, competitive school and district cultures. Leaders need a place to continue to experience, practice, and learn about this complex work. For this group of school leaders that place is their Critical Friends Group.

The TILE Critical Friends Group

The Critical Friends Group model of professional learning was developed in 1994 at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Adopting this model made a lot of sense to the leaders of the TILE district/college partnership because the cohort members not only had been trained in the ideas of professional collaborative community and facilitative leadership, but had also met in a Critical Friends Group during their practicum.

Group Membership. In the spring of 2004, when the TILE cohort finished the formal part of the program, one member had already taken a principal's position. By the fall of 2007, as the CFG continued to meet, 16 members of the original cohort of 22 had assumed formal leadership positions. Of the 6 that did not assume leadership positions, 2 decided to work part time for family reasons, another left education, and 3 decided to remain in the classroom.

The current TILE CFG is a group of 12 early career (3 years on average) school leaders from 5 very urban to very suburban districts. Of the original 14 members, 1 retired, and another moved to a different part of the country. In the current group of 12, there are 3 assistant principals, 8 principals and 1 district-wide technology director. There are 5 men in the group and 7 women. There is 1 minority (a Colombian). These school leaders participate in this CFG because

they feel it is an essential part of their professional growth. They receive no support from their districts for this work, nor do they receive any professional development points or continuing education credits.

CFG Structure. Following the CFG model, the group used a definite structure for each of its two and one half hour, late afternoon, monthly meetings. Every meeting began with a "check in" in which the members of the group set aside time to reflect "…upon a thought, a story, an insight, a question, or a feeling that they are carrying with them into the session, and then connect it to the work they are about to do" (The School Reform Initiative, 2010). The group next used a protocol to discuss a specific dilemma of leadership practice, get feedback about some professional work, or look collaboratively at student work. The CFG often scheduled enough time to do two protocols every meeting. In addition, at the end of the meeting, the group "checked out," reflecting upon the entire session.

The average attendance for the 30 meetings from the fall of 2004 through February of 2008 was 8.4 (72%). The meetings with the highest attendance (86%) were the initial meetings in the fall of 2004 and the meetings (91%) in the fall of and winter of 2006 -2007, during which the group decided to recommit itself to the work of the CFG. Over the 30 meetings, all but one member of the group presented a dilemma, a text, or a piece of their work to be tuned. All but two members of the group facilitated at least one protocol.

Of the 30 CFG meetings, 6 — mainly at the beginning or end of each school year—were devoted to planning and reflection. The remaining 24 meetings were devoted to looking together at relevant texts, examining dilemmas of leadership practice, coaching each other through the transition to formal leadership, and looking at student work. Eighteen of the meetings were structured so that there were 2 different focuses. For example, a CFG meeting might use a Consultancy protocol to consider a problem of leadership practice and then have a Text Based Discussion on a related topic.

During the 30 meetings, the group used 9 different protocols. The group was expert at using the Consultancy, Tuning Protocol, and Text Based Protocol (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2007; The School Reform Initiative, 2010) as they had used them many times during their formal training in the TILE program. The CFG used the Consultancy 15 times, the Tuning 6 times, and the Text Based Protocol 7 times.

The Consultancy Protocol. This study looks closely at the group's enactment of the Consultancy Protocol, which is a structured conversation or protocol that is divided into the following six discrete steps.

1. The presenter offers an overview of their dilemma and the context in which it is situated. Typically, the presenter ends their presentation with a question for the group to consider.
2. The facilitator guides the group through a series of questions starting with very specific,

clarifying questions. Clarifying questions have very brief, factual answers and are designed to help the group understand the context of the dilemma.

3. The facilitator asks the group for more probing questions—questions that ask the presenter to do more analysis or expand their thinking about their dilemma. The group does not discuss the presenter's answers.

4. The presenter remains silent while the group discusses the dilemma and the presenter's question. The group might, for example, reflect on what they heard, what they thought the real dilemma might be, or what assumptions might influence the dilemma. Sometimes, a group offers concrete suggestions; other times, the discussion centers on constructing a more robust understanding of the dilemma.

5. The presenter reflects on what they heard and what resonated during the discussion.

6. Finally, the facilitator asks the group to reflect on its enactment of the protocol (The School Reform Initiative, 2010).

The group also used the Slice, Critical Incident Protocol, Charette, Collaborative Assessment Conference, Art Shack Protocol, and the What, So What, Now What Protocol at least once (The School Reform Initiative, 2010).

CFG Topics. The topics and dilemmas that the group considered can be divided into five broad categories. First, in 8 sessions, the CFG group used the Text Based Protocol to look at 8 texts. Second, during 5 early sessions the group examined issues relating to securing a leadership position. The group used the Tuning Protocol to tune the resumes of 5 group members and spent 1 session devoted exclusively to the interview process. Third, the group convened 4 sessions focused on issues faced by new principals such as negotiating with a senior administrator, building an effective partnership between a new principal and an assistant principal, surviving as a new principal, and cultural differences on a new leadership team. Fourth, in 9 sessions, the group considered general leadership subjects such as school climate and culture, teacher supervision, leading literacy, Special Education, and difficult conversations both with individuals and with the entire faculty. Fifth, the group twice spent time looking at interdisciplinary student work. In the spring of 2007, the group decided to take up the theme of "difficult conversations" and devoted 4 sessions to this topic. In October of 2007 the group adopted the theme of "building professional learning communities and dedicated 4 meetings to this topic. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the dates, topics, and protocols used during the 30 meetings:

Table 1

Meeting Summary

	DATE	TOPICS	STRUCTURE
1	November 4, 2004	Organizational meeting; arrange dates times, place; discussion of how CFG will run	
2	December 2, 2004	1. Norms discussion: How will we do our work together? Use " Willing to be Disturbed" 2. Leadership grant proposal	1. Norm building exercise/Text based 2. Tuning Protocol
3	January 19, 2005	1. Norms 2. Presentation one of the group members will make about CFGs to her district-wide administrative team.	1. Norm Building 2. Tuning Protocol
4	Feb 1, 2005	Roles of note taker, facilitator	
5	March 8, 2005	1. Supervision dilemma 2. Resume	1. Consultancy 2. Tuning Protocol
6	April 5 2005	Two Resumes	Tuning Protocol
7	May 3, 2005	1. Text based "Leading from the Eye of the Storm." 2. Resume	1. Text based 2. Tuning Protocol
8	June 7, 2005	1. Resume 2. Text based "Ithaka."	1. Tuning Protocol 2. Text Based
9	July 13, 2005	Culture vs. Climate. What difference do they make in schools? Where is my leverage as a school leader?	1. Consultancy
10	August 2, 2005	Planning/Reflections	
11	September 13, 2005	1. Survival in leadership 2. Survival in Special Education	1.Consultancy 2.Consulatncy
12	October 3 2005	1. Building walk about 2. Student work	1. General Discussion 2. Collaborative Assessment Conference
	November 1, 2005	1. Supervision Dilemma: How do I help a struggling teacher when other administrators ignore important issues? 2. School culture: How do I influence the culture of my school?	1. Consultancy 2. Consultancy
14	December 6, 2005	1. Literacy in schools 2. New principalship: How to overcome cultural differences on the leadership team?	1. Consultancy 2. Consultancy
15	Feb.6 2006	1. Interviewing for a principalship	1. Charette
16	March 7, 2006	1. Kindergarten dilemma—with fellow administrator. How do I negotiate the boundaries? 2. School culture issues: How do I work with an experienced staff and strong school culture?	1. Consultancy 2. Consultancy
17	April 4,2006	1. Student work across school teams	1. Art Shack Protocol
18	May 9, 2006	Planning/Reflection	General Discussion
19	October 19, 2006	Future of the CFG	1. Consultancy
20	November 9, 2006	Future of the CFG	1. What, So what, Now what?
21	December 14, 2006	Restructurings of CFG's work: Norms, goal, membership commitment and rigor.	1. Norm/goal setting process
22	January 11, 2007	1. Text based, "Difficult Conversations." 2. Difficult conversations with individual staff	1. Text based 2. Slice Protocol
23	February 8, 2007	1. Text based, "Crucial Conversations." 2. Difficult conversations with whole staff	1. Text based 2. Critical Incident Protocol
24	March 8, 2007	1. Text based "Behind the Silence." 2. Equity and class in schools	1. Text based 2. Consultancy
25	May 10, 2007	1. Text based, " White Privilege." 2. Difficult conversation with staff about equity.	1. Text based 2. Consultancy
26	June 5, 2007	1. Text based, "At Risk Learners: an Insider's Perspective." 2. Who gets access to services and why?	1. Text based 2. Consultancy
27	Oct 25, 2007	Professional Learning Community/School Culture	1.Consultancy
28	November 15, 2007	Professional Learning Community Building	1. Consultancy
29	January 24, 2008	Professional Learning Community Building	1. Slice
30	February 28, 2008	Personnel issue	1. Consultancy

My Role in the Group. As the group changed and developed over the course of the years it met, so did my role. Initially as the Salem Sate University representative in the district/college partnership upon which the TILE Program was built, I both taught in the program and convened the initial Critical Friends Groups meetings. At the outset, the intention was to offer the group a chance to continue to meet in the CFG format after finishing the TILE program. I convened the group, organized the initial meetings and facilitated many protocols. However, after the first year, when the group decided to continue to meet, my role began to change. Other group members took notes, sent out the agendas and facilitated the protocols. By the third year, I was just a member of the group. The group shared the facilitation of the protocols unless they wanted to try a new protocol in which case I facilitated. By year four, after the group decided that it would like to document its work, I assumed the role of documenter.

In summary, the context of this case study is particularly rich and complicated in three ways. First, the members of the group were trained in a college-district educational leadership preparation program that focused on understanding, building, and sustaining professional communities. Second, the TILE CFG has met together as a Critical Friends Group without any district support for over four years. During this period all the members of the group transitioned into formal leadership positions. Third, during the 30 meetings, the group used a variety of protocols and took up a broad range of topics. The fact that the group had made a strong commitment to learn together suggests that there is value for the participants. This case study asks how did this group of school leaders use a CFG protocol to build a learning community for themselves, enact the CFG model, and what difference did the enactment make in the leaders professional practice?

Methods

This case study follows the approach outlined by Yin (2008). It is considered a case study because of the complicated real-life context in which the case is situated and the large number of factors that influence the case. Further, the study is an example of what Yin terms an "embedded, single case design" (p. 41, 1994). It is an embedded case study because it involves two units of analysis. The first unit is one CFG meeting in which the group used the Consultancy Protocol to help one of the principals think about a dilemma of leadership practice. This unit of analysis was chosen in order to clearly understand how the principals enacted a protocol and how that enactment influenced the creation of a learning community characterized by collaboration, reflection, a focus on teaching and learning, the deprivatization of practice, and the surfacing of shared norms and values (Louis & Kruse, 1995). The second unit of analysis is the group of principals who have regularly attended the TILE CFG meeting since its inception. This unit was chosen in order to better understand the connections between the professional community that the

principals built for themselves and their practice. This unit looks at how the creation of a leadership Critical Friends Group influenced the leadership practice of the group members.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does the enactment of the Consultancy Protocol in a leadership Critical Friends Group build a collaborative, reflective, learning-focused community that deprivatizes practice and strengthens shared norms and values?
2. In what ways did the regular participation in the TILE CFG influence the leadership practice of these administrators?

Units of Analysis/Data

The field notes and transcripts of a session in October of 2007 in which the group used the Consultancy Protocol are the data for the first unit of analysis. This particular session was chosen because (a) the group used the Consultancy Protocol, the protocol that it most frequently used, (b) all of the 9 principals who regularly attended were at this meeting, and (c) the dilemma that the group considered connected to the theme of professional community building.

When the group first convened in the fall of 2004, the group kept minutes that were sent out to the members who did not attend a particular meeting. However, as the group became more comfortable with and committed to each other and this work, they became interested in documenting their learning. In January of 2007, they began making digital recordings of every session as well as keeping a speaker's list, making a seating chart, and noting the time of each step of the protocol. The transcription and notes from the meeting in October 2007 are the data for this part of the study. In the text, the names of the participants and their schools are changed to ensure anonymity.

The data for the second unit of analysis is taken from in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998), which were carried out in the spring of 2007 with 9 of the 14 CFG members who had originally committed to the group. The 9 members that were interviewed had attended most (80%) meetings since the CFG's inception. In the interviews, the leaders were asked (a) What is the TILE CFG? and (b) How does your participation in the TILE CFG inform or sustain your leadership practice? The interviews were recorded and transcripts made.

Analysis

Following Miles and Huberman (1994), transcripts of the group's enactment of the Consultancy Protocol in the October 2007 meeting were analyzed. In this analysis, a time-ordered matrix was constructed. The Consultancy Protocol has a series of very specific steps—present, clarify, probe, reframe, reflect—that naturally lend themselves to this approach. Each step of the time-ordered matrix was next divided into a conceptually clustered matrix based on Louis and Kruse's

(1995) characteristics of school-wide professional community. The analysis looked both at how the protocol was enacted and also how the enactment connected to the characteristics of reflection, collaboration, deprivatization of practice, focus on teaching and learning, and shared norms and values (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

The analysis of the interview data also followed the discourse analysis approach outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). The analysis again looked for patterns and themes, focusing especially on (a) the members' understanding of their work as members of the TILE Critical Friends Group and (b) how their participation in the CFG influenced their leadership practice. To focus the analysis and keep track of the large amount of qualitative data, a multilevel, conceptually clustered matrix, again following Miles and Huberman (1994), was created. For example, after being divided into responses to the question about the nature of the TILE CFG or CFG's influences on their leadership practice, the data was further sorted into categories of: (a) the principals' ideas of professional community building, (b) leader decision making, (c) specific CFG

tools and protocols, and (d) effects on district leadership practice.

Findings

Findings: In what ways does the enactment of the Consultancy Protocol in a leadership Critical Friends Group build a collaborative, reflective, learning focused community that deprivatizes practice and strengthens shared norms and values?

This particular Consultancy took place on October 25, 2007—the 27th meeting of the CFG and the first of the 2007-2008 school year. Because it was the first meeting of the year, the group spent much longer in the "check in" phase of the meeting than normal (30 minutes vs. 15 in a typical meeting). In addition, the group spent some time (30 minutes) discussing organizational matters such as how to set the next meeting's agenda, who would convene the meeting, and where it would be held.

Nine of the 12 members of the CFG were present for this Consultancy, which was presented by Clarke, a third-year principal of a suburban elementary school. Table 2 summarizes the roles and experience of the members of the CFG who were present during this meeting:

Table 2

The CFG Members (Present on October 5, 2007)

Name	Position	School	Years in Position
Helen	Principal	Elementary K-5	2
Ellen	Principal	Elementary K-5	5
Clarke	Principal	Elementary K-5	3
Margaret	Principal	Elementary K-5	2
Steve	Principal	Elementary K-5	2
Alan	Assistant Principal	Middle 6-8	4
June	Assistant Principal	Middle 6-8	3
Mike	Assistant Principal	K-8	3
Sara C	Principal	Elementary K-5	4

The Consultancy was facilitated by Sara who had facilitated Consultancies before and had used some protocols in her school. However, it is important to note that this is an experienced group, all of whom had formal training in the use of protocols and many opportunities to facilitate and use them in the CFG. This was the fourteenth time that the group had done a Consultancy.

Clarke's Consultancy, Step 1: The Dilemma. As the group began the Consultancy, Sara reminded the group about the steps of the Consultancy, despite the fact that the group was experienced with the protocol and had done it many times. Not only did she remind the group of the steps of the protocol, but also about the goals of the protocol. She said, "It might just be a conversation about helping Clarke get a different perspective. It might just be helping him cook this dilemma. I mean, we might not find the silver bullet type of solution." With these opening moves, Sara let the group know that she would try to stay with the structure.

Rather than giving an overview first and then posing a question for the group, as presenters had done before, Clarke asked his question right away: "How important is a good culture in your school?" In presenting the context, Clarke expanded on his dilemma:

And what I have experienced over the last several years at Horace Mann has been mind blowing with the amount of complaining and just general unhappiness and malaise amongst the staff. It has been mentally draining for me, and, really, what I felt to be a detriment to learning at the school. But, now I'm running into this sort of conversely—my NCLB scores were very good this year. You walk into the classrooms and the teachers are working really hard with the students. The assistant superintendent walked with me through the building, and she turned to me and she said, "You

know? I like what I'm seeing here. I mean, kids are learning. Kids are working. Kids are doing a great job."

As Clarke continued to explain, he gave examples of how the teachers continually threaten to go to the union, complain about each other, criticize the parents, disparage the central office, and grumble about Clarke's leadership. Eventually he admitted, "I sometimes reach the end of my rope and I get kind of sad when I have to deal with this all the time." At the end of the presentation, Sara prompted him to restate his question by saying, "And your question is, how important …?" Clarke answered,

> So how important is good culture when the academics are pretty good and the kids are learning and the kids love their school experience. I think that kids leave Horace Mann, and they really feel like they've been nurtured and cared for and parents are really happy with what goes on there and that type of thing. And so sometimes I think to myself, "You know what? Maybe I should just concentrate on the parents, work with parents, and set things up that way because there's enough work there to keep me busy."

In this very first step of the Consultancy, two important themes of professional community surfaced: collaboration and deprivatization of practice. The facilitator made it clear that today's work was collaborating on

Clarke's dilemma. In response to this offer of collaborative work, Clarke shared a critical and daunting dilemma of his own practice. This initial deprivatization of practice was emotional and personal. Clarke directly asked his colleagues for help.

Clarke's Consultancy, Step 2: Clarifying Questions. After Clarke's framing of his dilemma, Sara moved quickly to clarifying questions—again making a decision to remind the CFG about the meaning of clarifying questions and the importance of adhering to the protocol:"So, a few clarifying questions. Just who, what, and when; size of school; number of parents; number of staff types of questions you might need to know before we push on." At first, the group asked 15 clarifying questions.

After the fifteenth question, Ellen asked about the possibility of having a visiting team from another school give feedback to Clarke's school. Sara thought that this was not a clarifying question and said, "Can we just hold off on that question for moment? I think we might be ready for probing questions. But are there any more who, what, when questions?" This facilitation move both marked where the group was in the protocol and also created space for final clarifying questions. The group asked 7 more clarifying questions. The questions ranged from the number of staff who lived in the district, the role of the teacher aides, and the grade levels of the most negative staff. Sara moved on by asking, "Are there probing questions—wondering questions, what-if questions, why, and what-were-you-thinking questions?" Sara marked

where the group was in the protocol and reminded the group about the nature of a probing question.

In this second step, the group built upon the deprivatization and collaboration of the first step by digging deeper into Clarke's dilemma. Clarke's deprivatization of practice did not stop in the first step of the Consultancy. Rather than solve Clarke's dilemma as quickly as possible, the group, supported by Sara's facilitation, collaborated to build a clear, shared understanding of the dilemma.

In this step, the theme of reflection also surfaces. The facilitator's moves seem a critical ingredient in building the group's reflective capacity. Rather then let the group quickly move through the clarifying questions, Sara asked the CFG to slow down and reflect on whether they had all the information that they need in order to help Clarke. During this pause for reflection 7 more clarifying questions surfaced.

Clarke's Consultancy, Step 3: Probing Questions. The group asked 19 probing questions. In this step, the group probed about Clarke's relationship with the central administration, the other principals, his allies in the building, and defining moments in his principalship. The questions were in two broad areas. First, many questions were designed to uncover the dynamics of the culture of the school. A typical exchange was as follows:

ALAN: And how are the interpersonal relationships in your building? I mean, are these people who will go out and have a drink on Friday? Do they get along well? Are they complaining about each other?

CLARKE: Yeah, they tell on each other. I had a couple. They don't like certain people. There's a core group who don't like my social worker. This lady hasn't had lunch in I don't know how many years. I mean, she works her ass off. She's an incredible social worker. They got mad at the last week of school because she had IEPs and things to fill out. They got mad because she wasn't seeing her "friendship groups" any more. So the two union representatives came to me and said, "We want to know why blah, blah, blah." And I said, "Listen. I've never met union people who turn on their own." I said, "I've never seen this before." I said, "Can you actually do this? She's in your union." And they [said], "Well, blah, blah, blah" and left, and I didn't hear from them again. But there was a group that put them up to it. I know who did it, too. I know all the players. I mean, I understand the building. I've got to say this: I understand that building extremely well. I know where everything comes from and who started what, and I'm usually right.

A second broad area of questions concerned Clarke's leadership. In pursuing these questions, the group moved beyond Clarke's question about school culture:

ELLEN: Clarke, do you think the perception of the staff, do you think that they perceive that they have you off kilter with this?
CLARKE: That's a good question.
ELLEN: Do you feel off kilter?
CLARKE: I feel that they've got me dancing like a little puppet.

In this section, the group accepted Sara's invitation to go deeper. They probed about the nature of the school and its culture, and also about the personal toll that this struggle was having on Clarke. In enacting this section of the protocol, the group moved beyond Clarke's original question. Once again, Sara marked the end of a section by noting that she was about to move into the next step of the protocol, while at the same time inviting final comments, "So a couple of more questions and then I'm going to shift gears. I think we're almost there."

In this step, the protocol asked Clarke to go deeper into his dilemma, to extend his deprivatization of practice. The structure also asked the group to work hard to be reflective and collaborative. The probing questions encouraged Clarke to be reflective about his dilemma, to question his assumptions and consider a variety of possibilities.

This step also uncovered another aspect of professional community: shared norms and values. In this case, the shared norm was a commitment to the idea that school leaders play a critical and unique role in understanding, leading, and managing school culture.

Clarke's Consultancy, Step 4: Group Reflection. As she did during every step of the protocol, Sara reminded the group what this step was about:

So this is going to be a conversation, and Clarke is going to eavesdrop. It's not a conversation with Clarke. Clarke is going to take notes or do whatever he wants to do. We're going to talk about 10 or 15 minutes about what we hear, what the issues are, what the different perspectives are, what things he might want to consider, if there are concrete steps or things that might make sense, we can throw them out. Clarke can make of these what he will. He doesn't have to respond individually to everything we said. It's just his time to listen and our time to cook this mess for him a little bit. So what do you hear?

This was the longest step of the Consultancy. It took 22 minutes and the members of the group made 135 reflections. The group began by restating Clarke's problem and reflecting again about the power of school culture. Typical comments were, "I mean, it's so blatant and so out there, but I think there's a lot behind it"; "I think there's a lot of stuff that's really deep," and "There is a culture of complaint. It is. It's what they've done. It's what they do." The group agreed that the problem was deep and undoubtedly rooted in the practice of

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past principals, long standing hiring practices and the way in which new teachers had been inducted into the school culture. The group also agreed that the fact that the school performed well on standardized tests took away any sense of urgency to address issues of school culture.

The CFG worked collaboratively for Clarke's sake, and articulated a number of approaches that Clarke might use to influence the culture of the school. For example, Helen talked about making sure that the new teachers were inducted into a positive view of the school:

> I think there's a little bit more of this onus on you, taking them on as your people. You picked them. You brought them in. They're yours to mold and train and set up, and how do you send the message of expectation like we do with kids? How do you set the expectation?

Sara made a suggestion about asking the right kinds of questions to the faculty: "Start with an assumption that nobody can deny. Throw out a belief like, 'If we believe that talking about teaching and learning improves student results, then when are we going to talk about it?' and let them develop the answers."

From the very beginning of the group's enactment of this step of the protocol, it had ignored Clarke's question about the importance of school culture in a school where many performance indicators were positive. The group assumed that school culture

was important. The CFG ignored Clarke's original question and instead answered the question, "How do I build a more positive school culture at my school?" The group had reframed Clarke's original question based on a shared value around the importance of school culture and its connection to teaching and learning.

After the group discussed the difficulty of understanding and addressing issues of school culture, one of the principals commented, "This sounds like poorly behaved 8th graders." This comment immediately started a strain of conversation about how Clarke's school sounded like it had a culture of bullying. The concept of "bullying" became a way for the group to re-characterize and understand Clarke's school and his dilemma.

> MIKE: There's the normal. We often live in a culture of complaint in schools, that's part of what you get. But I think there is bullying behavior here, and I always try to think of these problems as teaching problems, but I think this is maybe an 8th grade playground problem a little bit. I think there are two or three bullies on the staff and then there is a pretty big group that's actually afraid of them, that are …
> ELLEN: Just watching what's happening.
> JUNE: Just watching. They are saying, hey, I don't want to get involved in this.
> ALAN: In my school, we have major teacher bullies and what

we did with the principal was we met them and we said, "You know, you're bullying." And the amazing thing is that after we pinpointed the behavior and we made it public, they actually were really upset about it. They were really good at it.

MIKE: Good at bullying?

ALAN: But once we put it on the table and then we told them they were bullies and we held everyone accountable for that, it was a shift. Now they're going back a little bit but once you put it. It's like saying you're bullies, and this is what you would not allow a child [to do]. Because a lot of the adult bullies complain about kids' behaviors.

STEVE: Yes, that's right.

MIKE: And this is exactly what you have—bullies.

SARA: You're absolutely right.

JUNE: But isn't it ironic that we don't talk to adults; we don't talk to each other that way. We don't challenge each other the same way that we expect to challenge the kids with that behavior.

Once the group had characterized Clarke's school as having a culture of bullying, it was also able to offer a number of strategies based on their experiences with dealing with adult bullies. For example, Steve suggested finding ways to include and learn from the bullies. He noted, "They're bullies, but they're leaders of the school, and if people are afraid of them, they're using their power for evil, and how do you get them to use that

power, that leadership for good?" Margaret reflected about strategies to strengthen the "silent majority" in the staff. She suggested, "Because I do think it's sort of a two-pronged problem. One [part] is how to identify these bullying behaviors and deal with that, but [the second part is], how do you empower the silent majority?" Others suggested confronting certain staff, sending out a faculty survey about school culture, and involving the district office in the conversation.

As the Consultancy continued, the CFG further reframed Clarke's question into "What do I need to do about my own leadership practice in order to replace a bullying culture with a more positive culture?" This reframing started when Ellen said,

There's nothing worse than to sit back and reflect and to be off kilter. And we've all been there. So it's nothing new. And to know that it's really impacting the way that you want to work in the building, what your priorities are, and what you're trying to stress as the most important thing in a building. There clearly are good things that happen in this school, but it's so clouded and so grey. It is truly the type of thing that I think any one of us, if confronted with it—and the longevity of this is amazing, could easily walk away from what we know we should do because the culture just beats you down. I'm bringing this forward because perhaps it is how am I am also reacting with kids in my

building. It's a very lonely job sometimes, and you can isolate yourself, too, when getting out into that crowd. It becomes frightening.

The focal point of this reframing was on the personal, emotional toll that this dilemma was taking on Clarke. Ellen's observation that, "We've all been there. So it's nothing new" and her description of the principalship as "lonely" and "frightening" makes public the personal, emotional element in Clarke's dilemma. This reframing took the group away from a strategies-focused conversation into one that was more affective and personal. The group was worried about Clarke, and could relate to his dilemma on a personal level. Steve, immediately responded,

I think the number one priority right now for Clarke is to get back into feeling on kilter, not off kilter. So whatever the hell it takes, if it takes telling people, "I'm only going to allow complaints from 12 to 12:20," or have a complaint box…whatever it takes for him to get back on track, that's absolutely the number one priority.

Others built on Steve's observation. Comments like, "I agree with the discussion that he needs to find his center," from Mike and, "I was going to say I think Clarke is dealing with one of the most difficult things to deal with—having that culture that is bigger and heavier than you are" from Alan were typical. Margaret added, "And the good

news is, he shouldn't flatter himself because it's clearly not him. This has gone back decades in this school."

However, the CFG did not limit itself to empathizing with Clarke's feeling of being "off kilter." It offered Clarke suggestions for restoring balance in his leadership practice. For example, Alan suggested, "I don't think you can reveal yourself too much. I think that can be dangerous. I think there are ways to be nice without revealing too much of what your next step might be or what you're thinking or what your plans are." June suggested that Clarke re-focus, and establish clear norms of behavior in the school. She asked, "What are the norms? I think having the conversations in public and making sure that all the voices participate in that conversation will be a huge shift in the culture." Sara talked about "framing the right kinds of questions. Start with an assumption that nobody can deny."

At the end of the twenty two minutes, Sara, who had not offered any facilitation reminders in this step, closed this section of the Consultancy simply by saying, "So let me invite Clarke back to the conversation."

In summary, this was a critical step in the group's enactment of the protocol. In this step, the group worked collaboratively for the sake of one of its members for twenty-two minutes in a way that might be unusual for groups of school leaders. The group owned and cared about Clarke's problem. This was extended and serous collaborative work for the benefit of a colleague who had the luxury of just listening, learning, and reflecting.

The group also reframed Clarke's initial question, based on a commonly held value about the connection between principal practice and school culture. No member of the group ever questioned the idea that school culture was important or supported the idea that Clarke should ignore the issues of culture simply because there was no sense of urgency driven by standardized test scores. Instead of taking up Clarke's question, the group reframed it to "How can I address issues of school culture in my school" and quickly reframed it once again into "How can I address the culture of bullying that exists in my school?" The group has a shared norm about the critical role school leaders play in shaping school culture and used that norm to reframe Clarke's question.

In the process of uncovering and understanding Clarke's dilemma during the clarifying and probing steps of the protocol, the group had surfaced some shared issues of the isolating, emotionally draining and even frightening aspects of the principalship. The deeper the group went into Clarke's issue, the more they uncovered and reflected on fundamental issues shared by them all. In this step of the protocol, it became clear that Clarke's dilemma was also connected to larger, commonly held issues of the principalship.

Clarke's Consultancy, Step 5: Clarke's Reflection. At Sara's invitation, Clarke reentered the discussion, agreeing completely both with the group's thoughts about the connection between principal practice and school culture and with the reframing of his dilemma:

So thank you. There's so much I heard here. It's incredible. Thanks for the empathy. I thought your comment, Ellen, rang true. You know, I believe I do live in a place with bullies—and then there's just getting myself back on kilter. What I'm going to sit and think about over the weekend is, how do I get myself on kilter again so I feel like I'm back in the game?

Clarke also reflected on the characterization of his school as having a culture of bullying:

That was a revelation for me. I think of stuff like that, but to challenge an adult with that, to actually close the door and say your behavior is bullying. It's pretty big stuff. I know it to be true, but I never made the connection [that] the people who are the worst bullies are also the ones that always complain about kids and are negative about kids.

In his reflection, Clarke not only agreed with the group's reframing of the question, but he was also able to talk very honestly about his feelings about "being off kilter." In this step, Clarke confessed, "Someone asked me—and I think any principal would answer this the way 'What are you scared of?' Like, what were you scared of when you first came into the principalship? And I said, 'That they'd figure out how much I didn't know.' You know. That I was a fraud."

In this reflection, Clarke's deprivatization of his practice became very personal. The process had led him to a place where he could reflect on his shortcomings as a principal with other principals. His pubic reflections seem against the grain of the interactions in the competitive, isolated professional cultures in which they typically work. Clarke was led to this very open reflection by the previous step of the protocol in which he was asked to listen as his colleagues worked for his benefit.

Clarke's Consultancy, Step 6: Group's Reflection on the Consultancy Process. After Clarke's reflection, Sara, following the protocol, asked, "Well, let me just do a little facilitation here. Any thoughts about the process? How did we do?" The responses—the group was at the end of its allotted time—were brief, but positive. Helen, for example, noted how skilled the group had become in the process by saying, " I like that we're beyond the point where you can just start flinging questions out and everybody knows what the probing ones are and when we're ready to go there. The pace is good." Clarke summed up the process by saying, "It's hard to spill it out. But I know all you guys, I know you're here to help me, so it's easier to do. I was actually looking forward to it. So, thank you." In the final step, the group named not only its skill in doing the protocol, but also how useful it was to the presenter.

In this step of the protocol, the group reflected not on Clarke's dilemma, but on their practice as a group as they enacted the Consultancy. This is an essential step in the protocol,

and it gave the group an opportunity to practice the habit of reflection.

In summary, this was a complicated discourse event in which a group of school leaders, guided by a protocol and a facilitator, were able to not only offer suggestions to a colleague about a challenging dilemma in his leadership practice, but also (a) re-describe the content of the dilemma in very different terms than those that the presenter originally used, (b) reframe the dilemma, and (c) raise, in a supportive way, difficult emotional issues of the principalship. In this enactment, the group was also able to practice many of the characteristics of school-wide professional communities that connect to increased student learning.

The group's use of the Consultancy Protocol was an opportunity for it to experience a collaborative, reflective, learning-focused community that deprivatizes practice and creates shared norms and values. To more fully understand the degree to which the group experienced such a community as used the Consultancy, it might be useful to consider these characteristics individually.

Collaboration. Overall, the enactment of this protocol was an example of sustained collaborative practice in which principals worked together to first thoroughly understand a colleague's dilemma of practice, and then offered the colleague feedback, and suggested new ways of thinking about the dilemma. The rigor of the protocol and the skill of the facilitator supported a collaborative practice which, at least

for these principals, was very different from their daily practice.

Deprivatization of Practice. The amount of collaboration in this instance seems directly connected to the presenter's willingness to present an authentic problem of practice to a group of fellow principals. Perhaps because of the group's experience with the protocol and the group, Clarke was willing to present a problem of practice that was threatening the success of his principalship. However, once Clarke presented his dilemma, the logic of the protocol—as the group clarified and probed the dilemma and then asked Clarke to remain silent and listen—took the deprivatization of practice to a deeper and more personal level. As the protocol further opened up Clarke's dilemma, it also increased the group's commitment to working together to help Clarke. Eventually the group used the process to deprivatize an emotional issue that was shared by the entire group.

Reflection. The protocol encouraged the group to be reflective in three ways. First, the protocol asked the members of the group to be reflective about Clarke's dilemma. Second, the protocol encouraged Clarke to be reflective by allowing him to listen as the group discussed his dilemma. The Consultancy gave Clarke a place to both remove himself from the conversation and continue to learn about his dilemma. As part of the process, the facilitator asked Clarke to reflect on what he had heard. Third, the final step of the protocol asked the entire group to be reflective about how it had enacted the protocol. Although the group was

near the end of its time together, the facilitator adhered to the protocol, and asked the group to think about how it had used the Consultancy.

Shared norms and values. The clearest shared norm and value of the group was its commitment to this collaborative work which has continued for six years. However, another shared norm and value surfaced during the protocol: the critical role leadership plays in influencing a school's culture. In the protocol, the group quickly surfaced this shared idea and reframed the presenter's dilemma into one of building a more learning-centered school culture, a reframing that the presenter supported.

Focus on teaching and learning. As they used the protocol, the group never focused on issues of teaching and learning. Perhaps this was because of the nature of the dilemma that Clarke presented or possibly because of the distance that school leaders are from the work of teaching and learning. Other protocols such as the Collaborative Assessment Conference, in which a group closely examines student work, might have supported more of a focus on teaching and learning.

The Enactment of the Consultancy. Four factors influenced this enactment of the Consultancy. First, the group was very experienced with the protocol—this was the 14th time the group had used it. This shared group experience meant not only that the group understood the steps of the protocol, but also trusted that they would lead the group to a productive and useful place. Second, the enactment had a facilitator who regularly

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reminded the group both of the steps of the protocol and what each step entailed. For example, the facilitator was able—in the clarifying questions step—to keep the group from rushing to the next step when there were more clarifying questions to surface. Third, the group, at an appropriate time, was able to move past the presenter's initial presentation of his dilemma, describe the school's culture using different sets of lenses, and reframe the presenter's question. Finally, the group was also to reframe the dilemma a second time to make the dilemma more personal, emotional, and deeper than it had been presented initially. The ability of the group to go deeper seemed very much connected to its experience with each other, its trust in the group, and its confidence in the protocol.

Overall, this enactment of the Consultancy provided a means for this group of school leaders to be more reflective, and collaborative, able to deprivatize their practice and surface shared norms and values than they would have in typical administrative cultures.

Results: In what ways did the regular participation in the TILE CFG influence the leadership practice of these administrators?

It seems reasonable to suggest that the principals' participation in this Critical Friends Group was engaging. These principals were committed to regularly using protocols such as the Consultancy and had done so 30 times. However, the question remains, how did this sustained, reflective learning affect the principals' leadership practice?

In a series of interviews carried out during the spring of 2007, nine members of the TILE CFG who had participated regularly in the CFG meetings were asked two broad questions: (1) What is the TILE CFG? and (2) How does your participation in the TILE CFG inform your leadership practice?

What is the TILE CFG? In general, the TILE CFG members described the CFG as a place for leadership learning that was different from the isolated, unreflective administrative cultures in which they typically worked. Also, every member identified a commitment to intellectual rigor and the regular use of protocols as the primary vehicles by which this learning was created.

Many members highlighted how reflective, collaborative conversations were rare in their school districts. Comments such as, "In this job, you can go weeks without this type of conversation," "Now I have a place to come and hash things out," and "The CFG almost has a spiritual quality" were common. Another principal described her CFG experience by noting,

> The group is honest, truthful. You have to trust in the group. I knew that when I missed CFG meetings, I was really missing something. I think it was the honest, truthful conversations, and knowing that you had a voice. I don't always feel I have these in my own district.

Another said, "In our regular administrative meetings I often say, We have to slow it down. You have to slow your thinking down. That is what we do in the CFG. It is slower paced. It is focused. It is thoughtful. And, it is purposeful." The group suggested that CFGs were more thoughtful, safer, reflective, and honest places than the ones in which they normally worked.

The group also raised issues of the isolating nature of leadership work. One principal summed up this by saying,

> For me, the CFG groups are places where you can test your hypotheses. It is the safest place. I do not know any other place where I can do that. I cannot do that with my staff. I cannot do it with my boss. And the only place where you will be taken seriously in this way is the CFG. School is a lonely place with regards to this type of conversation.

> According to the group, the CFG is a more truthful, safer place where leaders can continue to take risks for the sake of their learning.

Every group member noted that a commitment to intellectual rigor and the use of protocols were essential in creating this reflective, safe learning environment. For example, one principal commented,

> I look at our CFG as having some rigor. There is always a focus.

People bring a problem. We use a protocol. There was a lot of opening up in those sessions. It is more than a support group. We have a support group in my system, but I would feel funny about bring a text to look at or presenting a problem or using a protocol. I could not even suggest it.

Another member put in this way, "I never in my wildest imagination would have ever dreamed that I would have valued protocols in a conversation. But I need that. I need to have a structure if I am going to get value out of something. If I don't, I will just go on and on, and regress into some anecdotal conversation." Another used these words: "The great thing was all of our CFG sessions had a protocol to guide the conversation. It was great to be able share yourself." The protocols focused the learning and created a sense of rigor.

The members also noted that the use of protocols was connected to individual learning. Typical comments were: "This is where you really get it. It seems like we are all invested in that format, in that way of having conversations"; "It makes a difference going through the process. It made me see things that I would not have seen in another way. It was helpful to hear"; "I would think, if I was there, this is how I might handle it." The protocols opened up the group to a variety of perspectives on leadership practice.

In general, the group suggested that the TILE CFG functioned very differently from their district administrative teams. They continually

used words like "safe, honest, truthful and collaborative" to describe the CFG in contrast to the "hurried, competitive, political" administrative meetings in which they frequently participated. The members also identified the use of protocols as an essential characteristic of the CFG. The participants suggested that protocols opened up new learning, encouraged sharing of dilemmas of practice and created a collaborative, learning environment.

What are the connections between the TILE CFG and your leadership practice? In the interviews, every group member gave numerous examples of how their participation in the TILE CFG sustained and informed their current leadership practice. The examples fell into three broad areas. First, members shared how the TILE CFG continually refocused them on larger issues of school culture and professional community, encouraging them to look beyond the immediate problems that they faced as school leaders. Second, the principals described specific structures, tools or practices that were used in the TILE CFG that they also used, in some way, in their schools. Finally, three members of the group recounted the effect that having some TILE CFG colleagues in their district had on the work of the district administrative team.

Every one of the nine administrators interviewed for this study shared how their participation in the TILE CFG supported their commitment to building professional communities focused on teaching and learning. One principal described the change in her thinking by saying,

Are kids learning or are we just teaching? You have to create that culture where you can have conversations around instruction. It is far better to sit in a meeting and peel the onion about a kid's learning problem than to talk about how we don't have the right books or complain about the parents in the building or about how kids don't do homework. That is so gone now.

Many principals framed their work in terms of the culture of their schools. For example, one brand new principal stated, "My teachers work very hard. Yet they close their doors and work very hard. If a student runs down the hall and it is not the teacher's student, they ignore him. That is a problem and it is about culture." Another described her leadership approach by saying, "It is about always about bringing the conversation about teaching and learning. It is about building a CFG language with the staff. I try to keep focused on teaching and learning and talk about collective responsibility. And evidence of student learning." A new principal described both his commitment to CFG structures and his need for support: "It has completely influenced my thinking. My first year has been so overwhelming; I do not have the confidence yet to host my own CFGs. I will need support from our CFG."

TILE CFG members not only highlighted a connection between the TILE CFG and a general orientation towards thinking about the conditions

that support professional community in their schools, but also shared many examples of how this connection informed their decision making. One administrator shared, "The CFG reminds you that there is more than one way to look at a problem. You really need to stay open and respect other people's perspectives." Other comments were, "In the CFG, I got what I needed. When you talked about your decision making, it caused you to learn again," and "It is about the need to think again about a leaders' work." One principal summed up the shift in his thinking by noting,

> The first thing is [it helped] me to not react too quickly. Using the protocols lets me know how many layers there are to everything. When I first started in the CFG, I thought leadership was like being a fireman. There is a fire, and I will dump water on it and put it out. I learned sometimes the fire is a grease fire, and I should not put water on it, or sometimes the fire is useful. The use of protocols has allowed me to say, I don't know. To look at things in lots of ways—I don't think I was always that way. I thought I had to have the answer.

In every instance, the CFG members were able to describe a direct connection between their work as members of a CFG and their general approach to school leadership and decision making.

Some members recounted how the TILE CFG supported their commitment to building professional community by letting them experience a safe, reflective environment for their own learning. One principal summed this up by saying, "To know that I can go there after having a sucky day—as a lot of us have—and hear, 'We will help you through this.' It is such a lonely job that is hard to explain to someone that has not done it." Typical comments were, "There is a level of comfort and safety," and "I don't know that I would have ever come to understand and respect how much I can learn from others. Everyone has such different strengths and perspectives. I am in awe of everyone." The TILE CFG was a learning community that the principals had built for themselves.

The administrators also provided many examples of tools, protocols, and ideas that were used in the TILE CFG that they also used in their own practice. Some examples were using the Collaborative Assessment Conference to look at student work, holding collaborative data analysis sessions, using a Tuning Protocol to look at a crisis plan, and participating in reflective journaling. One principal described the connections she had made in her leadership practice by saying, "But you learn. You have to do it. But I am to the point that we have made some progress. In my school, we have introduced norms for our work. [We] use essential questions to drive faculty meetings and collaboratively examine data." Other principals described a more ambitious use of the CFG practices and principles:

> I decided that my approach was to run my faculty meeting in a

CFG way. Every faculty meeting starts with a check-in and ends with a closure. After check-in, there is a reflective prompt. I had bought all the staff journals. And we do some journaling. I try to get the prompt to connect to the work of the day. It is a warm up. Sometimes the work is around data or evidence of student learning. One meeting we looked at student work. We used the Collaborative Assessment Conference. The feedback was that [the faculty] had never done that, and they really loved it.

The TILE CFG not only generally influenced these leaders' practice, but also provided some very specific structures that leaders could use in their schools.

Three principals depicted two very powerful examples of connections between the TILE CFG and the leadership practice of the district administrative team. In the first example, one principal explained how a presentation that she made about her CFG work influenced how the district administrative team functioned. She explained the connection in this way:

I made a presentation about CFGs to the district leadership team. I presented on CFGs and PLCs (Professional Learning Communities). We first did a Chalk Talk (a CFG protocol). I talked about the components of a CFG. We did a Consultancy about a professional dilemma presented by one of the

principals. We did a check-in. We ended with a closure piece. Ultimately, what happened was the Assistant Superintendent decided that the district leadership team meetings would be run as a CFG. Throughout the year, principals brought student work, a dilemma, or a text-based discussion to the meeting. They still do it today. This year, the principals are running their grade level meetings as a CFG.

A second connection to district leadership practice surfaced because one district had hired three TILE CFG members as elementary principals. These three principals explained the effect that having three TILE principals (out of five elementary principals in the district) had both on their own transition into the district and on the practice of the district team. One principal described her transition:

Starting in a new district and joining a new leadership team comes with a certain amount of anxiety. Having already built a professional relation has made joining a new team a little more comfortable. It has allowed us to meet the work right off rather than tiptoeing around relationship building. For example, this summer, when S. and I were working in the office, it was easy to talk about what a faculty meeting would look like. After the first half day, we all decided to meet together to talk about block scheduling, then we

took a tour of one of our schools. We thought it benefited all of us. We got ideas, and it was reflective. We decided to go to each other's buildings when we had a chance and do a walk through, and talk. We always invited other principals.

A second new principal added,

There is a level of comfort, and it is good to be able to pick up the phone and ask a question. It has made the transition easier. In our case, the two new principals have relied on S. to figure out how things work around here. Who do you need to touch base with, keep in the loop?

Besides making transitions easier, the principals were able to identify an effect on the district team. The principal that had been in the district the longest summarized the effect by noting,

Before J. and S. arrived, the previous superintendent tried to get conversations about teaching and learning going on the leadership team. He tried to do a book study on *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001). They rode him out of town. But now it makes a difference with three of us who understand the value of this work.

She also reported that, "What's happening is that I would rather have a text-based or structured discussion rather than sit around and complain. I used to dread principals' meetings, but now I look forward to them. I can learn from so many other people." The difference was that there were now three principals on the district team who understand and valued participating in structured collaborative conversations that focused on teaching and learning.

In summary, the principals were able to articulate four broad connections between their leadership practice and their membership in the TILE CFG. First, each of the principals interviewed in this study indicated that their regular participation in the meetings of the TILE CFG was a valuable learning experience to which they were very committed. The principals talked about the meeting even having a "religious quality" and "how they really missed something when they were unable to attend a meeting." This was in distinct contrast to how they functioned in their district administrative teams, which provided minimal support for their continued learning.

Specifically, every principal felt that the structure of the CFG, the use of protocols, and the presence of a facilitator were essential factors in supporting and sustaining their learning about their own leadership practice. The CFG structure helped the principals create a professional community that encouraged collaboration, giving and receiving useful feedback, reflection, and sharing of practice. Every principal felt that they had built their own professional learning community.

Second, all of the principals framed their leadership decision-making practice as making decisions that create the conditions that build and

sustain reflective, collaborative learning communities. Every principal indicated that the TILE CFG was a place where these skills and commitments could be relearned, reaffirmed, and practiced. The principals were able to give specific examples of times when they slowed their decision making process down enough to first ask clarifying questions, and then probing questions and be reflective as they gave and received feedback.

Third, many, but not all of the principals were able to give examples of specific CFG practices that they used regularly in their school. Examples ranged from using a specific protocol to look at student data to running a faculty meeting in a Critical Friends Group format.

Finally, three of the principals provided examples of how the tools of professional community that they had learned in their program had influenced the practice of their district administrative teams, helping the district meetings become more collaborative and reflective. In one example, the district leadership team intentionally adopted a CFG structure for some of its work.

Implications

The TILE CFG began as an answer to one of its founding superintendent's assertion that "Leadership programs can no longer just hand candidates a degree, a principal's license, wish them good luck, and expect them to be successful. We need to do something more." The superintendent's assertion is supported by literature that suggests that school districts minimally support the learning of their school leaders (Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008), and leadership preparation programs typically do little to ensure that what their students learn in their preparation programs is transferred to their practice (Fry, O'Neil, & Bottoms, 2006; Levine, 2005; Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008). This case study has implications both for the practice of school districts and educational leadership preparation programs. Like many case studies it raises much larger questions.

One of the largest questions is about leadership learning. How do school leaders continue to learn about leading, improve their practice, and make sense out of the changing, complex set of demands that characterize school leadership? School leaders are asked to build schools that are reflective, collaborative communities, despite the fact that they often work in competitive, isolated, non-reflective administrative cultures that are very far from the professional learning communities that the literature highlights. How and when does this leadership learning happen?

This case study suggests that school leaders can learn about building learning-focused, reflective professional communities by building one for themselves. The Critical Friends Group model is one answer to the question of how this might be done. This particular group of school leaders has met together for six years to collaboratively examine dilemmas of leadership practice, look at student work, and consider relevant texts and to continue to learn together.

The sustained engagement of these leaders begs an obvious question, what is so special about what happens in the Critical Friends Group?

The analysis of this enactment of the Consultancy suggests that the use of a protocol combined with skilled facilitation allows the group to experience, practice, and learn many of the components of effective school-wide communities. In this case, the Consultancy Protocol encouraged the group to collaborate for the benefit of a colleague, supported a group member as they deprivatized their practice in a powerful way, surfaced a powerful shared norm that allowed the group to reframe a dilemma, and challenged the principals to reflect on their group practice as they used the protocol. In every case, principals reported that the group practice of their CFG was very different from the practice of their district administrative teams. The principals were able to build a professional community for themselves by intentionally and rigorously using a protocol that asked the group to practice and learn the skills of reflection, collaboration, and deprivatization that characterize effective learning communities.

Moreover, the principals not only learned about professional community by creating one for themselves, but this learning also affected their leadership practice. In every case, principals reported that the CFG was a place where they tried out ideas, learned about protocols and facilitation, and thought more broadly and deeply about their leadership practice. Much as the protocol provided a place for Clarke to

sit, listen, and reflect, the CFG provided a unique place for the principals to be reflective and learn about their practice.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of this case study is simply that examples of multi-year, sustained, collaborative principal learning groups are rare. Despite the fact that both districts and university-based educational leadership preparation programs are putting an increased emphasis on building professional learning communities, they do not typically support principals' sustained learning about such complicated leadership tasks. Nor do they typically help beginning principals transfer what they have learned in their preparation programs into an emerging leadership practice (Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008). In general, principals, beginning and otherwise, are often overwhelmed, isolated, and focused on the daily decisions needed to manage a school (Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). This study questions whether principals are likely to stay that way without an intentional, sustainable learning structure that focuses on continued leadership learning.

This case study suggests that any answer to the question of how to support the leadership learning of early career principals might have four characteristics. First, the structure needs to be ongoing. In this study, the principals have met together in this format for four years. They continue to meet. The work of leading schools is so complex that it seems unlikely that principals can be effective leaders without continually rethinking and reinventing their craft (Mitgang &

Maeroff, 2008). This can only be done over time.

Second, the study suggests that any learning structure needs to have a mechanism for guaranteeing rigor as the group learns. In this case, the deliberate use of a set of protocols, and especially the Consultancy Protocol, supported the group's learning and encouraged it to go deeper into dilemmas of leadership practice. The CFG is not a Friday afternoon support group or a book club; it is, by design, a rigorous learning experience.

Third, the continued learning should be connected to actual dilemmas that school leaders face. In this case, the majority of the TILE CFG meetings were concerned with ongoing challenges of principal practice. In the Consultancy described earlier, the TILE CFG explored an authentic problem of leadership practice. It was not a case study, or a learning exercise. It was the real work of a real principal.

Finally, the study suggests that any ongoing support for continued principal learning should model the type of community that the principals should build in their own schools. In this case, the principals not only had conversations about complex leadership tasks such as professional community building, they also built a professional community in which they were asked to reflect about their group learning, collaboratively consider a leadership problem, deprivatize their practice, give and receive useful feedback, and reframe important leadership dilemmas. This is exactly the community they should build in their schools.

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