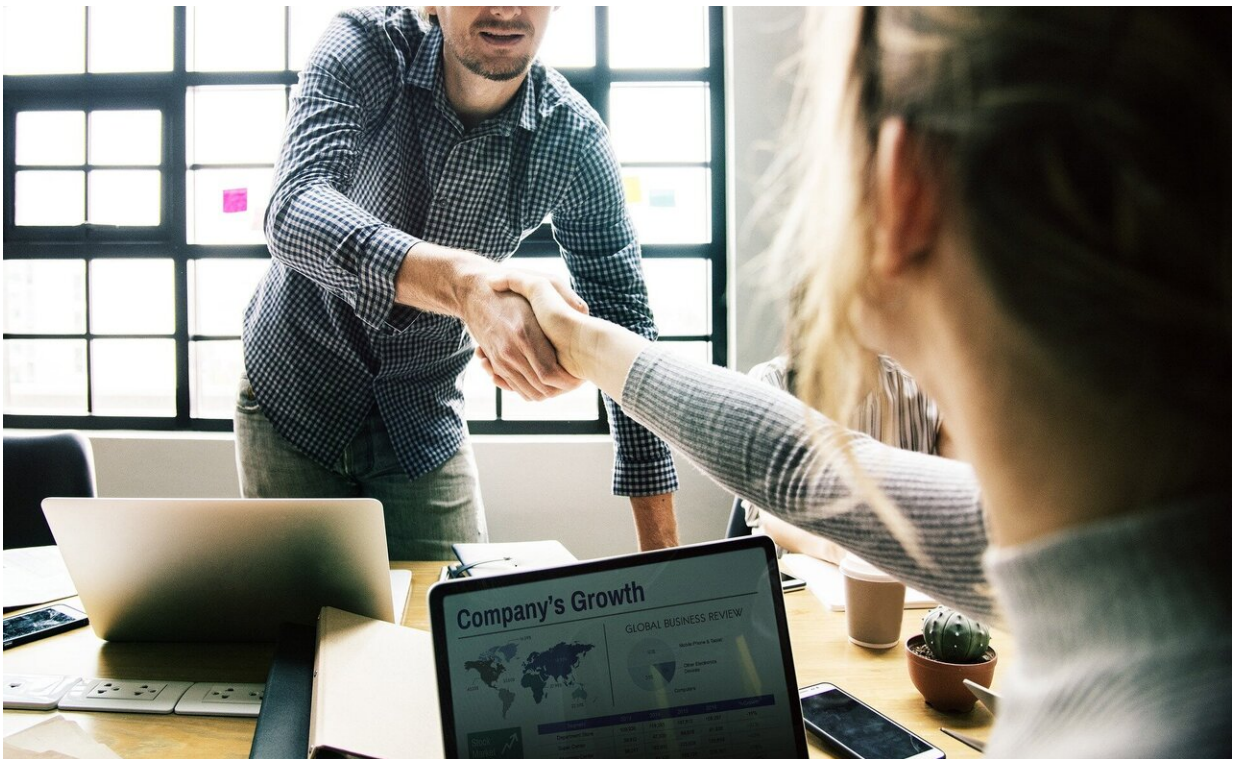


# Critical friendship groups aid teacher candidates' reflection, study finds

May 22 2019, by Claire Miller

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Student teaching, the time when teacher candidates are apprenticing with a mentor teacher in schools, is extremely busy. Most teacher candidates are also studying learning theory, designing lesson plans for the first time, developing strategies for classroom management and being

evaluating in multiple informal and formal ways. It can be hard to find time to reflect.

Enter critical friendship groups. These small-group settings are designed to give teachers a collaborative space for thoughtful discussions about their struggles and examine possible solutions they can implement in their classrooms. In particular, these spaces can be used for critical reflection on internal biases, inequitable systems and structures in schools, and other obstacles to justice-oriented teaching.

Associate Professors Nadia Behizadeh and Stephanie Cross and CEHD doctoral student Clarice Thomas recently published a [case study](#) about critical friendship groups in the Journal of Teacher Education, focusing on how this structure can be used with student teachers in university teacher preparation programs. They suggest that critical friendship groups, when supported by a justice-oriented teacher preparation program and coursework, can help teachers reflect on inequitable institutional structures and their own biases.

The study focused on a class of middle level education teacher candidates who were divided into smaller groups that met regularly during the semester. These meetings would begin with someone offering an issue they faced in their student teaching and the group would explore the issue's broader context and possible solutions. Then, each group member would write a reflection on the process. Eleven teacher candidates agreed to participate in the study and the authors analyzed their reflections throughout the semester.

Two-thirds of the dilemmas they discussed centered on relationships with mentor teachers and students, curriculum and instruction challenges, and perceived student deficiencies. While some of their conversations didn't yield any specific next steps or plans for action, others led to discussions about revising lesson plans, developing

relationships with students and adjusting classroom management plans. Importantly for the CEHD's focus on preparing social justice-oriented teachers to work in urban schools, participants took many of the original dilemmas that voiced deficit views of students and reframed them as pedagogical or relationship issues.

Behizadeh, Cross and Thomas found that the majority of students believed the critical friendship groups were helpful and in at least 13 instances, teacher candidates were able to shift their perspectives on the issues they faced, including five examples of candidates reframing deficit views of students.

Group members asking probing questions was a key factor in these reframing efforts. "The practice of asking probing questions, which we worked on in class meetings throughout the semester, may have helped push conversations from venting frustration that tended to seek a source to blame to the level of critical reflection that included depth (examining assumptions, biases, etc.) and breadth (considering the broader context, such as effects of high-stakes testing and discipline policies)," the authors wrote.

They recommend that teacher preparation programs interested in starting critical friendship groups should require at least one instructor attend formal training, then have all instructors and graduate [student](#) facilitators participate in local training to better understand the theory and practice involved in this type of collaborative reflection. Also, the authors recommend that teacher educators engage in critical collaborative reflection themselves.

In addition, the research team has developed a series of [social justice](#) educational experiences—such as discussions on culturally-responsive classroom management, a field trip to a local community-based organization working for social and economic justice, and a film

screening on intercultural dialogue—to encourage [teacher](#) candidates to critically reflect on their teaching beliefs and practices.

**More information:** Nadia Behizadeh et al. Reframing for Social Justice: The Influence of Critical Friendship Groups on Preservice Teachers' Reflective Practice, *Journal of Teacher Education* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0022487117737306](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117737306)

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