

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The need for productive, meaningful, and constructive ways for teachers to collaborate has intensified as more systematic reforms have emerged due to higher curricula demands and stricter accountability formulas (Peterson, 2002). Despite efforts to maintain highly qualified teachers, a consistent, national practice for teacher collaboration has yet to be implemented. In many circumstances teachers are without formal opportunities to collaborate. Formal opportunities are limited to busy schedules, overcrowded classes, and attention to their students needs. Teachers may meet informally, but the content, structure, and results are often weak (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Despite the potential benefits of a collaborative practice, many problems persist during professional interaction. These problems include inconsistent meetings, unproductive goal setting, unprofessional interactions, and ineffective plans to address shared purposes (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Through implementation of a facilitated, focused, constructive collaboration practice the opportunity for professional growth and teacher strategies for success within the classroom will increase.

Pajak (2003) has outlined issues with teacher collaboration. Despite supervisors' best efforts, teacher discussions about best practices often deteriorate into opposing positions. A few examples of opposing positions are individual vs. whole group instruction, mastery facts vs. higher order thinking, and phonics vs. whole language instruction. The oppositional beliefs could be related to Pajak's (2003) assertion that teaching is more than a job. For many educators, teaching is nothing less than a way to live their lives. Teachers expose their identity and display their personality through

their daily lesson plans and instruction, which can influence the dynamics of teacher professional development.

Costa and Garmston (2002) noted that human intelligence increases as we justify reasons, resolve differences, listen to another person's point of view, and receive feedback. The coping skills needed to handle future conflicts and issues can be developed through a professional's exposure to a difficult situation and purposeful reflection afterward. These challenges allow professionals to develop and draw upon certain internal resources. Costa and Garmston describe these internal capacities as the five states of mind. The five states of mind are craftsmanship, interdependence, consciousness, flexibility, and efficacy. According to the authors, "These basic human forces drive, influence, and inspire intellectual capacities" (p. 124).

Another significant issue is the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB states that by 2006 every student must have a "Highly Qualified" teacher to lead their instruction. The federal definition of a "Highly Qualified" teacher is one who is fully certified and licensed by the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Highly qualified teachers must also hold at least a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution, and demonstrate competence in each core academic subject area in which they lead. This requirement is prompting school districts across the country to focus more intently on high-quality professional development and foster a collaborative working environment. Eastwood and Lewis (as stated in Barton, 2005) stated that establishing an environment with collaborative problem solving and harmonious relationships "should be the first order of business" (p. 84) for principals.

A collaborative working environment is considered to be critical in the creation and maintenance of schools as professional learning communities (Raywid, 1993). In a related educational article, Fullan and Miles's study (as cited in Raywid, 1993) discussed the difficulty in finding time for teachers to collaborate. The collaborative time for teachers to undertake and sustain school improvement may be more important than equipment or facilities, or even staff development. Additionally, in Little's study (as cited in Raywid, 1993) described a successful school as being distinguishable from unsuccessful ones by the frequency and extent to which others discuss practice, collaboratively design materials, and inform and critique one another.

In schools where collaboration is the norm, students can sense coherence and consistency of expectations. He cited urban career academies and theme schools as examples of a unified program. Furthermore, Inger writes that collaboration in urban schools breaks up the isolation of the classroom. As a result, teachers feel more effective and receive a higher degree of satisfaction in their teaching.

Educational Practices

Best practices in education center on curriculum and teaching, classroom practices that enhance student academic skills, and academic achievement (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Best practices also place an emphasis on the principal's leadership role, the articulation of clear and well-defined academic standards, and the involvement of parents and community members in the life of the school (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde). Zelelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) also believed the potential of these best practices remains confined to the schools where they were developed and practiced, and are not readily available to other schools to study and implement.

Lezotte's (1992) basic beliefs in developing the total effective school focused on using demonstrated student learning as the primary evidence in quality teaching. This allows the school to avoid the problem of mandating a one "best model" (p. 44) of teaching. Lezotte also believes instructional strategies should build on the knowledge base of effective teaching and the laws of learning. Teachers who teach to mastery and implementation will produce the best results or outcomes. Finally, Lezotte stated "repeating practices that do not work can not be repeated" (p. 45).

According to the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) (2007), all nineteen senses need to be stimulated in order to create the rich environment needed to stimulate powerful learning for all students. The nineteen senses reported are: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, balance, vestibular, pain, eidetic imagery, temperature, magnetic, ultraviolet, infrared, ionic, vomeronasal, proximal, electrica, geogravimetric, barometric (see Utah State Board of Education for detailed explanation). Curriculum and instructional strategies need to be based upon stimulating as many senses as possible. Students also benefit from hands on learning using real-life situations. In contrast, learning based on secondary input is inherently brain-antagonistic because it severely restricts input. According to the USBE (2007), the fewer senses involved, the more difficult the task of learning becomes for all learners. Students of today come to classes with very little experience of the real world and thus with minimal conceptual understanding of what makes the world function. Today's students are starved for exposure to reality. They are coming with a shortage of experiences with the real world and the concepts and language that accompany them (Utah State Board of Education). The USBE explained that researchers have known for some time that 80

percent of reading comprehension depends upon prior knowledge. In effect, one can only take from a book what one brings to the book. Books can expand knowledge but cannot create it from scratch.

According to the National Academy of Education Committee (NAEC) on Teacher Education (2007), each fall, more than one hundred thousand new teachers enter classrooms across America. Some enter with strong preparation, competence and confidence to help their children learn. Most teachers have obtained a teaching degree, while other teachers are hired on emergency permits, and have no preparation at all. Even the teachers who received formal training have not received a rigorous education. More importantly, exposure to basic information about children, curriculum, or schools located in low income urban and rural areas is limited (NAEC, 2007).

In a report, the NAEC (2007) stated that society does not invest seriously in the lives of children, especially poor children and children of color. Schools who educate these students typically are forced to employ the least prepared teachers. Teaching is viewed as proceeding through a set of curriculum in a manner that provides information from a teacher to a child. Many state licensing systems reflect these attitudes and have entry requirements that lack demanding standards, especially for teachers who teach poor and minority students (NAEC, 2007).

Teachers within the same school have different perceptions of what strategies and new learning are useful to them. To one professional, a supervisors plan will seem insightful, while another professional is negating its value. Glickman (2003) states new or hesitant teachers want to be shown a bag of tricks for their survival. As the teacher matures, the focus moves from self to students.

Application to Teachers

Allington & Cunningham (2002) stated that classroom teachers need the opportunity to work and talk collaboratively about their work with their peers. However, powerless teachers, teachers who have little authority over their teaching do not talk about their work or their working conditions.

Glickman (2002) discussed the behaviors that a scholastic leader demonstrates with teachers when dealing with classroom issues. These behaviors are listening, clarifying, encouraging, reflecting, presenting, problem solving, negotiating, directing, standardizing, and reinforcing. Leaders cannot afford to put demands on people before the needed skills are defined. This means common goals, complementary skills and abilities, and mutual accountability (Lombardi Jr., 2001).

The research raises the question of: “Do teachers know how to manage their professional growth?” Personal insecurities, lack of professional opportunity, and fear of professional criticism hinders the willingness of professionals to set themselves up for scrutiny, despite the fact that appropriate scrutiny leads to positive professional growth and development. Teacher professional growth can be viewed in multiple ways. Growth can be measured in terms of cognition, experience, commitment, identity, subject areas, and classrooms. The issue of determining the best ways to work with teachers is complex. Teacher evaluation is always an experiment, and needs to be established within an overall purpose and direction (Glickman, 2002).

In most schools today, the problem is even more basic than barriers between departments. Teachers in adjacent classrooms often do not converse with one another, especially about the problems associated with their professional practice. Lezotte (1992)

reported that educators spend less time than members of any other profession in observing the practices of colleagues. Another barrier to effective collaboration or professional practice is that it is often assumed that practitioners have the ability to identify the essential characteristics of teachers who create relevant learning. Also researchers struggle with ways to structure professional development experiences in order to foster and develop critical teacher characteristics (Lasley, Siedentop & Yinger, 2006). One promising, but fairly new strategy that a minority of schools has implemented to enhance professional interactions is the idea of a Critical Friends Network.

Critical Friends Group

A Critical Friends Group (CFG) is a professional learning community consisting of 6-8 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for about 2 hours. A CFG can generate effective practices for teacher's to share materials, develop support systems, and promote and define holistic approaches to meet the teaching and learning needs of schools around the nation (Cromwell, 1999).

Critical Friends Groups are similar to conventional supervision and evaluations in that they assist educators in turning theories into practice and standards into actual student learning. However, arguments against conventional supervision and evaluation suggest that educational supervision or evaluation is not an effective strategy to help teachers with their day to day struggles, planning, classroom management, grading practices, and most importantly, professional growth (Marshall, 2005). To clarify, a CFG is designed to create professional learning communities, make teaching practices explicit through dialogue, and establish a foundation for sustained professional development based on inquiry. A CFG can also provide a context to help non-educators understand

what educators do, how they implement peer building, and share their beliefs about teaching and learning (Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000). Additionally, when a structured teacher collaboration program is implemented, teachers are more thoughtful about connecting curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Overall, teachers who have participated in Critical Friends Groups believe they can affect student achievement and these teachers have higher expectations for student learning, which, in turn, leads to greater student achievement (Cromwell, 1999). A CFG can adjust current attitudes towards collaboration and professional development, theory and practice strategies. CFG members see improvement in student participation, achievement levels (Cromwell, 1999). The effects of CFGs have been compared to the outcomes of Cognitive Coaching. Cognitive Coaching produces self-directed persons with the cognitive capacity for high performance, both independently and as a member of the community (Costa & Garmston, 2002).

Purpose

Scholarly literature reveals many studies about the effects of Critical Friends Groups being utilized within high school settings. However, few studies show the overall effects of Critical Friends Groups within elementary school settings. Therefore, this study will explore the effects and influence of CFGs to validate or modify the current collaboration techniques and attitudes within the elementary school setting.

Summary

This chapter introduces the background of this thesis study, discusses educational practices today, describes the application of the study to the teachers, and delineates the purpose of the study. Chapter two discloses literature pertaining to this study. The

literature discusses the fundamentals of cognitive coaching, including the five states of mind, and the definition and examples of supervision, coaching, and mentoring. Chapter two also explores the various studies that help the understanding and the implementation of the Critical Friends Group. Chapter three discloses the methodology of the study, the background of the participants, and the data collection process. Chapter four presents the results of the study, delineating themes and patterns that appear in the data. Chapter five completes the study with the researcher's conclusions of the study, implications of the study, limitations of the study, recommendations for future studies, and guidance for implementation of a Critical Friends Group.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Teacher growth is viewed in multiple ways. Growth is measured in terms of cognition, experience, commitment, identity, subject areas, and classrooms. Considering the complexity of growth, the issue of determining the best ways to work with teachers is complex. Teacher evaluation is always an experiment and needs to be established with an overall purpose and direction (Glickman, 2002).

This chapter summarizes the extensive information available on the development of an educator's growth through school culture, teaching styles, professional development, cognitive coaching, the five states of mind, supervision, mentoring, issues in education, collaboration practices within schools, and the history of the Critical Friend's Group network. It includes a description of these processes, information for professionals, and an overview of the current challenges of peer collaboration within the education system.

School Culture

The notion of school culture was first discussed in 1932 by Willard Waller (as stated by Peterson & Deal, 2002). Waller argued that every school has a culture of its own, with a set of rituals and folkways and a moral code that shapes behavior and relationships. Parents and students can detect the "special, hard to pin point spirit of schools" (p. 8). Students and staff members who have attended several schools can pick up the culture immediately as they work to become a part of the mix. Students and teachers can decipher differences in a positive or negative way. Culture is more than just rules or procedures.

Peterson and Deal (2002) explore the importance of school culture. A great deal of attention is being paid to making schools better. Policymakers want schools to change quickly and to be more responsive to students' learning needs. The response has been to tighten up structures, increase accountability, present challenging curriculum standards, test student performance, and provide rewards to schools that measure up and sanctions to those that fall short of standards. "In the short term, these tactics may produce changes and higher test scores. In the long term, such demands will "never rival the power of cultural expectations, motivations, and values" (p. 7).

Culture is important because it influences and shapes the way teachers, students and administrators think, feel, and act. School culture influences what students, teachers and community members' focus on, how they commit to the school, their motivational level, and their productivity (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Teaching Styles

In *Honoring Diverse Teaching Styles*, Pajak (2003) discusses the images of teachers. One image is of the inventing teacher. Inventing teachers use strategies within their classrooms with which have personally received positive results. The character traits of inventing teachers tend to be realistic, methodical, and structured in their thinking. Inventing teachers are able to defend their practices with logic and reason. They pay little attention to authority, conventional practice, or trends in education. Pajak also describes the images of knowing teachers. A knowing teacher holds all students to higher standards and consistent rules without consideration of the student's background or previous learning experiences. Inspiring teachers are depicted as having a talent for

making their instruction come to life. They are described as trendsetters and innovators of their field. Inspiring teachers are constantly reinventing themselves through reflection.

Educators strive to generate classroom environments where students thrive and opportunities to learn and grow are evident. Educators attempt to provide rich experiences and ample opportunity to reflect upon their student's work. Educators guide students through modeling and prompting to work together in large and small groups. When students are flourishing and demonstrating growth, reflective educators ask themselves if they are actually preparing their students for the future (Hole, 2003).

Professional Development

Cohen (1993) addressed that schools are constantly being pushed to make dramatic changes in instructional practice. Educators create lessons to engage students deeply in learning that integrates higher order thinking skills and produces conceptual understanding. In addition, Evans (1998) stated that schools are expected to adapt approaches to teaching and learning that will work for students whose needs and motivational patterns differ from those of prior generations. Many leading professionals of American education system have concluded that a conventional approach to professional development will develop educators' coping strategies to be successful within an educational environment (Dunne, 1998).

Lanier and Little (1986) pointed out the numerous variables needed by schools in order to be successful. The authors pointed out that there is no single formula that all schools can implement to maintain success because schools are not identical. Schools are made up of cultures, which vary from school to school. This includes geographical configurations, socioeconomic status, and school organizational patterns (Reuter, 1992).

To address personnel challenges, a variety of strategies for continued professional development must be addressed. A developmental plan for continuous personnel development must be implemented and carried out with consistency. Typically professional development is provided through short term conferences, workshops, consultations with experts, and other sporadic events. The effectiveness of these strategies has been questioned (Gallacher, 1997).

Cognitive Coaching

A proven method of developing teachers is through the practice of cognitive coaching. Costa and Garmston (2002) stated that a cognitive coach's role is to "apply specific strategies to enhance another person's perceptions, decisions, and intellectual functions" (p. 21). Cognitive coaching is effective because teachers need and want support. Through coaching cycles and reflection, coaches guide teachers into a state of holonomy. Koestler (as stated in Costa and Garmston, 2002) stated that holonomy is the science or study of wholeness with an individual. Holonomy considers both an individual's integrative tendencies and autonomous aspects. Integrative tendencies describe combining two theories or ideas into one, while autonomy is defined as having control over one's own affairs. A holonomous teacher can function as a member of the whole while still maintaining separateness. Holonomy also describes a person's cognitive capacity to accept the concept that he or she is whole in terms of self and yet subordinate to a higher system.

Costa and Garmston's (2002) primary goal was to enable a coaches' ability to develop a peers' recognition of their holonomy through the five states of mind. The five states of mind inform human perception and are the tools of disciplined choice making.

The states drive, influence, motivate, and inspire an individual's intellectual capacities, emotional responsiveness, high performance, and productive human action. The five states are efficacy, flexibility, craftsmanship, consciousness, and interdependence.

The Five States of Mind

The first state of mind is efficacy. Teachers who demonstrate this quality are resourceful and engage in cause and effect things. Efficacious teachers center their attention on challenging goals and overcome boundaries within their instructional practices. The second state of mind is flexibility. Flexible educators make decisions and change their minds based upon the data they receive. Flexibility involves the ability to step beyond and outside oneself. Flexible educators observe their educational environment and situations from a different point of view. Flexible educators are hypothesis makers who reflect upon every experience as a learning opportunity. When teachers assess their own performance and results, they gain a certain understanding of their practice. The third state of mind is craftsmanship. Educators displaying craftsmanship strive for continuous improvement. They value and seek data about their work in order to reflect and expand their abilities. The fourth state of mind is consciousness. Conscious educators are aware of one's thoughts, feelings, viewpoints, and behaviors. Conscious educators also internalize the effect they have on themselves and others. The fifth and final state of mind is interdependence. Interdependent educators are inclined to become one with the community of which they teach in. For example, interdependent educators strive to be a part of the development of a new or struggling school or increase the student achievement in a high poverty neighborhood (Costa & Garmston, 2002).

Supervision

Supervision is a widely utilized process for developing educators. Daresh and Playko (1989) defined supervision as the process of directing or guiding people to accomplish the goals of the organization in which they work. According to Sergiovanni (1991), effective supervision accomplishes three broad purposes: quality control in which supervisors are responsible for monitoring employee performance, helping professionals refine their skills, and promoting commitment to the field and the position to enhance motivation. Supervisors must overcome many obstacles within the field of education. One challenge in particular is the frequent need for supervisors to fulfill roles in professional development and evaluation. Because the supervisor is a decision maker in a professional's performance, promotion and retention, it is difficult to separate the evaluative role and its related functions from the educational role of promoting professional development. In supporting such development, establishing trust and collegiality is integral (Gallacher, 1997). In addition, Daresh (as stated by Gallacher, 1997) stated that supervisors must be aware of their own beliefs, be consistent with their behavior, observe and analyze patterns of behavior, consider alternative approaches, understand organization, and recognize that supervision is ongoing, not periodic.

Mentoring

Another widely used process for developing professionals is through mentoring. Mentoring can be described as the caring and supportive interpersonal relationship between an experienced, knowledgeable professional and a less experienced professional within the field. Krupp (1985) describes the mentor as having the ability to facilitate a

transfer of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values between colleagues of different lengths of experiences. The fundamental nature of the relationship is that the experienced professional takes a direct and personal interest in the education and development of the mentee (Gallacher, 1997).

The practices of supervision, mentoring, and coaching all are beneficial and offer opportunities for professionals to obtain support, develop their instructional pedagogy, professional knowledge, and communication skills. A constant theme for these practices to be successful is consistency in collaboration, collegiality, and opportunities to self-reflect on practice within the educational field (Gallacher, 1997). Daloz and Edelson (1992) expressed that “in today’s workplace what matters is not so much the skills and attributes that a person already brings to the job but rather those that they will need to develop” (p. 31).

Educators come from varied backgrounds and experiences and need different levels of professional development. Educators vary in the way they view and relate to themselves, students, and other peers. They need to be supervised on different levels because of the constant analyzation of instructional issues, and the implementation or interpretation of teacher practice. Beginning educators at lower developmental levels need more structure and direction. Veteran educators with higher developmental levels need less structure and a higher role in school wide decision making process. The overall goal would be to increase every teacher’s ability to grow in their stages of thought. Through reflection and self direction, teachers become confident and more capable of solving their own instructional problems and meet their students’ needs (Glickman, 2002).

Collaboration Practices

An integral piece to a functional group is the ability and the rationale to make collective decisions within their team, grade level, department, or school. An effective group must come to the conclusion that a change is needed, and what direction they will then take (Glickman & Gordon, 1987).

In some schools, especially high schools, teachers are colleagues in name only. Morton Inger (1993) discussed collaboration and student achievement, stating that teachers who work together see significant improvements in student achievement, behavior, and attitudes. Students can sense coherence and consistency of expectations in schools where collaboration is the norm. Furthermore, Inger writes that collaboration in schools breaks up the isolation of the classroom for educators. As a result of the collaboration, educators feel more effective and receive a degree of satisfaction in their teaching. Inger provides six dimensions for teacher collegiality and collaboration. The six dimensions are: endorsements and rewards, school level organization of assignments and leadership, latitude given to teachers, time, training and assistance, and material support.

Endorsements and Rewards.

The first dimension Inger discussed is the availability of endorsements and rewards. Teachers work best in learning communities where principals and leaders convey their belief that interdisciplinary teams serve students better. Vague slogans in favor of collaboration are ineffective. Educational leaders must spell out in detail why they believe collaboration is important. Examples of endorsements and rewards are

recognition for accomplishments, Teacher of the Month or Year awards, leadership opportunities or earned work days off.

School Level Organization of Assignments and Leadership.

A second dimension Inger discussed is the school level organization of assignments and leadership. School level reorganization stimulates cooperative work, but does not guarantee it. For teams to be effective, leadership must be broadly distributed among teachers and administrators. As an example, Inger proposes teachers having a reduced teaching load in exchange for leading a curriculum development work.

Glickman (2002) discussed the behaviors that scholastic leader's demonstrate in conferences with teachers when dealing with classroom issues. These behaviors are presenting, clarifying, listening, problem solving, and negotiating. For a positive collaborative approach leaders confront the teacher with his or her perceptions of the instructional area needing improvement. To clarify, the leader asks for the teacher's perceptions of the instructional area in question. The leader listens to the teacher's perceptions and proceeds to problem solve through proposing alternative actions for improvement. Finally the leader and the teacher discuss the options and alter proposed actions until a joint plan is agreed upon.

Latitude Given to Teachers.

Another dimension introduced by Inger is the latitude given to teachers for influence on matters of curriculum and instruction. Teachers need to be involved in the development of goals and objectives. Teaming for the sake of teaming leads to disillusionment; teams should be created to deal with the matters of compelling importance.

Time.

Another important dimension is time. Opportunities for collaboration are either enhanced or eroded by the structure of school master schedules. Schools foster collaboration among professionals by establishing common planning periods. Planning periods occur during the typical school day. At this time a teacher's students could be outside or attending other classes within the school. Planning periods are opportunities for teachers to generate or fine tune lessons, collaborate with peers or complete meetings with parents and colleagues (Inger, 1993).

Training and Assistance.

The fifth dimension Inger discussed is training and assistance. Since cooperative workplaces such as school districts and schools place unfamiliar demands on educators, schools need to provide their professionals with the training and assistance to help them master the skills required for collaboration. When these skills are mastered, educators will gain confidence in their ability to work with one another outside of the classroom.

Material and Support.

The sixth dimension provided by Inger is material and support. Material and support is an important dimension when evaluating school needs. The quality and availability of materials, consultants, and other areas of support are crucial to the overall development of a functioning learning community (Inger, 1993).

Issues in Education

Another significant issue to guide the development of teachers is the demands of No Child Left Behind. NCLB states that by 2006 every student must have a "highly qualified" teacher as leading their instruction. The federal definition of a "Highly

Qualified" teacher is one who is fully certified and licensed by the state. They also must hold at least a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution, and demonstrate competence in each core academic subject area in which they lead (Barton, 2005). NCLB requirement prompts school districts across the country to focus more intently on high-quality professional development and foster a collaborative working environment. Barton incorporates the writings of Eastwood and Lewis when they stated that establishing an environment with collaborative problem solving and harmonious relationships “should be the first order of business” (p. 37).

Although the general public and government would like schools to demonstrate highly efficient test scores instantly, the most sensible strategies work gradually. It has taken a century to develop school traditions of today, and these traditions cannot be undone easily or quickly. Creating an environment that responds to difficulties that students face when learning will require extensive institutional and individual professional learning. However, learning must begin with recognizing the mistakes already made. Change can be fostered, but change within the classroom must occur first. Good schools are a result of quality classrooms (Allington & Cunningham, 2002).

Fullan and Hargreaves (as stated in Allington & Cunningham, 2002) advocated that the primary problem in schools is that there is simply not enough opportunity or support for teachers who work together to improve instructional practices (Allington & Cunningham, 2002). Elmore, Peterson, and McCarthy (as stated in Allington & Cunningham, 2002) found that changes to instructional practices occurred in schools where professional conversations about specific instructional practices had been fostered, supported, and sustained.

To create schools that work, a stronger sense of shared responsibility among educators is critical. Shared responsibility is unlikely in schools where classroom teachers and specialists share little knowledge of each other's instructional practices. When two teachers who are working with the same student have little time to collaborate, or have poor collaboration skills, a coherent and supportive instructional environment is unlikely to be fostered (Allington & Cunningham, 2002).

Professional development alone will not produce the ability for educators to develop today's students and make deep lasting changes within their practice (Dunne, 2000). Professional development needs to be thought of as a continual element of every school day. Professional development should occur before school, after school, during the school day, during summers, and during professional leaves. One oversight by administrators has been an emphasis on trying to select the one best model, the one best schedule, or the one best topic (Allington & Cunningham, 2002).

Collaboration

When activities such as a teachers participation in an online discussion are combined with more traditional activities such as workshops by invited professionals and professional journal readings, they promote the collaboration needed to trigger reflection on professional practices. Teachers need to discuss their teaching professionally, not just read or hear about best practice. Accordingly, educators need the time and opportunity to observe their peers and be observed with a focus generated by the teacher to foster growth (Allington & Cunningham, 2002).

In many schools, teachers only encounter each other in lunchrooms and hallways, making it difficult to converse beyond small talk. One area that administrators struggle

with is the ability to create a professional learning community within their school.

Schools would be wise to create an area for teachers to engage in reflective dialogue.

This would create the prospect for positive collaboration amongst general educators and specialists (Hole, 2003). To help the majority of teachers promote success, schools must rethink their approach to teacher development. A positive approach is to create opportunities for successful teachers to reflect on their practice and share with less successful colleagues (Duncan-Andrade, 2005).

If the collaborative groups have a specific purpose of investigating and bringing forth action, they are often referred to as collaborative groups. When teachers have the opportunity to positively collaborate, strong bonds can be formed within schools not only with the staff, but also students. Duncan-Andrade (2005) discussed teachers shared philosophies to guide their instructional practices, curriculum design, and relationships with their students. To these teachers success meant raising test scores and developing the students' ability to think critically and act constructively. Their collaboration concluded that one without the other was unlikely to reduce the opportunity gap for urban students. This school was also having major discipline issues with students bringing toy guns into the school as a joke. As a result of the inquiry group collaborating to promote relevant, motivating writing lessons, a letter writing unit was created. The students wrote letters protesting the sales of toy guns within the school area. Under supervision, the students organized a march and were able to drive the toy sales out of the neighborhood (Duncan-Andrade, 2005).

Critical Friends Group

The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) is a professional development program that formulated in 1995 at the Anneberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The National School Reform Faculty is credited for the development of the Critical Friends Group (CFG) model. The CFG model of professional development provides a positive opportunity for reform in the new expectations for professional development through NCLB. The CFG model allows professional learning communities to be deliberately created and continued by motivated staff members. Also, the CFG model provides training and support that will reduce the fragility of collegial structures (Dunne, 2000).

A Critical Friends Group facilitates these needs through collaboration, reflective dialogue, demonstrating a collective focus on student learning, and an awareness of shared responsibility for the learning of all students. According to the NSRF, a professional learning community can develop within a school when there are scheduled times to meet and talk. According to Dunne (2000), the NSRF discusses how the community can be enhanced through motivation for improvement, trust and respect within the staff, a foundation in the knowledge and skills of teaching, supportive leadership, and socialization or school structures that encourage the sharing of the school's vision and mission. The NSRF reiterates the importance of creating a strong professional learning community.

The word “critical” is often misinterpreted in a Critical Friends Group context. To the group, critical means important, key, essential, or urgent. When a CFG is developed, an emphasis is placed upon spending time developing norms through

discussions about how to give feedback and how to question in a sensitive manner so that everyone feels comfortable. This is how the trust and confidentiality are established among participants (Bisplinghoff, 2002).

The outline of a CFG is a professional learning community consisting of six to eight motivated educators who come together to generate effective practices for teachers, share materials, develop support systems, and promote and support holistic approaches to meeting the teaching and learning needs of schools around the nation (Cromwell, 1999). CFGs make teaching practices explicit through dialogue, and establish a foundation for sustained professional development based on inquiry. Critical friends group's also provide a context to understand educators work with students, relationships with peers, and beliefs about teaching and learning (Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000).

CFGs use a professional literature and journal articles as a start to generate discussion, develop rapport and structure during the meetings. Participants of CFGs learn strategies for requesting and receiving feedback on curriculum and assessment design. During the meetings the participants practice techniques for examining students work and observing their colleagues during their lessons. As colleagues, CFG members help each other make choices on how to introduce concepts, uncover evidence that students are demonstrating growth, or have mastered a concept, rule, or strategy (Silva, 2003). Additionally, when a structured teacher collaboration program is implemented, teachers are more thoughtful about connecting curriculum, assessment, and instruction (Cromwell, 1999).

Critical Friends Group Coach.

Each CFG has a defined coach. The coach's role is to keep the meeting on task, introduce topics and schedule further meetings. During a CFG session, a coach may facilitate time managed protocols, such as examining, or reflecting upon student or teacher work that was brought in by a member. Group members through questioning and sharing support each other and improve their teaching practices. CFG members share dilemmas by collaborating across disciplines, tackling assumptions, or expectations, but never blame students or social conditions. A strategy for maintaining their personal reflection is to write in a journal about the effectiveness of their daily lessons, a given prompt, or open ended evaluative question provided by the CFG coach (Bisplinghoff, 2002).

There is no particular way to structure a CFG within an educational environment. Despite the variability among CFGs, the common developmental stages appear to characterize growth over time. The first stage staff members have described the group as an oasis, a trusting setting where they can spend uninterrupted time with colleagues. Uninterrupted collaboration time is a rarity in most schools. The second stage is used to strengthen the approaches to teaching. CFGs at this stage spend a majority of their meetings discussing their daily encounters with students, their modifications to daily lessons, and their reflections. CFGs question old habits of daily instruction. Groups within the third stage address fundamental questions about teaching. The group might inquire about an educational purpose, school activities, thematic units of study, student needs, and the school's mission. CFGs also spend time connecting practices to a broader issue of school culture and the community (Dunne, 1998).

The effects of the CFG can be similar to the mission of cognitive coaching. Cognitive coaching aims to produce self-directed persons with the cognitive capacity for high performance, both independently and as a member of the community. This ability to self direct in independent and interdependent settings is related to holonomy, the study of interacting parts within a whole (Costa & Garmston, 2002).

Barriers to CFGs.

There are several factors that can help or prohibit critical friends groups from moving to more complex levels of work. One is internal group dynamics. Until high trust levels are established it is impossible for groups to move to more complex levels of interaction. Dunne (1998) gave an example of how to build these trust factors. One is to pose challenging questions and install principles or rules about negative comments. In a previous critical friends group they described this as a “tone of decency” (p.6).

The second factor is the administrative structure. Despite an administrator’s verbal support of teacher collaboration, this support can only be measured through actions of the leader. The actions would be providing resources such as time to observe other teachers or a consistent room to meet in. Again trust and confidence within the collaboration is a must. Administrative support is necessary in order for the CFG to receive training and develop their collaboration skills. Administrators play an extensive role during the CFG development. Some can be coaches or leaders, others could be participants. It is clear that a principal must actively support the CFG by encouraging meetings, hiring substitutes so that peer observations and debriefing can take place, and providing other nonstandard opportunities such as a retreat (Dunne, 1998). Dunne states

that with consistency and support, a CFG can quickly develop within a school. However, through the transition of leaders and participants it can easily become dismantled.

A third problem is school culture. Despite the attempts of teachers to collaborate a school culture can disrupt all efforts through isolation and deprivation of resources. Toxic cultures or negative subcultures can be quite destructive to a school, staff morale, and student learning. Schools with toxic cultures demonstrate a lack of shared purpose or a splintered mission. The staff may view the past as a story of defeat and failure, and there may be little sense of community where negative beliefs about colleagues and students abound (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Research Implications for Thesis

Overall, teachers in CFGs believe they can affect student achievement and the teachers embrace higher expectations for a student's learning. A higher learning opportunity within the classroom leads to greater student achievement (Cromwell, 1999). Since CFGs represent artistic, mathematical, scientific, athletic, and technological intelligences, they prescribe members the opportunity to examine their colleagues work through these lenses. They too provide insight into motivating and educating students who may have complex learning or emotional difficulties (Silva, 2003). CFGs allow educators to explore complex practices in a collegial, collaborative environment. CFGs provide a public forum for teacher's questions, reflections, analysis, feedback, and new learning. CFGs provide a valuable structure that links adult learning to improved student achievement (Silva, 2003).

Professionals not only need to know how to effectively collaborate with their peers, but what to collaborate about. Evidence to demonstrate the impact on student learning and assessments would parallel the overall effects of the CFG on a school.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviews the literature, by defining and describing the practices of teacher growth through school culture, teaching styles, and professional development. The chapter concludes by reviewing the historical significance of a Critical Friends Group. Chapter three describes the methodology and design for this study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

While preliminary effects of Critical Friends Groups regarding teacher beliefs have been documented, more research regarding its influence on teacher practices is necessary. Thus, this study explores the effects of a Critical Friends Group on the practices of educators at Goodnoe Elementaryⁱ. With information gained from this study, recommendations for use of Critical Friends Groups will be provided. Addressing all of these factors will allow the researcher to address the question: What are the overall effects of teachers participating in a Critical Friends Group within the elementary school environment?

Setting

Goodnoe Elementary is a Title I school located in the Southeastern area of North Carolina. The school has a traditional schedule and a diverse population of over 700 students. The school's population consists of 68 percent white, 31 percent minority, 3 percent which are Hispanic, and 1 percent other. Two percent of the students qualify for English as a Second Language services, and students with disabilities make up 12 percent of the Goodnoe population. Goodnoe is in its second full year as an Elementary School. The school is currently housing fourth and fifth graders from a neighboring school that is currently undergoing renovations. Goodnoe also receives over 70 students that are bused in from a low income housing area downtown. These students spend over an hour per day traveling on a school bus.

Participants

Nine licensed school teachers in a southeastern North Carolina elementary school volunteered to participate in a field research study of the current collaboration practices

within a local elementary school. The participants were randomly assigned in groups of three that interchanged every two weeks during the study. The teachers had varied backgrounds and experiences within the teaching field. The study group consisted of one kindergarten teacher, one first grade teacher, one second grade teacher, two third grade teachers, two fourth grade teachers, one guidance counselor and an Intensive Academic Support teacher of students with disabilities.

The kindergarten teacher, April obtained her bachelor's degree in elementary education. April was in her second year as a full time teacher. Her future goal was to complete national board certification or to obtain a masters degree.

Diane, a first grade teacher was in her first year as a full time teacher. Diane spent the previous spring as a teacher in a year round school within the county. Diane's future goal was to return to school and obtain a masters degree. As a first year teacher, Diane was assigned a trained mentor who taught within her grade level. She received four observation evaluations per school year, three from school administration or a peer, and one from a county assigned mentor.

Valerie, a second grade teacher, was in her sixth year as a full time teacher. During the study, Valerie completed her application for National Board Certification. Like two other teachers within the group, Kate and Elly, Valerie was transferred to Goodnoe because her school was being renovated.

Marc, a third grade teacher and the only male of the group, was completing his seventh year as an educator. His previous teaching experience was for five years teaching in a charter school in California. Marc had hopes of opening his own charter school in North Carolina. Each third grade teacher that year at Goodnoe taught one

subject so the teachers could focus on student needs. Marc taught the social studies curriculum.

Lisa, another third grade teacher moved to North Carolina from Maryland where she previously taught middle school. Lisa obtained her masters degree in the field of human resource development. During the study Lisa was completing her sixth year as a full time teacher. Lisa taught the science curriculum that year to the third grade students. Lisa and Marc both hoped to complete their National Board Certification, but were waiting to be eligible because of their provisional licenses.

The veteran of the study group, Kate, was completing her twentieth year as a full time teacher. During her tenure as a teacher Kate has taught the first through seventh grades. Kate is at Goodnoe because her school is undergoing renovations. Kate planned on staying at Goodnoe even after her school was ready to reopen. During the study Kate was the fourth grade chairperson and participated on the Student Support Team. She is also the head of the School Climate committee.

Another participant, Carla, taught fourth grade and completed her masters degree in elementary education the semester prior to the study. During the study Carla's son was a student in third grade at Goodnoe elementary. Carla was completing her third year as a full time teacher and recently moved to the area from a central North Carolina county. This was Carla's first year teaching within the school district for Goodnoe Elementary. Carla had hoped to apply for her National Board Certification when she was eligible the following year.

The next participant, Mary, was one of two guidance counselors at Goodnoe Elementary during the study. Prior to her time as a counselor, Mary taught full time for

six years in California, and one full year in North Carolina in elementary school settings. Mary obtained her masters degree in counseling prior to moving to North Carolina. Previous to the year of the study, Mary taught third grade at Goodnoe Elementary. As a counselor, Mary provides full class and small group instruction on topics such as anger management, feelings, and family issues. Mary also provided one on one counseling when needed. During the study Mary served as co-chair on the lower grade Student Support Team. Mary took maternity leave six weeks into the study.

The final participant, Elly, was completing her 19th year as a full time teacher in the field of special education. Elly obtained her master's degree in the field of curriculum and instruction. Elly taught her first 17 years in a large city in Virginia. During the study Elly taught students labeled as needing intensive academic support to demonstrate success within the standard course of study. The students on the caseload were fully included within the typical setting and taught grade level skills despite their academic ability or inability.

Data Collection

A qualitative research strategy was used to set a basis for measuring the results produced by the data. Qualitative techniques were used to build a complex holistic picture, analyze words, report detailed views of participants, and conduct the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). Participants received an hour long training session that pertained to the responsibilities of each member. A video was shown to model observation strategies, develop rapport, and collaborate to develop the focus for their observation. Each member received an opening agenda and timeline to complete the observations and participate within the group sessions. Members were provided a

notebook to collect and write all of their observations and reflections from collaborative informal and formal CFG meetings, observations, shared resources, and ideas for their classrooms. The teachers also kept records of dialogue through informal conversations in their journal and they were required to print any emails regarding collaboration.

Surveys were given to each member before the training session (see Appendix A). The survey contained six questions about collaboration that received a qualitative response. Respondents answered questions on the subject, such as “What are some of your current views and experiences with grade level meetings?” and as a follow up “Is there a particular format that your current meetings follow?” Further questions included, “Describe what collaboration means to you” and “Discuss the positives or barriers that you currently encounter when collaborating”. The final two questions were more direct. The first question was, “Tell me about your experiences and how often you currently collaborate with: administration, grade level peers, non-grade level peers, and school specialists (*Exceptional Children’s, Reading Specialists, community members, etc*)”. The final question of the survey was, “Tell me what you know about a Critical Friends Group?” There was space provided under each question for additional information survey respondents wanted to add. The results of these surveys were then compiled and added to the data.

Throughout the study group members reflected in journals during observations, debriefing, and CFG meetings. The coach provided the agenda that promoted discussions on educational topics, work samples, assessments and observations.

Additional Support

The additional support provided to the members included a consistent room to collaborate in without interruption, coverage of their classrooms to observe other members, and access to current educational literature and intervention resources. Members of the group received the same periodical information, copies of the collaborative email, and shared observation notes.

The goals for each team that consisted of three group members were established within the initial training. The schedule was created so every teacher had the opportunity to observe one another during the study. The first goal was for each group member to define an area of focus in their instruction that they desired feedback. Next, the team would collaborate to set up a time to observe one another's lesson in pairs. The pair of teachers then completed an informal observation of their fellow team members within the allocated time period and focused on an instructional area set by the teacher being observed. The group would decide when they would debrief and share their thoughts, observations, and reflections they deduced during the observation. This practice would continue throughout the study until each teacher in the group completed an observation of a fellow peer group member.

CFG Meeting

Every two weeks for the eight week study the entire group would meet in a reserved conference room with an agenda created by the Critical Friend's Group coach on their findings during the observations, current issues within their educational environment, creating a learning community, burning topics in education, and celebrations of success. The meeting agenda was set for a one hour time period. This

time period gave the coach an opportunity to disburse new information and develop new peer groups for the next set of observations.

At the conclusion of the study, the members were given a second survey regarding collaboration. This survey also contained six questions. The first question on the survey was, “After participating in the Critical Friends Group, what (if any) are your new views on collaboration in your current school?” A follow up question required the members to, “Compare the collaboration results from the CFG to your past collaboration with peers.” The next question required the participant to reflect on their previous experiences by having them to respond to the prompt, “After participating in the CFG, describe what collaboration means to you.” Further into the survey the member was asked to “Discuss the positives or barriers that you encountered during your CFG participation” and “List any new strategies that you have implemented that you learned through your collaboration.” The final question of the second survey asks, “What do you know now about a Critical Friends Group?”

The qualitative information provided from the second survey was collected, documented, and compared to the previous surveys collected data. Using the information gained from this study, the overall effects of a critical friends group were determined. Furthermore, a model of the implementation of a Critical Friends Group was provided for use a Goodnoe or other Elementary school settings.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through written transcripts from journals, recorded meetings, and reflection handouts. The generated data samples were read in their entirety

several times to generate a list of significant statements. Significant statements were documented and analyzed to produce foundational themes.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explains the designs and methods used to establish the parameters for this thesis study. The chapter also explains the procedures for sample selection, data collection, and analysis. The following chapter reports the results of the data analysis using text and tables to identify the overall themes.

Chapter IV: Results

Chapter three presented the methodological rationales for this study. Chapter four presents the results of the analysis of the data collected during the study. The presentation of the results will begin with teacher responses to a survey given prior to their participation in the study. The survey's purpose is for the teacher to relay their views about grade level meetings, discuss format in meetings, reflect upon past collaboration experiences, discuss positives and negatives, and list their experiences with staff who do not teach within their grade level. The data provided created a number of themes within the data collected.

Foundational Themes

The first theme presented through the data was immediate support and trust generated in a CFG from the open communication. The second theme is the evidence from the members that the overall participation in a CFG is equivalent to attending professional development. A third theme is the trust developed promoted teachers to select a diverse range of focuses for their peer observations. The final theme evidenced in the data is teachers sharing relevant strategies to implement to improve teacher instruction that are more prevalent than professional and staff development.

Collaboration Questionnaire Results

The researcher used responses to the second question on the Collaboration Questionnaire (see Appendix A), "Is there a particular format that your current meetings follow?" Of the nine members, only Marc and Lisa mentioned using an agenda during their grade level meetings within their responses. Marc and Lisa both currently teach within the same grade level. April, Diane, and Val discussed the main objectives of the

meeting dealing with school business, discussing important dates, and completing “administrative requests”. Val, Marc and Lisa wrote about planning upcoming lessons, discussing “student’s behaviors”, and reviewing their upcoming week in math. Val, Marc and Lisa also discussed time constraints within their meetings. For example, Marc wrote, “Unfortunately we only get some of the agenda completed because someone has leave early to go a second job or the faculty meeting will begin.”

Positive Teacher Collaboration.

The researcher used responses to the fourth question on the Collaboration Questionnaire (see Appendix A), “Discuss the positives or barriers that you currently encounter when collaborating.” Each member responded to this question with positive responses. The responses varied from “getting ideas from someone else, or a new perspective on a topic”, “so rewarding, successful problem solving, working together, and meeting your goals”, “different ideas on what is best for students”, “teachers overcome obstacles and share new ideas, can be re-energizing”, and “a time to get together and discuss issues.” Other positive responses were “finding a common ground”, “some classrooms have a very positive energy”, “I love collaborating, but I only have one teacher at Murrayville that collaborates regularly with me”, and finally “new ideas are expressed”.

Collaboration with School Specialists and Administration.

The researcher used responses on the second page of the Collaboration Questionnaire (see Appendix A). The question asks the members to write down past experiences and discuss how often they collaborate with school administration, grade level peers, non grade level peers, and school specialists. School specialist could be

exceptional children's teachers, reading specialists, curriculum specialists, counselors, or community members.

Lisa, Carla, and Val wrote the results for collaboration with administration as occurring, "just during post conferences." Three other members were more specific about their collaboration times. Diane responded that she collaborates in some form "daily" with administration. April responded "one to two times per week", and Kate wrote that her "grade level has monthly meetings with the assistant principal." Finally, Marc summarized his time as, "when I have questions or during observations, usually nothing constructive offered", and Elly wrote "after student referrals, or parent issues."

The data collected for collaboration with grade level peers is as follows. Six of the members stated they "collaborate daily informally with their grade level peers." Mary and Elly wrote, they collaborate "one time per week", and Carla specifically named another teacher in the building who she collaborates with daily.

The majority of the members had similar responses when the data was collected for collaborating with non grade level peers. Val responded "one to two per month", Elly wrote "daily and usually positive", Diane responded "weekly", Lisa documented "with one teacher regularly", Carla wrote "in the hallway and break room", April commented "through committees but not academically, reading buddies." Mary, the guidance counselor, stated "I try to attend as many different grade levels as I can." Marc and Kate wrote they, "hardly ever", and "never unless I'm on a committee."

The next data collection procedure documented the experiences of collaboration with school specialists. As mentioned, members were provided examples of specialists as being exceptional children's teachers, reading specialists, counselors, or community

members. The statements from the members were, “informal conversations and referrals”, “when needed”, “I work with one special educator regularly, we are writing plans together”, “behavior specialists, mentors, liaisons, and social workers”, “daily”, and “during IEP meetings”. Three members wrote more thorough responses. April, the second year kindergarten teacher wrote, “I rarely collaborate with them this year but last year I got some great strategies and support at least monthly.” Marc, a third grade teacher wrote, “rare contact and even rarer communication. I only see them when they pick up kids, and I never know what my kids are doing or how they are doing.” Mary, the guidance counselor, responded “I collaborate with community members weekly to provide programs and events for Goodnoe. I talk to exceptional children’s teachers on occasion to follow up on specific student behaviors or for ideas.”

Knowledge of a Critical Friends Group.

The final data collection on the collaboration Questionnaire (see appendix A) allowed the members to state what they currently know about a Critical Friends Group. The members responses were as follows: April wrote, “teachers observe each other and give feedback on specific areas.” Carla responded, “a means of correct collaboration and a way to receive a different point of view to questions.” Lisa and Elly responded “not much yet”, and “very little.” Diane wrote “a group of teachers working together to solve problems and help come up with strategies and ideas.” Marc wrote “a way to collaborate in a more organized diverse way.” Mary responded “I know it’s a support group for teachers and staff to provide a collaborative process that is effective, a way to observe and provide feedback to each other.” Finally, Kate, the veteran 4th grade teacher wrote, “since (the word) friends is a part of the title of the group, I’m going to believe this is a

group of peers who will be able to provide constructive criticism about classroom instruction, and activities. Critical because they are important not necessarily critical to what I am doing.”

Rapport in the Group

The first meeting was held in the reserved conference room. Seven of the nine members were able to attend the CFG meeting that lasted an hour. The agenda set for the meeting was to review the goals of the observations, CFG member expectations during lessons and debriefings, scheduling, and answering any questions of the CFG process. Through previous emails and informal discussions, the coach realized group needed reassurance on what they would be observing, how would they cover their classes, and how long would their observations need to be. To answer the CFG members questions, the coach created a template (Appendix C) to guide them through their observations, create a focus, and provide feedback to their colleagues. A post observation reflection form (Appendix D) was also provided during this meeting.

To promote positive collaboration, the CFG coach established rapport with members, and within the entire group. A CFG is designed to create a professional learning community and make teaching practices explicit through dialogue learning (Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000). Seven members wrote about the barriers of collaboration through the responses on the pre-collaboration questionnaire (see Appendix A). Through the responses the data was clear that a barrier in the schools collaboration was a common ground in theory, reasons to collaborate and collaboration benefits. Val wrote, “it seems like we are really just reviewing what we did last year.” Carla wrote that a barrier is, “finding time to collaborate during the school day.” April disclosed that “I have

experienced being the only one at a meeting who wants to collaborate when all others want to get in and get out!” The most common response dealt with attitude. Diane wrote that, “most collaborations turn into venting sessions.” Mary shared the “inability to express concerns without emotions being involved (was a barrier).” Finally, Marc wrote that “(meetings led to) arguments and time wasted because of unnecessary discussions.”

Trust Generated from Open Communication.

During the first meeting, the coach asked the group to, “Take five minutes to write out and reflect on an issue in education or your life that is affecting your daily productivity as an educator.” The responses to the questions were voluntarily shared within the group and the goal was for the group to provide strategies, support, and a deeper understanding of their colleague. To provide a sense of the types of issues discussed, direct quotes are presented through voluntary dialogue.

Diane, a second year first grade teacher, was the first member to respond. She stated, “I have a student who I just don’t like! He seemed to be a perfect angel when he came to this school and now he is just bad. He is so smart but he makes me so mad and I want to like, but I just can’t. I decided to start adding more positives in our conversations. If I reprimand him, I would give him two positives. It seems to work but it just kills me to have to do this when he is such a little brat!”

It was clear the reflection allowed Diane to vent her frustration through her journal and words. Her colleagues were quick to respond with evaluative and reflective questions to gather more information, not turning judgmental. Mary, the guidance counselor, stated to the group and Diane that,

“I see a few students in your class in my anger management groups and it is easy to see your frustration. When I complete my lessons in your classroom I too have difficulty keeping the students on task. I heard you mention a positive behavior system, what other interventions have you tried?”

Marc, the third grade teacher, contributed some ideas that he used when he felt frustrated.

“Yea, I agree with Mary, I thought you did a great job at keeping the students on task. One thing we mentioned in our debriefing is sometimes too many plans becomes over whelming to the students and you in particular. You might just want to limit your systems. But in my class I’ve had to train myself to follow my class rules. I will tell my students how I’m feeling, turn around and take three deep breaths and count to ten. It’s good for me, or at least I find myself yelling less, and the kids get to see that adults too have these issues. We also try and do a morning meeting daily to discuss any in class issues. I believe kids are the best models for kids, if they are comfortable, they will let the class know when something or someone is bothering them. I have a book about it if you would like.”

Marc’s comments demonstrate the power of a comfortable collaborating environment. Teachers become very defensive about their students well being, for a teacher to admit she “hates” a student establishes not only her frustration level, but trust within her colleagues. This initial response created a tone for the remaining reflections.

The school counselor, Mary, reflected next. At the time of this meeting, Mary was in her eighth month of pregnancy. She needed to leave the study after the sixth week.

“I just wanted to share that recently I was removed from my morning car duty and I’m feeling a little inadequate right now. I think I know why I was but still, I don’t need pity, I can handle my job and I don’t like when decisions are made without my input.”

Kate, a fourth grade teacher, told Mary:

“I don’t understand, you don’t have duty anymore? How did they tell you?”

Mary’s response:

“He just walked up to me and said, “You don’t have duty anymore.” I was just really disappointed because apparently there was a meeting, not only with administration but a colleague as well and I wasn’t invited, but they were talking about me.”

The group provided Mary with strong feedback. Their suggestions were to sit down with administration to discuss her feelings, but also let administration know that she understands that they were just trying to be nice. Similar to the other responses presented in this section, this data demonstrates this data supported the comfort level at the meeting and the issues that are affecting educators are not always theory or practice.

Kate, the veteran teacher of the group shared her reflection.

“Over the last five days the fact that I have gotten up at 5:15 – 5:30 to have quiet time has greatly effected how I deal with students during the day. On the mornings when I was rushed because I got up late and didn’t have a minute to breathe before leaving, my classroom instruction was

tense. I found myself fussing over the stupidest things. However on my quiet time mornings, things were smooth sailing. I wasn't looking for someone to fuss at."

This reflection quickly changed the anxiety of the room. A veteran teacher had admitted her difficulties in the classroom and providing a strategy that her group colleagues could use to help organize their day. The response was welcomed by the group.

The final reflection was provided by Carla, another fourth grade teacher who recently completed her Master's degree in elementary education.

"A problem I am facing now is with another teacher within my grade level. Her demeanor with my students is very unprofessional. My kids come back to the room crying, a few parents have called about this teacher as well. The teacher has been making fun of the student's ability levels, making fun of the kids in general with sarcastic comments. What do I do?"

This reflection demonstrated how Carla tested the group and truly demonstrated the value she placed on the opinion and trust within the Critical Friends Group. Carla not only discussed a colleague within the school, but of her own grade level. The coach facilitated the member's responses by reminding them of the confidentiality of the group and not to use names during discussions.

Kate, the fellow fourth grade member of the CFG was the first to respond to Carla.

"First I want to say kudos for allowing your students to be open and gaining their trust. I have been teaching for a long time and this does

occur unfortunately within schools. Have you mentioned anything to the teacher? The best option might be to bring it up privately and just ask her if everything was going well with your student's progress and is there anyway she can help because you have noticed their confidence dropping after they return from math class. As for the parents, I would encourage them to call the teacher, but let them know you are also allowing their students to talk to you or maybe the counselor about it."

During the second CFG meeting, Marc discussed the difficulty he has had with parents and his grade level. He stated:

"This has been a difficult year for me, we as a grade level just decided that everything we have done has been in just this year. I feel like we have lost all control of the students and really the grade level doesn't get along. With the change I had to cancel my multicultural expo that we were planning. It is crazy, I have parents calling upset over the time for the projects we are completing, then the parents sign up to help out during our showcases and volunteering in the class and they never show up? I just had to cancel I can't really rely on them so I had to bag it. Because of the change in schedule what realistically would take me 6 weeks to complete, now it will take 9 weeks that we don't have now, oh, I also forgot that it was decided that we reduce the amount of time in science and social studies to thirty minutes per day. Each project has been geared toward the curriculum and incorporates many learning strategies but again what we

do is irrelevant because of the end of grade testing, which has made me start to realize that the public school setting is just not for me anymore.”

Knowing that another member of his grade level is a CFG member his statement is a true indicator of not only the trust within the CFG but the need for open communication in a school setting today.

Linking the CFG to Professional Development

The coach gave an opening reflection activity (see Appendix B) posing two questions to the CFG group. The first question was “Does your involvement in a CFG create opportunities for professional growth?” The second question posed was, “In what ways have you adapted or changed your classroom practice as a result in participating in a CFG?”

Marc was the first to respond:

“We are covering all of the sections of professional growth, we are taking the time. I had said this when we first started, this was always something I wanted to do, observe other teachers, same and different grade levels, with a focus or idea in mind. The outcome for me is selfish because I am really just looking for ideas for me. See how the other half lives.”

Mary responded in her written reflection, “A CFG allows you time with colleagues to share ideas and resources. Teachers love learning from others. I am a visual person, so seeing a co-worker in action is extremely beneficial.” Mary responded to the second question by stating “I am more aware of my professional nature. I make sure I set my expectations clearly with students during my group lessons. I am more open to trying new strategies and accepting all feedback.”

April responded to the first question, “Yes, I feel having peers come observe and provide feedback is beneficial to my professional growth. It helps me learn from others through discussions and idea sharing. I have adapted my classroom practice by creating a work folder for students who complete work early or who need enrichment.” April also stated, as recommended by a CFG peer, “I am modifying more work ahead of time instead of during the lesson or activity.”

Diane felt a CFG created an opportunity of professional growth through listening to different points of views from peers, especially the peers who have more experience than she does. Through collaboration Diane changed her classroom practice by becoming stronger in her behavior management plan. Through observations of two CFG members, Diane gained incredible insight on how to manage her lessons and communicate to her students.

Kate also felt that a CFG created opportunity for professional growth. Kate stated, “A CFG helps a peer honestly share what you should be working on without the fear of your colleague becoming upset. Educators through a CFG also are more open to attempting new ideas and strategies to improve your practices as an educator. A critical friends group makes teachers proactive in their practice.” One change that Kate incorporated in her practice is to think about what she is going to say prior to communicating to her class, especially when they are off task.

Marc agreed that a CFG created an opportunity for professional growth. His reasons were due to the informal feedback he received from peers. “The brainstorming of new ideas with colleagues and the observations of those practices (helped put a picture to the collaboration). Educators can reflect from observations and pull out and modify to fit

their needs.” Marc made many adaptations in his practice through the collaboration with his peers. Specifically, he had begun to organize his visual cues that he used within his daily instruction so they are more student friendly.

Val felt that the process of a CFG was a great tool to promote professional growth. Her reasons were due to the opportunity to “step into another teacher’s world and see how they operate or what teaching looks like from a students perspective.” Valerie stated she had yet to implement any new strategies due to the CFG, but felt she was focusing more on time management. The one observation she completed during the study she stated, “Marc was strong in time management skills and observing was beneficial to my overall teaching practices.”

Lisa stated that “a CFG allows educators to observe and learn from other teacher’s accomplishments and failed instruction. A CFG also promotes positive criticism from our peers on a weekly basis.” Lisa wrote she too had yet to implement any new strategies, but “I observed a very positive meeting environment in which I felt comfortable discussing the issues of the educational world. The CFG focused me on making changes to how I react to certain school situations.” Lisa also wrote she has been reflecting on her lesson plans more consistently.

Carla felt “discussing the issues that teachers face each day is an opportunity for professional growth. A CFG is a wonderful way to find solutions to problems in your classroom.” Carla stated, “The best part was developing relationships with my peers in different grade levels.” Carla has adapted her practice by becoming more aware of herself as an instructor. She states, “instead of ignoring my weaknesses, I am working towards building them into strengths. I also ask others for more advice now.” Carla

shared that the CFG had “promoted growth in my organization of materials.” The CFG also allowed Carla “I realized I wasn’t planning or linking my lessons ahead of time. My efforts have been geared towards preparing my lessons with a clear goal in mind, instead of reflecting during the lesson.”

The coach’s role was to keep the meeting on task, introduce topics and schedule future meetings. The coach facilitated the group members through questioning and sharing support each other and improve their teaching practices. During the session the coach wrote down notes from the dialogue of the group. Marc stated that “A CFG offers a fresh perspective to dealing with school issues and concerns, teaching practices and strategies.” The coach facilitated another discussion by linking the focus of the observations to the trust and rapport of the group, “The focus areas of trying to get students to be more open, building enrichment activities for kindergarten students, and effective distribution of materials are not common topics for observations or professional development.”

The second question also generated an overwhelming variety of changes in theory and practice in the classroom. Other reflection topics that were noted during the CFG discussion were Kate’s conclusion that “My expression and tone in my voice when I explains tasks or speaks to students is limiting their participation in the classroom.” The coach added reflection by stating, “Also, the vocabulary by educators used when explaining or modeling a task can be overwhelming to students, and makes teachers frustrated when the students don’t understand.” Through facilitated discussions, the CFG also discussed organization, having clearer expectations in all areas of classroom

management, the modification of assignments, and how teachers become more conscious of an educators role as models in society.

Teacher Selected Focuses

The teachers who were observed set the tone for the observation by selecting a focus they wanted their CFG members to focus on. Through a pre-conference for an evaluative observation, teachers discuss their lesson plans and management systems; this could be considered their focus. In a coaching cycle, teachers ask their coach or mentor to specifically look at particular aspects of their instruction. Through the reflection during the CFG meetings, Diane, April, and Lisa stated they chose lessons they are comfortable with and they know are successful during evaluative observations. However, with the CFG observations, the foci were experimental. Kate, and Marc admitted they wanted to show their peers what their classes were like on a typical day.

For example, during the second CFG meeting, the topic presented by the coach for discussion was “How did you come to your focus?” Through reflection the coach felt that the members discussed their foci with “ownership and pride.” The foci discussed during the meeting were distributing materials to students effectively, organization of materials, promoting an openness in the classroom, overall effectiveness of the lesson, classroom management, managing behavior, content, modeling, differentiation, and what to do with students who consistently finish early.

The following transcript was a conversation between members the group discussing the focus that Kate asked her peers to observe. Kate’s focus was getting her students to open up to her. This focus clearly depicts the trust and connection of the CFG

for a peer to admit she has difficulty communicating with her classroom and feels she intimidates them.

Kate – “At times I feel as though my students don’t respond because they are afraid to answer? I’m not sure if it’s my tone or what?”

Diane – “Well, I felt you were stern, but coming from me, I can’t control my class at all.”

Mary – “Well, you do a great job and what you do works for children who don’t have the structure, but other students might feel scared. Also, many teachers come to you for advice because your classes run smoother, but that’s because of your consistency in the class, you don’t falter from that. You may need to look to individualize your structure, a few students in your class appear might not need so much.”

Kate – “That actually wasn’t my class, it was another 4th grade teachers, and there’s one student who won’t even come in the room? One day I was able to coax that student to stay, but I had to bring him in small increments.”

Mary – “You have that nurturing side to you, I’m sure you show it in the class, it might just be more individual?”

Val – “There’s some kids that you try to individualize but in second grade, they see each other and say, if he can do it I should be able to do it to, as in getting a reward or less work.”

Diane – “I have definitely been more on top of my students since I have observed your class, it’s been a great opportunity for me. To see what my students need to get to, it is eye opening for me.”

Alice – “I do it to in kindergarten, there some students you see instantly are going to cry if you tell them they were wrong. It’s difficult to be consistent.”

Kate –“One child in my class literally jumps when I have to raise my voice, I always seem to be standing by her, I should look at my classroom flow, but she’s never a problem in class. But she just jumps.”

The researcher used this dialogue to show that teachers need to collaborate on more than the pedagogical practices and classroom management. The coach was congratulatory toward Kate for choosing a difficult focus, a very personal focus.

Shared Strategies to Improve Daily Instruction

The researcher selected the following data of dialogue and written reflection to demonstrate the effectiveness that the CFG produced in terms of implementing strategies and ideas in comparison to professional development, grade level meetings, and informal collaboration.

Diane, the first grade teacher stated:

“I feel just over the first few weeks, the teachers I observed were rubbing off on me. The way I talk, communicate to my students, how I plan. It’s been amazing, and the best part is that it was your honesty that allowed me to realize, I was giving student rewards for everything.”

It is evidenced by her tone that Diane is very frustrated when she discussed her class:

“They are the loudest class! You can hear them a mile away. After observing my peers, I have tried to adopt the mannerisms of those teachers, when they walk in they complete morning work, they are not able to speak, not out of their desk, I let it go too far, I had to put my foot back down. I have one kid who is just incredibly loud? My expectations have become clearer not only to my kids but to me. I express them before every lesson now and it has helped.”

The coach allowed Diane to vent so her true feeling could be shared. The group offered her many suggestions, but the coach felt Mary offered a strong suggestion.

“One thing you have to realize is that you’re a great teacher, the kids love you! You can not take it personal when they don’t listen to you. Just go back and take a look at the skills your kids are performing now compared to August.”

The CFG recognized Diane’s frustration because they too had been there before. One suggestion offered to Diane by the coach was to write down one positive thing that she witnessed a student doing that she taught them per day. Also, to try not to focus on what your kids are not doing so much. Positive collaboration is integral to a second year teacher. With all of the evidenced positive collaboration, a CFG can be used as a strong tool for teacher retention.

Work Samples.

Data was also collected through a reflection sheet from a CFG meeting (see Appendix F) in which the members brought work samples from their daily instruction. This particular CFG meeting took less than one hour to complete. The researcher used

this data to demonstrate that meetings with a generated focus, teachers remain on task and develop a sense of accomplishment at the conclusion of the meeting.

Carla wrote that, “I chose these particular samples because all of the students, despite ability level, were on the same page because of the group collaboration. The selections were unique because of the effort by the lower students. Instead of just writing down the answer they put forth an effort to come to the correct outcome of the task.” When discussing modifications, she wrote, “I would modify this activity by finding a way to ensure all students are comprehending the activity and working within the groups to generalize (their learning) during the assessments.” The suggestions the CFG suggested to Carla were to “relieve test anxiety by not calling it a test or quiz, use self assessment inventories for math, and perhaps incorporate some upper grade peer tutors for math.”

Kate reflected that “My work samples are unique because of the results or grades.” The ESL student scored the lowest, a SAGE student who doesn’t always take his time scored in the middle, and an inconsistent average student scored the highest grade in the class.” Kate stated, “My modifications would be to continue to encourage students to ask for help and use a more visual strategy to model and demonstrate the strategies. I would require the students to demonstrate their work as well.” The suggestions from the CFG were “a visual poster to demonstrate and model math vocabulary.” For the ESL student, the coach suggested to use the Spanish speaking staff members at Goodnoe to help decipher vocabulary in student’s language as well to reinforce comprehension. Another CFG suggestion was for Kate to “incorporate more

reinforcers for demonstrating taught strategies on their paper, and use a grid to help students line up their numbers when completing math problems.”

Diane referenced she brought her work samples because they “reflect a significant differentiation in learning styles of my students.” Diane stated “The selections were unique because of the student’s handwriting and the higher order thinking.” Diane wanted to compare the work copied from a model, to the work of the student when they write independently. The modifications Diane would incorporate are to “require the lower students to demonstrate less work, but at a higher quality than they are producing now.” The suggestion of the CFG was to have the students “cut out the words to take ownership of the activity and expose them to more vocabulary opportunities.”

Lisa stated, “My work samples were unique because of the content of the three writing samples. The lower student used humor and strong description within his product. The middle student demonstrated an understanding of transition words, and the high student had a high knowledge of structure and adjectives.” After reflecting on her groups feedback Lisa wrote, “I would modify this assignment by working with the lower and middle student in a more one on one setting to improve sentence structure. The highest student (sample) I would challenge her to write her selection in chapters (to a book).” The suggestions from the CFG were to change the perspective of the writing assignments to ensure comprehension, incorporate more daily instruction for language and sentence structure. One suggestion from Diane was a daily routine she incorporates with her first graders called, “Fix that Sentence.” Diane writes a daily sentence that needs editing on the whiteboard and the students know to edit the sentence independently

to begin their day. The final suggestion from a member was to incorporate peer editing within the writing time.

During the study, the coach prepared a data collection form (see Appendix E) for the CFG members to write down strategies they have implemented within their daily instruction. Table 1 summarizes the data to demonstrate the ability of the CFG to generate and share relevant intervention strategies to improve daily instruction of the members.

Table 1: Strategies learned and implemented through study period

Grade Level Meetings	Informal Collaboration with Peers	Staff Development	Critical Friends Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizing centers - Changing class to group students by ability - Discussing strategies that work for individual students - Remediation - Integrating lessons - Decimal activities - Poetry units - Interventions for success through student support team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Team building exercises (circle) - Drops in a Bucket (Math Review) - Reading detective and reading strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Energizers - Technology (Active Boards) - NC READS – critical stance - Make and Take for EOG Reading - Hands of practical manipulative - Algebra and numeration - District policies - Problem Solving, Responding to Intervention strategies - Scrapbook for students similar to a portfolio, but informal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reflecting to find a focus for observation - writing by different perspectives - graphic organizers for writing - improving my communication with peers - choral reading interventions - word surgery (decoding) - centers without centers - Timers for teacher time with a group - Tally marks or marbles to ensure fairness when helping groups

Table 1: Strategies learned and implemented through study period (continued)

Grade Level Meetings	Informal Collaboration with Peers	Staff Development	Critical Friends Group
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individualized behavior management - Positive language (“show me...”) - attach enrichment activity to worksheet to keep pace and higher students busy - finished early folders - predictions/modifications to work prior to lessons - timer for instruction (30 minutes to complete 20 min lesson, extra time is free time, stop timer if students are off task) - better placement of visuals - proper alignment of concepts - improved differentiation - Magic sticks to call on all students - Planning difficult lessons when you have extra help in the class - Peer staff buddies for ESL students vocabulary comprehension - “Fix That Sentence” - using grid paper to align math problems

Table 1: Strategies learned and implemented through study period (continued)

Grade Level Meetings	Informal Collaboration with Peers	Staff Development	Critical Friends Group
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expressive open ended higher order thinking to promote students sharing - Students to vote on favorite behavior management system - Challenging stronger writers to write chapters of a book - Math vocabulary posters or tables for students - Defined roles for math groups (calculator, reader, recorder, runner, reporter) - Coach instead of providing answer to lower students

This written documentation was accumulated through member observations and dialogue during the CFG meetings. This data is a result of all nine members. Seeing that all nine members attended the same staff meetings their data for the staff development category was repetitive, but consistent in content. The data revealed twenty nine documented interventions that were implemented successfully by the CFG members in their daily instruction for the duration of the study. In contrast there were nine strategies implemented through staff development, eight through grade level meetings, and three through informal collaboration.

Post Conference Questionnaire

The participants at the conclusion of the study received another participation Collaboration Questionnaire (Appendix G). The goal for this questionnaire was to receive the member's reflections about their experiences in education over the past eight weeks.

Participant Kate.

Kate discussed her new views on collaboration within Goodnoe Elementary. She stated, "As a school I don't think we are collaborating a great deal. Even within my grade level there is very limited collaboration as a grade level, partners may be working together on some areas, but it is not a consistent collaboration. Working with teachers outside of my grade level helps get other ideas that I hadn't thought of earlier to help with certain situations."

When asked to compare the collaboration results from the CFG to your past collaboration with peers, Kate responded that "Working with the CFG I received helpful techniques that I could apply immediately to my students. Before I would 'consider'

using the ideas but not necessarily implement them. Sometimes people throw out ideas just to help out but are not really helping or seeing the entire picture of your classroom.”

When asked if the CFG enhanced a sense of professionalism in you, she responded, “I’m not sure.”

The CFG has changed Kate’s thinking and practices as an educator by the way “I approach my students in teaching. Sometimes I don’t realize that I have said something that may put my students in their shell.” The CFG helped Kate reflect on each lesson and how the lesson before or after will impact the student.

Furthermore Kate responded that “The factors that supported the CFG during participation were the feedback and collaborations. The factors that acted as a barrier during the CFG were the time and planning.” She wrote, “It was difficult to find times when two partners could observe without disrupting the learning environment of my own class for example. It required me to find someone to cover my class and writing out a lesson plan for a less experienced teacher assistant.” Kate stated that, “Another barrier was the observation, I am a trained peer evaluator. I found it difficult to observe without thinking about the FODA and time frames that evaluators use to evaluate time management.” Kate said, “I had to remind herself this observation was for fun and experience.”

When reflecting about in what ways has the CFG impacted her students learning, Kate replied, “I now think more before I speaks to my students as a group or individually.”

The final reflection asked the member if they feel a CFG can be supported within a public elementary school. Kate wrote, “I feel that it would be a great tool to implement.

The CFG was very diverse, it was very helpful to have input from the different areas which included a counselor, exceptional children's educator and teachers from both upper and lower grades. It is important to know what the other grades are doing outside of your hallway or cellblock."

To implement a CFG Kate felt "It would be important to have a group of teachers volunteer to participate, work on their observations and feedback for a semester and then share with another group on their experiences. That way there is a 'core' group of sorts who could support the new members."

Participant Diane.

Diane wrote that she felt less threatened in the group because "I was free to ask questions and I didn't have to listen to negative comments during the meeting. The conversations remained positive and it has made me a stronger teacher."

When comparing the CFG to her past collaboration practices with peers Diane wrote, "The CFG has been an eye opening experience for me. I was unaware you could discuss barriers of being a teacher with other teachers and feel the trust that they won't feel cross. Sometimes (a) post conference (from an) observation focus(es) too much on the negative and nothing about the positives of your lesson."

Diane stated that the CFG has enhanced a sense of professionalism in her practices. "As an Initially Licensed Teacher I love receiving feedback and gaining ideas from veteran teachers. I can see myself mimicking the teachers I observed and that makes me feel more professional every day."

The CFG has changed Diane's thinking and practices as an educator by "My new found openness and willingness to share with other teachers my thoughts and feeling about a situation that might be bothering me. I am more willing to ask for help now."

The factors that supported Diane's participation in the CFG were her introduction to creative ideas and the constant positive feedback. She stated that, "The main barrier was the time to participate and synchronize with the other members."

Diane referenced that the CFG impacted her students learning through learned behavior management strategies. "Due to the positive changes I have implemented I have seen a rise in achievement and time on task during the day."

When asked to reflect upon whether she felt a CFG can be supported within an elementary school setting Diane replied that "I really enjoyed seeing and getting new ideas. "This particular group of teachers was very positive and willing to encourage (other) teachers to continue to make a difference. The CFG also encourages teachers to change and implement new ways of thinking and teaching."

Participant Elly.

Elly reflected on her views on her current collaboration in her school by stating, "It is rewarding to know that new strategies and ideas can be shared and implemented within the school. The varying degrees of experiences and years in education involved in the group made the experience more meaningful, it wasn't just brand new teachers."

"The collaboration results from the CFG were less tense than most grade level meetings. The professionalism and direction of the coach coupled with the comfortable learning environment helped facilitate a purpose and the flow of the meetings."

Elly stated that the “CFG enhanced a sense of professionalism in me by observing success in the classrooms when most educational data is negative was uplifting to experience. There is a degree of professionalism and commitment in our school that will continue to raise the bar. Just putting in the time is not acceptable.”

The CFG has changed Elly’s thinking and practices as an educator by “Acknowledging the effort of my colleagues to make the CFG work. I am grateful that the line between regular and special education is just a gray area at best. In other words, what works best for children who need support is best for all children.”

The factors that supported Elly during her CFG experience were, “The flexibility of the group and the coach encouraging me to participate as much as I could. The barriers that I encountered were my intense professional and family responsibilities.”

The CFG has impacted Elly’s students learning by her, “Becoming exposed to new ideas and strategies allows me to modify and incorporate my learning into my current instruction.”

Elly replied to the question of whether a CFG could be supported within the elementary setting by stating “I found it meaningful to be involved with a volunteer group that was deemed positively critical from the onset. Unfortunately the majority of the evaluative observations and reviews can raise a level of anxiety. There is normally an attitude that a teacher has to prove themselves during observations, so the CFG observations are very welcoming in comparison.”

Participant Val.

After participating in the Critical Friends Group, Val reflected on her new views on the collaboration practice. She wrote, “I participate in weekly grade level and staff

meetings, but I don't believe I am taking much away from them. The point of the meeting is for the teacher to benefit somehow from them. To demonstrate more success the structure and goals of the grade level meetings need to be addressed and we as a staff need to look at the whole process of these meetings."

When comparing the collaboration results of the CFG to her past experiences Val stated, "The collaboration from the CFG was more intense, the group was able to sit down and actually be really honest with what we saw in each other's classrooms." She contributes these results to the fact that the guidelines were set forth beforehand. "Regular grade level meetings now currently are used for planning upcoming curriculum, and this becomes very routine. I do not always feel as if we have the time to talk about teaching practices."

Val reflected upon the question of "Has the CFG enhanced a sense of professionalism in you?" by stating "more than anything I felt that it increased my sense of collaboration with peers that I would not usually get to work with, or speak with!" "I felt I was able to give some valuable feedback to those that I had the opportunity to observe (during the study)."

The CFG has changed Val's thinking and practices as an educator by "Being able to go and observe other teachers in other situations I was able to come back to my class and reflect about how I would do it differently. The observations were more informative because I was able to observe from a different perspective. I took some great strategies away from (the CFG) that the other teachers were already using." Factors that supported Val during her CFG participation were the ability to go and observe in pairs. "The observation process was very beneficial to be able to bounce ideas off of each other. As

observers we were able to discuss both positive and deficient areas that they might have missed if there were only one observer.”

The barrier that was present during her experience was the CFG meeting day. She wrote, “In order for the CFG to work properly, there has to be a better system for meeting. I really enjoyed meeting as a group, but because the meeting was not set ahead on a specific day conflicts arose and the participation was limited.”

Val stated, “My students will benefit from this (experience) because there were some strategies, both behavioral and instructional, that I can easily implement.” Val feels that in order for teachers to grow they have to be willing to try new things. “Teachers have to constantly try new things to keep your students attention. I think that an educator should always be looking for new and interesting ways to deliver content.”

Val thinks that a CFG could be supported, but the meeting times must be set beforehand. “Teachers are swamped with after school meetings throughout the week, so if your group members know that they are always going to meet on a specific day they can plan accordingly.” Val also felt that a CFG would be a beneficial staff development exercise to replace weekly grade level meetings as stated, “Teachers can find time to plan, some teachers may disagree, but however the CFG is more beneficial, even if it was practiced for only one half of the school year before the end of grade assessments.”

Participant April.

When reflected upon her new views on collaboration April wrote, “As a school we are not currently required to collaborate enough. If teachers are not told or recommended to observe each other, discuss ideas, or strategies it is not likely teachers will do it.” April felt the collaboration she experienced during her CFG was similar to

her grade level experiences. “I am very was lucky to be included in a very supportive grade level that works well together and meets on a regular basis. The main difference is the feeling that I can speak freely within the CFG. I felt free to comment, share problems and ideas within the CFG. In a grade level meeting the agenda is often rushed and focused on few topics.”

April felt that the CFG has enhanced her sense of professionalism by the idea of “Giving and taking ideas and feedback allowed me to reflect on my own practice and feel confident in my ability to share and grow as a professional despite her minimal (teaching) experience.” She also reflected upon her new thinking and practice, “The CFG has changed my thinking and practice by working and collaborating. The working and collaborating “developed my experiences and was rewarding. This opportunity has been essential in her improving teacher practices.”

The factors that supported the CFG participation for April were that, “Fellow teachers were willing to cover my classes as I observed my CFG peers. Also, the CFG members were very flexible in their planning and scheduling.” She also stated the main barrier as, “The barrier was finding times when two or three schedules could align to complete an observation and debriefing session.”

April stated that, “The CFG impacted my students through the strategies I have learned from my peers. I have seen a benefit during the study in my overall instruction and classroom management.” April feels that, “A CFG can be supported within a public school through replacing some staff faculty meetings. Another idea would be to change CFG groups every month. If a schedule was built prior and expectations were given to all staff members a school could work together to support a CFG.”

Participant Marc.

After his participation in the CFG Marc described his experiences with collaboration as being the “Limited pressure put on the observations and meetings allow(ed) me to provide and create a more authentic performance (in my instruction). Also, the CFG was more organized than my past collaboration with peers.” Marc shared that the CFG enhanced his sense of professionalism by building a, “Level of pride and confidence in my teaching abilities.”

Furthermore Marc stated, “The CFG has changed my thinking and practices as an educator by knowing that observations do not have to be stressful on the teacher, it should be a celebration of their abilities.”

The factors that supported Marc in his CFG experience were the excellent feedback and ideas and the support from a variety of educators. The main barrier that affected his CFG experience was time as stated, “The time issue was evident in creating time to observe, debrief and meet as an entire group.”

As Marc continued to reflect on his experiences she stated that, “The CFG has impacted my students learning through the fresh, new ideas I have added to my repertoire and most importantly my students understand and can see that I am trying to improve myself as a teacher every day.”

Finally, Marc felt that a CFG can be supported within a public school but the schedule needs to be clearly defined so teachers can work around their CFG schedule, not the other way around. He stated, “The expectations and suggestions for completion are key to the success, and the coach also needs to demonstrate leadership qualities.”

Participant Carla.

After participating within the CFG Carla stated that “I feel collaboration doesn’t happen quite enough in my school. Teacher’s do not want to collaborate, don’t know how to collaborate or don’t make the time to collaborate. The CFG helps teachers understand how and why collaboration is important.” When comparing the current collaboration that she participates to the CFG she just completed she stated, “I have always collaborated with one other teacher very well. We work outside of school mostly to plan and solve problems. As a grade level I have yet to experience this (collaboration).” Carla used her grade level as an example as stated, “My grade level meetings are filled with complaining, but no one works on solutions. The CFG is a better method because it is more focused. Having a facilitator is crucial. The coach helps with the flow and staying focused on the goals. With the CFG, I left feeling like something was accomplished.”

The CFG has enhanced a sense in professionalism in Carla is a sense, “I think more before I act, I am aware of other staff and faculty more now than ever before.”

The factors that supported the CFG for Carla were the feedback from her peers, the provided comfort zone and the bonds she built with faculty she had never met prior to the group. The barrier that was most intrusive was time. She stated, “It was difficult for me being a single mom to meet after school. I do not like having my son need to wait for her an extra day of the week, faculty meetings and workshops already prevent me from getting my son home.

Carla reflected upon the student impact by stating, “Because I am more aware and able to focus on the areas I want to work on to become a better teacher. I think more about what I am teaching and I am more aware of my students goals.”

Carla finished her reflection by stating, “A CFG can be supported within a public setting but more time would be needed for observations. It was difficult to coordinate schedules and get to the other classrooms. Also, it would be beneficial if meetings could be held through the school day with coverage by the teacher assistants or other faculty members.”

Participant Lisa.

Lisa started her reflection on her CFG experience by stating, “This was truly a unique experience. I have never collaborated in such a way with my peers.” After participating in the CFG, Lisa says that she realized she didn’t have many opportunities to collaborate.

Lisa wrote, “That in the past collaboration consisted of training sessions required by administration or grade level meetings. Being that they are required, the sessions and meetings were often viewed negatively by participants. The CFG however was a voluntary group and was a positive environment to work in. The group was able to observe peers in different grades as well as our own.”

Lisa continues to reflect on the positives by stating, “A CFG definitely enhanced a sense of professionalism in my views as a professional and the staff that I work with. It is often hard to give and receive positive criticism.” Lisa reflects on the trust by stating, “This was a safe environment to work in, the entire CFG gained respect for each others opinions. Everyone had something to offer.”

Lisa has changed her thinking and practices as an educator by her newly learned many techniques from her peers. This opportunity gave Lisa a chance to see what her students were coming with and where they needed to go. This is evidenced in her statement, “I was also able to see observation as a positive process instead of a negative.”

The factors that supported her in the CFG experience were that, “Teammates were eager to observe and were flexible. The support of the group was also a motivating factor in participating on a weekly basis.” The barriers Lisa mentioned during a CFG were, “The time restraints to complete the observations and sticking to the scheduling and other after school commitments like a second job interfered with her meeting time.”

The CFG impacted her students learning indirectly by enhancing her knowledge of previous and future expectations. Lisa has also learned positive behavior techniques from her peers as well.

Her last reflection was regarding whether the CFG could be supported within an elementary school. Lisa thought “A CFG could be supported throughout the year as long as participants view it as a positive process. If it is viewed as another observation, it will not be beneficial to anyone. Whoever presents the idea would have to emphasize that it is a learning environment and a chance to collaborate across the grades. There needs to be more time allowed for observations before groups are changed. Also, if it is school-wide, help with covering classes for observations would be needed.”

Participant Mary.

Mary reflected upon her updated views on the collaboration process. She wrote passionately, “I believe in the process! I feel that it is VITAL for staff members to collaborate.” Mary felt the process was a good release in a structured setting that resulted

in positive outcomes. She went on to say, “I feel the meetings were productive and effective rather than time-consuming and negative.”

When comparing the CFG process to her past collaboration experiences she noted that she felt safe among the CFG and in other meetings she tends to feel intimidated with staff members. This is evidenced through her statement, “I enjoyed the fact that I wanted to be with the CFG rather than be forced to collaborate with peers. I was able to share a lot more with peers than she ever had in past collaborative meetings. It felt nice to be a resource for someone else and to find a resource within the group.”

When describing what collaboration means to her now Mary wrote, “Collaboration means a dedicated time set aside to work and grow with peers in a positive manner.” She defined collaboration as, “sharing ideas in a structured, effective way to help each other move around road blocks in teaching/education. A CFG is a support system to turn to for anything and everything!” The factors that helped support Mary in her process were, “The coming together and sharing professional experiences and ideas. Also, taking time to listen to others and learn from each individual participating in CFG.” The one barrier that Mary stated was, “getting everyone at the meetings since the staff is so busy and such.”

The new strategies that Mary enhanced from her experiences were geared towards how to effectively communicate with others. For example Mary wrote, “The CFG suggested ideas to stay in touch with fellow teachers regarding students that I see or counsel. Also I picked up strategies on how to deal with a certain student or class.”

Mary described the CFG as “A very positive and healthy way to bring the collaboration process into a school environment in a non-threatening way. I believe in

the support system available to educators through CFG and the value of time put in helping others because you learn so much and gain great perspective.”

Chapter Summary

Chapter four presented the results of the analysis of the data collected for this thesis study. The emergent themes presented through the data were the support and trust, the equivalence to attending professional development, the diverse range of foci for their peer observations, and finally the shared relevant strategies that improve teacher instruction. Chapter five utilizes these findings to discuss conclusions and implications of this study.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter four presented the results and findings for this study. This final chapter discusses conclusions from those findings. In addition, Chapter Five considers the barriers that may have affected the study, reveals implications for a Critical Friends Group in an elementary setting, and includes recommendations for future research.

Discussions of Conclusions

The results of this study imply that a Critical Friends Group can be implemented and maintained within an elementary school setting. The process and goals of the group would be easy to communicate, and positively viewed by the participants. While communicating, members created and shared relevant ideas to implement within their daily instruction. The data showed that teachers are more likely to implement strategies from each other rather than a workshop because they have the opportunity to watch the strategy being used. Through observations, teachers are more honest and willing to take chances with their instruction. Overall, in the CFG process, participants demonstrate the ability to collaborate in a more positive demeanor and more often. In turn, CFG positively affects the staff members to create a sense of a learning community. A learning community creates an overall higher morale among the school, which will positively impact the students learning and their overall achievement.

Evidence of Positive Communication.

Examination of the data indicated that none of the participants had ever heard of or participated in a group dedicated to collaboration. It was also evident through the data that collaboration practices were lacking at Goodnoe Elementary School. The opportunities for collaboration were limited to grade level meetings, staff development,

professional development, and informal collaboration with peers. In fact, collaboration with school specialists was described as “rare” by a participant. Overall the data showed that the participants collaborated at a minimum one scheduled time per week through grade levels. The grade level meetings were described as informal and rushed. Through an implemented CFG process, members would participate in weekly, focused observation opportunities in pairs, and biweekly meetings in a larger setting with a set focus and agenda for the meeting.

Examination of the data displayed that CFG members were expressively open and conducted comfortable dialogue with their peers. CFG members voluntarily discussed personal issues that affected their daily instruction, their future as an educator, their tone as a teacher, feelings towards difficult students, communicating with colleagues, and administration.

This positive, open communication continued throughout the study and was evident when the CFG member selected the focus for their observations. During collaboration, members noted that for observations by peers or administration they typically chose a lesson that was concrete and had a high success rate when being observed. The group also noted that observations evaluations are stressful and produce limited feedback. During the study, a trust and comfort level was evident through the focus topics chosen by the teacher. These foci were mainly not pedagogy related. The foci were personal and were deemed integral by the teacher to promote success. For example, the veteran teacher of the group, Kate, asked her peers to observe her tone and demeanor during her lesson. She felt that her students this year were very quiet and soft spoken. She stated, “I felt they were intimidated and afraid to be wrong in their

answers.” Another member, Diane, asked for a focus in the opposite criteria. Diane felt her students run the classroom, and give her little respect when it comes to following classroom rules. Diane was looking for advice and feedback on why her class disrespects her. It took a strong recognition of self worth and a desire to improve for professionals to admit they are lacking a skill. This comment by Diane was true evidence that an implemented CFG can provide a comfort zone that exceeds all other collaborative environments.

Shared Strategies.

Pajak (2003) outlined issues with teacher collaboration. “Despite any supervisors best efforts, educators discussions about best practices often deteriorate into opposing positions” (p. 3) Education is filled with numerous theories and strategies to develop students abilities.. Through the CFG, the members regularly shared strategies that they used in their classroom, have observed other teachers implement, or have learned from a professional development they attended. The members, through their reflections, stated they were at times unwilling to implement strategies they heard at a workshop or grade level meeting because of the uncertainty in effectiveness or relevance. Through the CFG, the teachers had first hand knowledge because they had the opportunity to observe the strategy being used within the classroom. This alone made the strategy relevant to their teaching.

Through the CFG, 29 new strategies were implemented within the nine teachers instructional practices in less than an eight week period. This data was compared to nine strategies through professional development, eight through grade level meetings, and three strategies through informal collaboration. The strategies ranged from classroom

management, behavior management, and word attack, using math manipulative appropriately, organization, and enrichment, positive team building exercises, group participation levels, and time on task.

The group reflected upon the positives of the CFG in comparison to a workshop or a grade level meeting. The positives the group listed were the amount of time to participate, the motivation to participate, and the consistent overall goals of the group.

Impact on Student Learning.

A common question today in terms of professional development is what evidence demonstrates these learned practices impact student learning. The CFG group responded to the challenge of defining their student's impact in a small study period. The responses were recognizing a tone in a teachers voice was creating a sense of insecurity in her students, organizational issues of the teacher was preventing the students to receive adequate time on task, and the exposure to new ideas and strategies allowed a member to incorporate more independent practice. The practice of a strong classroom management was a consistent topic within the group. Through the implementation of timers and data collection systems for teachers to recognize how long they spend at a table, or how many times they visit a group has provided more students with the support they need to be successful. Also a strong indicator of the impact on students was the teacher's conclusion that her lesson plans were not linking to prior learning and did not have a future plan to incorporate current lessons.

CFG as Professional Development.

Cohen (1993) indicated that schools are constantly being pushed to make dramatic changes in instructional practice. Educators create lessons to engage students

deeply in learning that integrates higher order thinking skills and produces conceptual understanding. In addition, Evans (1998) stated that schools are expected to adapt approaches to teaching and learning that will work for students whose needs and motivational patterns differ from those of prior generations. The NCLB requirement prompts school districts across the country to focus more intently on high-quality professional development and foster a collaborative working environment.

As evidenced within the study, the group participated in observations, sharing of ideas, collaboration with a focus, and provided reflections of their experiences. The group also provided evidence of their implementation of their newly adopted strategies within their classroom through the cycle of the CFG observations. Marc stated, "The CFG covered all of the sections of professional growth experience; we are taking the time to explore and share fresh ideas in education." Another member, Carla, described her experiences as now being more aware of her professional nature. Carla stated, "I am more aware of the educational culture that surrounds me." The members of the CFG were more open to attempting new ideas and strategies to improve your practices as an educator. A Critical Friends Group helps teachers become proactive in their teaching practices through the reflection and sharing. Finally, through the completed observations teachers learn and adapt new strategies to their thinking, a similar process when teachers attend professional development. Also, the opportunity to collaborate and share their new strategies extends the professional development experience.

Barriers

The factors that acted as a barrier during the CFG were time, planning, personal lives, professional relationships, past collaboration experiences, other staff development,

and school related responsibilities. The participants noted it was difficult to find times when two partners could observe without disrupting the learning environment of their own classroom. Elementary teacher's schedules are very hectic. The teachers at Goodnoe have planning periods during the time of their specials (Music, Art, Physical Education. During CFG meetings the group discussed the difficulty in finding adequate supervision for their classroom so they could go observe their peers. Another barrier was the act of observing. Teachers who were trained evaluators needed to enter the environment with a non-evaluator mindset. Kate discussed her difficulties when she observed another member. Kate had to remind herself the evaluation was for "fun." Like in most professions, personal lives become a factor in your daily productivity. Of the nine CFG members, Elly, Carla, Val and Kate all had children. Mary, the guidance counselor, was in her third trimester of her pregnancy during the study. These five all struggled to be consistent in attending the CFG scheduled meetings, completing observations or debriefing with their assigned group. Another personal life barrier was teachers with second jobs. Marc, Lisa and April were holding second jobs during the study. Their hectic schedule made it difficult for the coach to organize meeting dates and for members to participate fully in the after school CFG meetings. Because of the length of the study, there was a time issue evident when the members changed groups and were given adequate time to observe, debrief and meet as an entire group.

Due to the barriers mentioned, participation in CFG group meetings was limited. Of the five meetings, the entire group never participated as an entirety. Despite this barrier, each member observed at least three other members of their group during the study.

Future Research

Further investigation is needed regarding the impact of CFG participation on teacher growth and development. Individual growth is a process that is difficult to track. It may take a teacher a large amount of time to see and relate their growth into their teaching practices. A school could investigate student impact through school or individual student scores in academic areas in classrooms of teachers participating in a CFG compared to teachers who are not participating.

Further research could assess the impact of the CFG on teacher retention, school morale, and school climate. This could be done by surveys to staff members and the community along with comparing student scores on local and state assessments.

Ideas for Implementation

The group felt that a CFG would be beneficial to an elementary setting, but to be successful certain factors need to be addressed. Future CFG leaders, would have to emphasize that a CFG is a learning environment and a chance to collaborate across grade levels. If a CFG is viewed as another “observation”, the process will not be beneficial to anyone. The idea of being positively critical from the onset must be established. In addition, administration must be in support to provide the needed resources, such as adequate coverage of members classes, and the understanding of the appropriate functioning time and space for a CFG.

The next factor that needs to be addressed is the participants. The participants must be voluntary and have a clear understanding of the goals and concepts of the group. To be successful each member will need to know and accept their role within the group. An idea offered by Val is to “Have a group of teachers volunteer to participate, work on

their observations and feedback for a semester, and then share with another group on their experiences. That way there is a core group of sorts who could support the new members.”

Another factor when implementing the CFG into an Elementary school is scheduling. Because of the hectic schedules of teachers, especially special area teachers, adequate time is needed to establish consistent scheduling. A CFG member needs the opportunity, time and adequate space to observe, debrief, and collaborate on their observations in a calm manner. To be successful, and have member support, a CFG must have a predetermined meeting schedule. Teacher schedules at Goodnoe Elementary are filled with after school meetings 3 of the 5 days of the week. If a meeting date is consistent, the group members know that they are always going to meet on a specific day they can plan accordingly. A recommendation is to replace grade level meetings with CFGs meetings. CFG member Val reflected, “Teachers can find time to plan, some teachers may disagree, but however the CFG is more beneficial, even if it was practiced for only one half of the school year before the end of grade assessments.” Other ideas were to replace a monthly faculty meeting or develop a common time within the school day for teachers to observe, debrief or participate in a CFG meeting.

The final factor is the ability of the coach to create a schedule and facilitate a meeting. For a CFG to function, a common goal must be addressed. This goal can be created by the CFG members, the coach or administration. The important factor is the relevance to all of the members. Through analyzing the data, the researcher believes a rotating coach within the CFG would be beneficial for the members to gain a sense of ownership and develop their leadership qualities.

Conclusion

The research indicates the participants in the Critical Friends Group responded enthusiastically to their experience. The CFG shared and demonstrated a number of strategies to improve and impact student learning, developed professional relationships and promoted a feeling of professional growth among the participants. There is a further need to research the true impact on student learning of staff members that participate in a CFG, however that impact could take three to five years to develop. As a conclusion to the evidence, the researcher believes that the overall effects of a CFG in an Elementary school can be evaluated through student's scores, teacher retention, and overall school climate.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire provided to participants at initial training session

Collaboration Questionnaire

What are some of your current views and experiences with grade level meetings?

Is there a particular format that your current meetings follow?

Describe what collaboration means to you.

Discuss the positives or barriers that you currently encounter when collaborating

Appendix A continued

Tell me about your experiences and how often you currently collaborate with:

Administration

Grade level peers

Non-grade level peers

School Specialists (*Exceptional Children's, Reading Specialists, community members, etc*)

What do you know about a Critical Friends Group?

Appendix B: Reflection form provided at the initial CFG group meeting

Please spend about 5-10 minutes reflecting on these questions

Does involvement in a CFG create opportunities for professional growth? How?

In what ways have you adapted or changed your classroom practice as a result of participating within the CFG?

Appendix C: Form used to provide observing members the teachers thoughts prior to CFG observation

CFG Observation Focus

Observers: _____

Dates and Times available: _____

Subject/Lesson: _____

Focus: _____

Give a brief overview of the goals of the lesson:

Give a brief description of why you would like your group to focus in this area (What are the Issues?)

Appendix D: Template for CFG members to reflect upon their lesson that was observed

Post Observation Reflection

Observers: _____ Date/ Time: _____

Lesson/Subject: _____

Focus: _____

How did you come to your focus?

Reflecting on the lesson, what changes would you make?

Was the feedback from your CFG member's helpful, if so, how?

How did this experience differ from other observations, conferences, or professional development?

Appendix E: Form for CFG members to collect the strategies they implemented from beginning of the study to the conclusion (8 weeks)

During our collaboration, please list the strategies that you have learned, or ideas implemented within your daily instruction.

Grade Level Meetings	Informal collaboration	Staff Development	Critical Friends Group

Appendix F: Form provided during CFG meeting for teachers to reflect on the work samples they shared during session

Work Samples

Reflect upon why you chose these particular samples.

What made each selection unique?

After sharing with your CFG, how would you modify this activity?

What suggestions did you CFG provide?

Appendix G: Reflection questionnaire provided to CFG participants at the conclusion of the study

Collaboration Post-Questionnaire

After participating in the Critical Friends Group, what if any are your new views on collaboration in your current school?

Compare the collaboration results from the CFG to your past collaboration with peers.

Has the CFG enhanced a sense of professionalism in you? How?

Explain how the CFG has changed your thinking and practices as an educator.

Appendix G continued

What factors supported or acted as barriers to you during your CFG participation.

Supports:

Barriers:

In what ways has the CFG impacted your students' learning?

Do you feel a CFG can be supported within a public school throughout a year? Why or Why not? What ideas for structure can you offer to implement and maintain a CFG?

End Notes

ⁱ All participant names and location, Goodnoe Elementary are Pseudonyms.