CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUP: EFFECTS ON TEACHER PRACTICE AND COLLABORATION

Carolyn D. Harrington

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Approved by

Advisory Committee

Amy Conklin Dr. Scot Imig

Dr. Michele Parker
Chair

Accepted by

Dean, Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

The influence of participation in a Critical Friends Group (CFG) on teacher collaboration and practice was investigated in this study. Seven teachers from Basal Elementary School in Wilmington, NC participated in a Critical Friends Group for six weeks under the direction of a CFG coach. The participants conducted peer observations and reflected on their practice through debriefing sessions, journals, and discussions with the CFG group. Multiple data sources were collected during the study, including narrative and descriptive notes and surveys. Qualitative research strategies, such as coding and categorizing were used to analyze the data. The results showed that participation in a CFG does have an influence of teacher collaboration and practice. Teachers shared successful strategies to improve student learning, they became more aware of their reflective practices, felt it was more purposeful than other forms of professional development, and developed professional relationships with their peers. It is concluded that a CFG has the ability to influence teacher practices and collaboration within an elementary school setting.
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INTRODUCTION

High stakes testing, public accountability, and the punitive sanctions of No Child Left Behind has focused the nation’s attention on student achievement. The educational system has been placed under the microscope of public scrutiny. Schools not meeting adequate yearly progress benchmarks are facing challenges and are on the paths to school improvement. Communities, parents, and politicians are calling on the education system to serve students better, yet most teachers are struggling to meet the needs of all of their students (Kelley, 2007).

Teachers are being pushed to make dramatic changes in their instructional practice (Dunne & Honts, 1998). Curriculum, instruction, and assessment that is linked to standards is important, but is not sufficient to change teacher’s beliefs or practices. Research suggests that all stakeholders, including teachers and principals, must come together as a community of learners that believes and expects that all students can learn (Zawaslin, 2007). Yet, in most schools, teacher professional development is presented in the form of a lecture, telling teachers what to do instead of giving them the tools and strategies to improve themselves. Consequently, this top-down approach has resulted in lack of commitment by the faculty (Defour & Eaker, 1998). Dunne and Honts (1998) conclude that “teachers facing today’s demands, armed only with today’s skills and attitudes are placed in a predicament that embodies stress…emphasis must be on enhancing coping skills” (p.2). Also concerning is the fact teacher practices that benefit students directly are frequently unaccompanied by effective implementation. The specific structures needed to accomplish this are not in place (Kuh, 2006).

In a climate of increased accountability, schools seek professional development to gain expertise and knowledge about student learning. Today’s educators are on a quest to find new ways to hold higher expectations for students, improve instructional practices, and increase
student learning and achievement (Reichstetter, 2006). However, in many cases, teaching remains a largely isolated profession with few opportunities to learn together and collaborate with colleagues (Kelley, 2007). Hudson and Gray believe that “in the often-isolated environment of a teacher's life, becoming revitalized and renewing spiritual strength are so important that, if we neglect them, we risk losing our most valuable resource” (p.1). Kuh (2006) similarly states that “reflection on one’s practice is a pivotal part of teaching which in the busy lives of teachers is often neglected” (p.1). Therefore, a shift in how teachers plan and carry out instruction must emerge if teachers are to improve their practice and student learning over time (Feger & Arruda, 2008).

In past decades schools have seen an array of educational reforms, all of which are supportive of student learning and providing the best educational experience. Many of these reforms are deeply rooted in research-based information and good intentions. Unfortunately, several of them have failed to improve schools and enhance student performance (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Huffman and Jacobson (2003) state that “for reforms to become institutionalized, a systematic change process over time is necessary…people in organizations will change only if the sought-after reform is meaningful for them and has application for their work” (p.239).

Current literature sheds light on the paradigm shift with regard to the professional development of teachers. This reform moves beyond supporting new knowledge and skills for teachers, but involves the teacher in both teaching and learning (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2006). Dunne and Honts (1998) state that “traditional professional development, characterized by short-term, de-contextualized, direct instruction, has been shown over and over again to be inadequate to the task of helping practitioners make deep and lasting changes in their practice” (p.1). Over
the past several years, school communities have switched their focus to highly reflective learning as a means of supporting teachers and increasing student achievement (Dunne & Honts, 1998).

One model that has evolved as a result of this paradigm shift is that of a professional learning community. This most recent model requires a fundamental change in the way schools are traditionally governed. Through collaboratively examining their day-to-day practice, teachers strive to meet the educational needs of their students (Vescio et al., 2006). Building a collaborative community in schools leads to a shared vision and positive changes in school culture. As the school organization moves from a “me” culture toward a “we” culture, a clear focus develops within the school structure. This kind of collaborative leadership is important as the learning communities begin to include all stakeholders: students, teachers, families, and community (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003).

Promoting the kind of reflective practice that directly effects student achievement is an issue in education today. Teachers are encouraged to collaborate and reflect as part of their job responsibilities, as witnessed in their evaluation standards. In most schools, teachers are given a great amount of flexibility to reflect when and how they wish. As with most voluntary tasks, it can just as easily not take place. Districts, schools, and teachers have turned to various models and programs in order to look critically at their work (Kuh, 2006).

One particular professional learning community model that holds promise for personal and collaborative reflection is the Critical Friends Group (CFG). Critical Friends Groups focus on the improvement of individual teacher practice as well as shared knowledge among colleagues (Kuh, 2006). A CFG generally consists of eight to ten educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for two hours and are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning (NSRF, 2008). A CFG is an on-going practice where teachers
continually learn about the content they teach as well as the instructional and assessment practices they use with that content (Hudson & Gray, 2006). According to Hudson and Gray (2006), “to change their practice, teachers must go through a regular process of self-analysis, inquiry and reflection. Doing this analysis in a collaborative situation allows for remarkable professional gains” (p.1). A large benefit to CFGs is the consistent social feedback system. There is a strong focus on examination of student work and teaching practice. Peers question each other’s assumptions and beliefs about student learning, which over time can have an impact on student achievement (Kuh, 2006).

This study will focus on CFGs as an opportunity to study teacher collaboration and its influence on reflective practice and teaching. For the purpose of this study the researcher will apply the following terms and definitions:

**Professional Learning Community**- The professional staff studying and acting together to direct efforts toward improved student learning (Hord, 2007).

**Critical Friends Group**- The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) defines a Critical Friends Group as a professional learning community consisting of approximately 8-12 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for two hours. Group members are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Building a sense of community in schools leads to shared vision and positive changes in school culture and a capacity to serve students. Current research concludes that students’ academic achievement is greater in schools where teachers report high levels of collective responsibility for student learning (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). Dufour (2004) states that “the idea of improving schools by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue” (p. 6). People use this term to describe every imaginable group of individuals with an interest in education. It is used so loosely that it is in danger of losing all meaning unless educators reflect critically on the concepts and major ideas behind the movement. The professional learning community is a powerful new way of working together that affects practices within a school, but it requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching and accountability when results are unfavorable (Dufour, 2004).

In 1994, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform designed the Critical Friends Group approach, focusing on the practitioner and on defining what would improve student learning (NSRF, 2008). Critical Friends Groups have a strong focus on examination of student work and teaching practice and also include a strong social network for continuous feedback (Kuh, 2006). More and more schools are turning to this professional development approach as a way to build a sense of community in their school building. The structure of each Critical Friends Group meeting is similar. They are usually held on a monthly basis, with each meeting opening with “connections.” During the connections time, teachers share whatever is on their mind while others listen without interrupting. In the initial meetings, groups might include a team building activity meant to bond the group and foster trust. The group then moves to protocol presentations. At each meeting, one or two teachers take turns presenting issues, dilemmas,
cases, student work, curricula, etc. using a specifically chosen protocol which the presenter and facilitator work together to select. Groups spend time early on establishing mutually acceptable norms for group function and expectations, which are reviewed mutually. In the past ten years, the CFG model has been accepted as a viable professional development option for school districts (Kuh, 2006).

According to the National School Reform Faculty (2008), Critical Friends Groups are designed to: (1) Create a professional learning community, (2) Provide a context to understand our work with students, our relationships with peers, and our thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning, (3) Help educators help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning, and (4) Improve teaching and learning. Critical Friends Groups differ from more traditional professional development approaches. The NSRF indicated that CFG participants thought they were more beneficial for the following reasons: (1) It is continual, (2) It is focused on their own teaching and their own students' learning, (3) It takes place in a small group of supportive and trusted colleagues within their own school, and (4) Participants have control over their own professional learning needs.

When teachers are regularly engaging in collaborative conversations, they begin to function as a team that assumes the responsibility of developing a school wide plan for continuous improvement (Zawislan, 2007). Similarly, as a result of CFGs, research indicates that classrooms move from being teacher-centered toward child-centered. Teachers are more thoughtful about aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment and they believe that they can affect student achievement (NSRF, 2008). Key (2006) also indicated that CFGs have the potential to positively influence teacher practices and student learning by providing essential learning opportunities.
A CFG provides a context of collegiality, which supports teachers and administrators in improving their practice through learning new curriculum and instructional strategies and the methods for interacting meaningfully with each child. Teachers look deeply into the teaching and learning process and learn to become more effective with their students. The learning is more complex in a social setting, where participants can interact, test their ideas, challenge their interpretations and process new information with each other. Multiple sources of knowledge and expertise are shared in this type of setting and new concepts are tested as part of the learning process (Morrissey, 2000).

For teachers, collegiality breaks the isolation of the classroom and brings career rewards and daily satisfactions. It helps avoid end-of-year burn out and stimulates enthusiasm. Teachers are more likely to celebrate a pattern of accomplishments within and across classrooms rather than a series of single achievements. First year teachers are also likely to avoid the trial-and-error mode they generally face. It brings experienced and beginning teachers closer together, reinforcing the confidence of the novice. New and changing curriculum issues can be challenging, but teacher teamwork can make these tasks more manageable, can stimulate new ideas, and can promote a cohesive link between a school’s curriculum and instruction (Inger, 1993).

Collaborative conversations call on teams of teachers to make public topics such as goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. Teams focus their efforts on crucial questions related to learning and generate products that reflect that focus. For meaningful collaboration to occur, some barriers must be addressed. School districts spend a lot of time designing the intended curriculum, but pay little attention to the implemented curriculum and even less to the attained curriculum. Time must be given to teachers to analyze and discuss state
and district curriculum documents (Defour, 2004). Defour (2004) states that “facilities must stop making excuses for failing to collaborate. A group of staff members who are determined to work together will find a way.”

Hord (1997) recognized that schools acting as professional learning communities consistently operate among the following five dimensions: (1) supportive and shared leadership, (2) shared values and vision, (3) collective learning and application of learning, (4) supportive conditions, and (5) shared personal practice. Each dimension develops at its own pace, many times overlapping with other dimensions (Morrissey, 2000).

Strong leadership within a school is critical in supporting and sustaining a professional learning community. The traditional school structure is replaced by one in which in the administrator, along with teachers, seek solutions for school improvement. The entire staff works together to reach shared goals and grow professionally. The administrator provides the necessary structural supports for such collaboration among the staff. Without dominating, administrators share the responsibilities of decision making with the staff (Morrissey, 2000).

In many situations, the principal of a school is viewed as all-wise and all-competent by the staff. There is little room for the principal to admit to any need for professional development themselves or to recognize the potential of staff contributions to decision making. Consequently, it is difficult for the staff to propose ideas about the school’s effectiveness when the principal is seen in such a dominant position. Kleine-Kracht (1993) suggested that administrators, along with teachers, must be learners. This new relationship between administrators and teachers leads to a shared and collegial leadership in the school, where all grow professionally and learn to view themselves as all playing on the same team and working toward the same goal. Prestine (1993) defined three factors required of principals in schools that attempted school restructuring:

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the ability to share authority, the ability to facilitate the work of staff, and the ability to participate without dominating. Dunne, Faith, and Honts (1998) point out that the principal must actively support the Critical Friends Group by encouraging meetings, willingly hiring substitutes so that peer observations can take place, and providing other non-standard opportunities. In schools where administrators take a more passive role, CFGs do not seem to thrive anymore than they do when the principal orders all staff to participate in a CFG (Dunne, Faith, & Honts, 1998).

In addition to the school administrator, a chief executive of the school district is needed to support and encourage continuous learning and improvement among its professionals. Leaders can no longer be thought of as top-down agents of change or seen as the sole visionaries of the school building; leaders must be envisioned as democratic teachers. They must invite others to share the burdens of leadership (Hord, 1997). Collaborative leadership results from collaboration between teachers, principal and parents to foster a climate for continuous improvement in student performance. Leaders from different levels promote collegial inquiry, experimentation, and reflection in areas that are professional significant to all stakeholders (Zawislan, 2007).

A professional learning community is built on the assumption that students are not only taught, but that they learn. There is an unwavering focus on student learning. Students are pictured as academically capable, and staff envisions learning environments to support and realize each student’s potential achievement. These shared values and visions lead to binding norms of behavior that the staff shares. The same shared values and visions among the school staff guide the decisions about teaching and learning in the building. The values are embedded in the day-to-day actions of the school staff, creating an effective organization that is committed to learning and improvement (Morrissey, 2000). According to Defour (2004), when a school
begins to function as a professional learning community, teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn.

Hord (1997) states that “sharing vision is not just agreeing with a good idea; it is a particular mental image of what is important to an individual and to an organization.” In a true learning community, the individual staff member is responsible for his/her actions, but the common good is placed on the school goals. Caring relationships are affluent, supported by open communication and trust (Hord, 1997). In schools with a positive school culture, the school community engages in rituals and celebrations of learning and teachers create an enthusiasm for learning. High expectations and a mutual respect creates a climate in which the entire learning community shares responsibility for all students’ successes (Zawislan, 2007).

Collective learning refers to the idea that professional learning communities engage school staff at all levels of their work. By creating meaningful and collegial relationships within the community, educators produce creative solutions to problems, strengthen bonds between peers, and increase their commitment to their professional efforts. Instead of focusing on administrative issues such as scheduling or procedures, schools focus on areas that contribute to significant school improvement such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school culture. Educators in a collective learning environment constantly seek the best instructional strategies and instructional practices to increase student achievement and respond to students’ needs. Defour (2004) adds that, “The powerful collaboration characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that
promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.”

Structures that support the vision of a professional learning community are vital to its effectiveness. Hord (1997) cited two types of supportive structures found within professional learning communities: structural conditions and collegial relationships. Structural conditions include time, communication procedures, size of the school, proximity of teachers, and staff development opportunities. An additional factor is the staff’s ability to select teachers and administrators for the school who are on board and in tune with the school’s programs and ideas. Time is one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts. It is considered both a barrier (when it is not available) and a supportive factor (when it is present) by staff engaging school improvement (Hord, 1997). Donahoe (1993) maintained that “formally rearranging the use of time in schools so that staff are supported in their interactions is a prime issue to be resolved by restructuring schools. It is difficult to find the time and the necessary resources for professional learning communities to collaborate together, however it is a key to maintaining the growth and development of the group (Morrissey, 2000).

Collegial relationships include positive educator attitudes, widely shared sense of purpose or vision, established norms, respect, trust, and caring relationships. Louis and Kruse (1995) cited that “one of the first characteristics of individuals in a professional learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement.” Strong collegial relationships can lead to the following changes and improvement within a school: reduced staff isolation, increased staff capacity, and improved quality of school programs (Hord, 1997).

Teacher interaction and shared personal practice, the last dimension mentioned by Hord (1997), encourages educators to build a culture of mutual respect and an increased commitment
to their work. Sharing personal practice confronts the issue of teacher isolation and allows more time for educators to deeply study teacher practices that affect their classrooms. It is a paradigm shift from the traditional roles in education, but a practice that cannot be ignored within the school community (Morrissey, 2000). Darling-Hammond (1998) cites research reporting that teachers who spend more time collectively studying teacher practice are more effective overall at developing higher-order thinking skills and meeting the needs of diverse learners.

Review of a teacher’s behavior by colleagues is the norm in the professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). This practice is not evaluative but is part of the peer coaching process. Peer observations are conducted regularly by teachers who visit each other’s classrooms to observe, script notes, and discuss observations with each other. The process is based on the desire for individual and community improvement and is enabled by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members. Teachers need opportunities for colleagues, someone other than the campus administrator, to observe them in trying new practices and providing feedback. Through discussion with other teachers in the professional learning community, teachers’ ideas of good teaching and classroom practice were defined (Hord, 1997).

According to Inger (1993), schools benefit from such teacher collaboration in several ways. Through conversations about learning, teachers and administrators get the opportunity to get smarter together. Teachers are better prepared to support one another’s strengths and accommodate weaknesses. By planning together, they reduce their individual planning time while greatly increasing the available pool of ideas and materials. Schools also become better prepared and organized to examine new ideas, methods, and materials, while becoming more adaptable and self-reliant. Last, teachers ease the strain of staff turnover, by providing
professional assistance to beginners and socializing all newcomers, including veteran teachers, to staff values, traditions, and resources.

David (2008) notes that “a growing body of evidence suggests that when teachers collaborate to pose and answer questions informed by data from their own students, their knowledge grows and their practice changes.” Borko (2004) added that “the teachers gained greater understanding of their student’s reasoning and adapted their classroom practices to this new knowledge.” Teachers could conduct cycles of collaborative inquiry in their own classrooms, but they rarely do so on their own. Collaboration adds both motivation and value to the process. When teachers work by themselves, they tend to rely on intuition. Ingram, Louis, and Schroeder (2004) reported that teachers are more likely to collect and use data systematically when working as a group.

At its core, the concept of a professional learning community rests on the premise of improving student learning by improving teacher practice (Vescio et al., 2006). For the purpose of this study, it is important to look at the literature regarding participation in a learning community and teachers’ classroom practices. One study by Dunne, Nave, and Lewis (2000) documented the findings of a two-year study on CFGs commissioned by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. The researchers used interview and observation data to compare the practices of non-participants to the practices of those who participated in a critical friends group. The authors concluded that the practices of participants became more student-centered over time. They also stated that participants increased the use of techniques such as classroom flexibility, pace of instruction, and accommodations for student mastery.

Another study by Englert and Tarrant (1995) studied changes in practice for three teachers within a professional learning community. One teacher made significant changes in her
practice. Prior to participation, her literacy instructional practices consisted of skill sheets or tasks that required students to read or write isolated words and sentences. Through participation in the community of learners, this teacher implemented several changes in her literacy instruction.

In the Hollins et al. (2004) study, the authors mention that early meetings of the twelve participants focused on the struggles associated with teaching low achieving African American students. They found that by the tenth meeting, the focus had shifted. The teachers designed a new approach to language arts, introducing letter writing, poetry projects, and the writing process into their instructional practices.

In another example, Strahan (2003) did a case study of one elementary school where all of the teachers participated in efforts to improve student achievement in reading. This case study does not document specific teaching practices prior to participation, but it does provide interview data from the principal regarding the initially negative attitude of the teachers toward student learning. As part of the change process, teachers worked together to develop a shared school mission based on certain values. The author concludes that this made the teachers receptive to working with a curriculum facilitator in the area of reading, as well as developing stronger instructional norms.

There are however shortcomings in the literature. One study by Curry (2003) is not as promising as the aforementioned studies. Curry concluded that the CFGs were insufficient as a resource for transforming the high school setting she studied. The CFG bridged departmental divides and provided a variety of perspectives, but fell short of providing opportunities for growth in subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. In sum, the researcher
noted a faded interest as teachers sensed their participation did not result in professional growth over time.

Closely related to teacher practice is a teacher’s sense of professionalism. The literature suggests that CFGs promote the development of a professional self. The National School Reform Faculty’s use of the Professional Climate Survey indicates that CFG participation promotes professionalism in teachers (Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000). In their survey responses, CFG members exhibited greater professional engagement than non-members. They more strongly agreed that they improved each year and they were eager to hear about ways to improve their teaching. The survey also indicated that the participants had a higher sense of efficacy and responsibility in their teaching, and more strongly agreed that they can affect student achievement by trying new teaching methods. The participants strongly agreed that they would put in more effort beyond what is normally expected of teachers (Key, 2006). Overall, group members continually seek to experiment with methods and strategies to learn and improve. This forms a foundation upon which CFGs might work to impact school improvement efforts.

Although there is a wealth of literature that holds promising for CFGs, there is still the need for more studies to examine the link between CFG participation and changes in practice and professionalism (Key, 2006). The author of this study proposes to conduct a study to answer the following research question:

1. In what ways does teacher participation in Critical Friends Groups influence teacher practice and collaboration?

The resulting data concerning participation in Critical Friends Group could prove valuable for recommended uses of CFGs in the future. Teacher leaders and administrators will also find the data useful for creating and sustaining CFGs at their own schools.
METHODOLOGY

Although preliminary effects of Critical Friends Groups regarding teacher practice and collaboration have been documented, more research regarding its influence is necessary. This study explored the effects of a Critical Friends Group on the practice of teachers at Basal Elementary School in Wilmington, North Carolina. Information from this study was used to make future recommendations for the use of Critical Friends Group in an elementary school setting. The researcher addressed the question: In what ways does teacher participation in Critical Friends Groups influence teacher practice and collaboration?

Design

This study employs qualitative research strategies used to analyze participant’s views and accounts during the study. A Critical Friends group requires reflective practice, therefore, taking a qualitative approach to this study was natural. Qualitative research is effective in obtaining information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations. Qualitative research is distinct in that the study design is interactive. Data collection and the research questions are adjusted according to what is learned during the study rather than a design that is subject to assumptions and pre-determined conditions. One of the benefits of using this approach in this study is that the use of open-ended questions and probing gives the participants the opportunity to respond in their own words instead of choosing from fixed responses. The responses are rich and meaningful and sometimes unanticipated by the researcher. During initial participant responses, the researcher also has the flexibility of probing deeper, to ask why or how. Another advantage is that the researcher has the ability to engage more with the participants and work with their individual styles and personalities to encourage them to elaborate on their answers (Donnelly & Trochim, 2005).
Setting

Basil Elementary School is a non-Title 1 school located in the Southeastern area of North Carolina. The school operates on a traditional schedule and has a population of almost 700 students. Parsley has been open since 2001 and serves children in grades K-5. Parsley went under new administration last year in January 2008. The previous principal opened the school in 2001 and left in December 2007. There are 26 regular classrooms within the school and 2 special education classrooms.

Participants

Seven licensed school teachers from Basal Elementary School in North Carolina volunteered to participate in a field research study of the current collaboration practices within an elementary school setting. The teachers had varied backgrounds and experiences within the teaching field. The participants were all white females, with the exception of an Indian-American female. The teachers ranged in age from thirty-five to forty-four years old. The study consisted of two first grade teachers, two second grade teachers, one third grade teacher, one fourth grade teacher, and one fifth grade teacher.

Grace, a first grade teacher, obtained her bachelors degree in elementary education with a concentration in art. She was in her fifteenth year as an educator. She previously taught in Johnston and Wake County before settling in New Hanover County. Grace had experience with the peer coaching process while teaching in Johnston County. She was also a semi-finalist for Teacher of the Year, as well as a Sally Mae first year teacher award winner.

Willamena, also a first grade teacher, was in her thirteenth year teaching. During the study Willamena was co-chairperson of the Staff Development committee and a member of the School Improvement Team. She also participated in an ongoing school grant project titled NC
Ready Schools. She hoped to start completing her National Board Certification the following year.

Mary Alice, a second grade teacher, was completing her twelfth year as a teacher. She completed her National Board Certification in 2006. During the study Mary Alice was a member of the Social and Guidance committee and hosted an intern from the local college. She is a trained peer observer and has led workshops at the school and county level. In the past she has led other leadership positions including grade level chair and chairperson of the Academic Excellence committee. In the future Mary Alice hoped to renew her National Board Certification and had considered going back to college for school administration.

Another participant, Susan, taught second grade and was in her fifteenth year as an educator. During her career Susan has primarily taught second grade except for two years in fifth grade and kindergarten. She is a member of the Staff Development committee and serves as the grade level chairperson in second grade. Susan also serves as the school’s social studies representative for county meetings. She enjoys being in the classroom and intends to stay there, hoping to complete her National Board Certification in the future.

The next participant, Holly, is a third grade teacher completing her twelfth year as a full time teacher. Holly transferred to Basal Elementary in the fall of 2004 after working at another local elementary school. She obtained her masters degree in instructional technology and during the study was completing her school administration internship. In 2003 Holly completed her National Board Certification. She is involved with many committees at school including the School Improvement Team, PTA Advisory committee, and the NC Ready Schools project grant team. Holly has future goals of holding a supervisory role while furthering her educational leadership skills.
Jill, a fifth grade teacher, has been teaching for eleven years. Prior to starting work at Basal Elementary in 2003, she taught in another nearby county. Jill is a trained peer observer, director of the school science fair, and a member of the Globally Competitive Students committee. In 2004 she completed her National Board Certification. Jill has been a host to many interns at Basal Elementary. She would like to begin work on her masters degree, but at this time is unsure of what program she would like to enter.

The veteran of the group, Sadie, was completing her sixteenth year as a teacher. Sadie has taught at several schools before transferring to Basal, including an at-risk school in Charlotte, NC and another at-risk school in Wilmington, NC. Currently she is teaching fourth grade and is the grade level chairperson and a member of the Budget committee. She obtained her National Board Certification in 2003, followed by a masters degree in elementary education in 2006. Throughout her career, Sadie has hosted five interns. Sadie’s professional goals include pursuing school administration and other leadership options.

Methods

Multiple data sources were collected during the study, including narrative and descriptive notes and surveys. A survey regarding collaboration was given before and after the study. This provided valuable information about the participant’s perspective on certain issues surrounding a professional learning community and will help determine the overall influence that the CFG had on the group. Conference forms were completed each time observations took place. The pre-conference form documented the teaching focuses and lesson goals, while the post conference forms asked the teachers to reflect on the lesson and the feedback they got back from their CFG peer. Participants were given notebooks as well to write down notes during observations and any reflective ideas they had during the course of the study. These notebooks were later helpful for
identifying themes in the narrative data. The researcher also encouraged the teachers to print any emails regarding collaboration, adding to the narrative data.

Procedure

The Critical Friends Group study at Basil Elementary took place during the spring semester of 2009, during the months of April and early May. A week before the study started, IRB consent was obtained and the proper forms stating participants’ rights were completed by each participant. Participants attended a training session in which they were given information about the responsibilities of each member and how the study will work. An open-ended survey regarding collaboration was given to each member before the start of the study (See Appendix A). Guidelines and expectations regarding peer observations were also discussed. A video was shown to model observation strategies and collaboration to develop the focus for their observations. Each member was given an agenda and a timeline to complete observations, along with a schedule of group sessions. The researcher gave the participants notebooks to write notes from each observation and reflections from collaborative meetings and conversations with colleagues. They were also required to print emails regarding collaboration. The participants were encouraged to journal weekly during the course of the study (Jelly, 2006; Curry, 2008).

During an initial meeting, the seven teachers were assigned to random teams consisting of 2-3 members. Each member of the team had to define an area of focus that they wanted a peer member to observe during a lesson. Ideally this would be an instructional focus that the teacher wanted feedback on. The teams set up times to observe one another’s lessons. To make use of time, some teachers observed one another in pairs. The teachers completed informal observations of a peer team member, focusing on the area requested by the teacher being observed. Conference reflection forms were completed before and after the observation (See
Class coverage was provided by other staff members in the school building. The team agreed upon a time in which they would engage in a pre-conference and then debrief to share observation thoughts and ideas. Members were periodically given support documents during the study to aid them in their peer observations. For example, the members were given documents with additional coaching techniques and sample focus areas and guiding questions. These documents were helpful to the success of their peer observations and debriefing sessions. The teams changed every two weeks during the six week study, giving each teacher in the study a chance to observe almost every other teacher in the entire group. Each teacher did a total of three observations. Since there were an odd number of participants, some teachers did four observations.

The Critical Friends Group meetings were held every two weeks for six weeks, with the entire study group present. The participants would meet in a reserved room at Basal Elementary School and the Critical Friends Group leader, or coach, would create the agenda. Topics discussed included observation findings and reflections, collaboration ideas, current educational research, and other topics brought to the table by the group members. Each meeting was scheduled to last one hour. New observation peer groups were established as well. The researcher recorded meeting notes and dialogue during every session in a personal journal. Participants were also encouraged to take notes and record new ideas in their journals during group meetings. After the study was over, the participants were given a second survey that contained open-ended questions regarding collaboration (See Appendix D).

*Instruments*

The first survey contained 6 open-ended questions on collaboration. Space was provided under each question for the participants to elaborate and add as much detail as needed. The first
question, “What do you know about a Critical Friends Group?” provided the researcher with a starting point for organizing the data. Other questions included, “How would you describe your current experiences with your grade level during collaboration?” and “What do you think it means to collaborate?” These were later followed up with questions such as, “Discuss the positive or negative barriers that you encounter when collaborating” and “Briefly explain your experiences and how often you collaborate with: administration, grade level peers, non-grade level peers, and school support staff.” The results of this survey were compiled and added to the data.

Participants were asked to share their new views on collaboration in their school after the study in the form of a second survey. They were asked questions such as, “Is collaboration with the Critical Friends Group similar or different to your past collaboration with peers?” and “Has the Critical Friends Group changed your thinking and practice as an educator?” Another question asked them to reflect on the factors that supported or acted as barriers during their CFG participation. The final survey questions were “In what ways has the CFG impacted your students’ learning?” and “Please list specific strategies or ideas implemented into your daily instruction during your time in the study.”

Researcher as Instrument

The researcher is a twenty eight year old white female who is employed as a teacher at Basal Elementary School. She has an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education and is completing her requirements for a master’s degree in Curriculum, Instruction, and Supervision. She started her career at Basal Elementary and has been teaching for seven years. Before the study began, the researcher read a surplus of literature about facilitating a CFG group. In an attempt to curve any biases, the researcher let the other group members lead most of the
discussions during CFG meetings. Every effort was made to keep CFG group sessions focused on a set agenda in order to avoid irrelevant conversations that were off topic.

Data Analysis

To get an initial sense of the data, the researcher read the data that was collected and wrote notes and highlighted sections that seemed important. In addition, the researcher made note of common threads running through the data. Next, the data was broken down into smaller, more manageable units through the process of coding. Categories were formed to organize similar concepts and themes. In order to provide a narrative picture of the study, special attention was paid to the context in which the study took place. The context, actions, and interactions of the participants were described in detail. The views of the research participants were also described in detail as part of the analysis (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). Furthermore, the influences of a Critical Friends Group on teacher practice and collaboration were determined. The following chapter displays the results of the study by using narrative text and tables to identify major themes.
RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the data collected during the study. Prior to the study, the teachers responded to an open-ended survey about collaboration. Teachers reflected on their grade level meeting experiences, past collaboration experiences, positives and negatives about collaboration, and their experiences collaborating with non-grade level peers. The results of the pre collaboration survey will be presented first, followed by a summary of the major themes presented through the data. Then the results of the post collaboration survey are provided.

Pre Collaboration Survey Results

The first question on the collaboration survey was “What do you know about a Critical Friends Group?” All seven participants mentioned that it had something to do with teachers working together, but beyond that they could not articulate the specific purpose of a CFG. The second question asked them to share how often they currently collaborated with their grade level. Willamena, Mary Alice, Susan, and Sadie collaborate with their grade level three times a week in the form of a grade level meeting. Sadie mentioned that “we don’t collaborate in the way we should be” and Willamena commented that “it’s mainly just business, not real planning.” Jill, Grace, and Holly indicated that they collaborate on a daily basis. Grace even added that “sometimes we meet a little too much.”

Questions three asked the participants to describe their experience with their grade level during collaboration. The responses to this questioned varied with the different grade levels. Mary Alice and Susan teach second grade together. Mary Alice thinks described her experience with the grade level as being “confusing, nonproductive, with a lack of focus.” Similarly, Susan described it as “good, but we are still struggling to plan well together.” Willamena and Grace
teach first grade on the same team and both noted that their grade level team was “great!”

However, Willamena would like to see the team “thinking deeper” and Grace would like to see the team working in “half the time we normally do.” Jill, the only fifth grade teacher in the group, had very positive comments about her experience with her team. She stated, “we plan together, brainstorm, together, discuss problems, share the work, explain new ideas to each other, and overall we have a great time together.” Sadie, the only fourth grade teacher, feels like the group “goes in different directions without a specific focus.” Holly was very honest by explaining that her entire team “is in the learning stages.”

When asked to reflect on their own definition of collaboration in question four, the results presented similar responses. Comments included “working together on a common focus,” “sharing strategies and ideas,” “planning together,” and “growing together.” The participants were then asked to discuss the positive or negative barriers they encounter when collaborating. Most of the participants commented on both aspects, while some only chose to focus on the negative. Some of the positives responses included “sharing the workload,” “there is more of a team feel,” “I feel supported and not alone,” and “there is team success.” Jill stated that one of the major draw backs is “getting off task and wasting time.” Susan believed that one negative barrier is the fact the “some people just don’t want to share.”

The last questions of the survey asked the participants to explain their collaboration experiences with other professionals other than their grade level members. This includes administration, non-grade level peers, and support staff. Support staff can be the reading coach, community members, exceptional children’ teacher, etc. All of the participants responded that they “rarely” collaborate with administration or that it is “every once in a while, usually one to two times a month.” During the study Holly was an administrative intern, therefore, her
response was a little different. She responded that she collaborates with administration “almost
daily.” Collaboration with non-grade level peers is almost non-existent. Three out of the seven
participants stated that they “don’t do it enough,” and three other participants wrote that they
only do it “sporadically,” or “periodically.” The last two participants mentioned that they
“never” collaborated with non-grade level peers. When it comes to collaborating with support
staff, the responses varied greatly. Mary Alice, Holly, Susan and Jill mentioned that they
collaborate with the reading coach “at least once a week.” The others did not mention any
collaboration with the reading coach. Sadie was very specific on her collaboration with the
exceptional children’s (EC) teacher, stating that, “I work with them most often to build on my
own practice so that I can better understand my EC students.” Jill and Holly commented that
they collaborate with the EC staff “mostly through email.” Grace and Williamena noted that they
only collaborate with support staff on an “as needed basis.” None of the participants mentioned
any collaboration with the outside community.

*First Critical Friends Group Meeting*

The purpose of the first meeting was to promote a positive interaction with the
participants and to establish rapport and trust within the group. The main agenda for the session
was to go through the process for peer observations, including goals, expectations, scheduling,
and any other questions the members still had about the study. All members were present during
the first meeting that was held in a reserved room at Basal Elementary. The coach provided pre
and post conference forms to help guide the members in their observations and give them a
starting point for discussions with their peer observer. The CFG coach also gave the participants
background knowledge about CFG’s to help them better understand behind this type of
professional development. Participants watched a video that showed examples of peer coaching
in action to help aid them during their own interactions with their CFG peers. Lastly, the first round of peer observation groups was set up and a second meeting date was set. The rest of the CFG meetings gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their lessons and observations with the chance for open dialogue among colleagues.

Categories and Themes

The researcher read the data in its entirety and listed common items and topics that were noticed. Related items, topics, and phrases were categorized under the following four categories: trust, professional development, student learning, and strategies. After categorizing the data, the researcher re-read the data several times and established four major themes (Gay et.al., 2006). The major themes presented through the data are the result of the analysis of CFG meeting notes, participant’s journals, pre and post conference forms, and collaboration surveys. The first theme that emerged from the data was an openness to allow colleagues into the classroom based on trust and a mutual respect for one another. The second theme is that the participants found a CFG to be different and more beneficial than previous collaboration and professional development experiences. The third theme is the evidence from the participants that the CFG impacted their students’ learning in that they were more purposeful and reflective of their own practice. The final theme that emerged was the implementation of new strategies in the classroom to improve student learning based on the suggestions and comments from the participants.

Theme 1: Trust and Mutual Respect

During the study several journal prompts were used at the beginning of meetings to break the ice and to allow for reflective thinking. The participants had about five minutes to reflect and write in their journals for each prompt. At the beginning of the first meeting, the CFG coach
asked the participants to “Think about your school year so far. Reflect on what has been a major challenge for you this year as an educator.” Responses shared within the group were voluntary. Grace, a first grade teacher, was the first to respond. She stated, “Time has been a major issue this year for me. With the new grade level planning schedule, I can’t seem to find the time to really plan for what my students need.” Susan, a second grade teacher, felt similar and stated “I know how you feel. Our small group reading plans are supposed to be detailed, but I could stay here all night if I planned like that.” Willamena, another first grade teacher, stated to the group that, “I think everyone is feeling somewhat overwhelmed this year. We are all getting used to a new master schedule, a new reading block, new teachers, and it’s just hard. I think we have all come a long way, but we still need to work at it. Change takes time, but many of us here are perfectionists so we want to feel like what we are doing is working now.”

Other members had issues with time management as well. Sadie, the only fourth grade teacher in the group, shared that “Finding time to make literacy station activities has been difficult. I liked it better in the beginning of the year when we shared the work load as a team, but that approach didn’t last for long. I guess I could suggest to my team again that we start doing that again.” Holly, a third grade teacher, responded with, “My team does that and it’s great. It requires you to be on the same page a lot and plan a lot together, but well worth it.”

The dialogue between the members demonstrates the power of words. The members openly shared their frustrations and the reactions from the other participants were free of judgment. This trust and rapport that was initially established would prove beneficial during the peer observations.

Several group members expressed the level of comfort they felt with the other participants. During peer observation debriefings, the participant being observed reflected their
thoughts on a post conference form. One of the questions on the form stated, “How does this kind of experience differ from other observations, conferences, or professional development?” Responses generated from this question provide evidence for a CFG’s potential to create an open environment and a willingness to accept feedback from a trusted colleague. Mary Alice, the only second grade teacher in the study, found the feedback very helpful. After the second round of peer observations, she stated that, “I value my colleague’s opinion much more than anyone else’s because they are dealing with the same pressures and issues that I am. It was a relief to sit down and talk to someone I never have the chance to see. We had great discussions over certain issues and came up with some strategies together.” Sadie and Willamena had similar experiences with their first observations. They both noted on their post conferences forms that the peer coaching was “non-threatening,” and “risk-free.” Sadie went on to add that she “felt totally comfortable talking to my colleague about suggestions and ideas.” Holly enjoyed the structure of the CFG peer coaching component, stating that, “it is informal, reflective, data-driven, and real.” She went on to say that, “traditional professional development is often mandated and too formal.” The remaining comments on the post conference forms were positive in nature and none of the participants expressed any negatives comments about professional development in the form of a CFG.

*Theme 2: Professional Development in the Form of a CFG*

During the study the participants had time to reflect on how a CFG was both similar and different from other observations, conferences, and professional development. Several participants noted the differences and the benefits that a CFG has had on their teaching practice. For example, Jill wrote during the first cycle of observations that, “the CFG allowed me to perfect my teaching. I could focus on what I wanted to improve on verses somebody doing a
formal observation. So much staff development is centered on state and national standards, but not our own needs. The CFG group was helpful and less intimidating.” Sadie made a similar comment during the last cycle of observations. She stated that her last observation was, “helpful because the observer was there to make me a better teacher, not just critique me.”

Grace was excited about the opportunities she had to work with other grade levels. She also felt the CFG was different than other forms of professional development, stating that, “I had the chance to discuss issues with other grade levels and we hardly ever have the chance to do that.” Holly also commented on the vertical alignment during the study. She responded that, “The CFG was different because it allowed conversations to exist across grade levels. We need that in order to be on the same page.” Sadie noted how the collaboration in a CFG wasn’t all about lesson planning. She stated that the CFG was different because, “Rarely do we get the chance to go into each other’s rooms and help each other grow in our profession. I usually collaborate to plan lessons, but I liked the peer coaching component.”

Other participants found the peer coaching component to also be beneficial. Susan responded that, “Collaboration to me has been nothing more than a grade level meeting a couple of times a week. We discuss administrative issues and we might plan a lesson or two. There is no discussion of our own personal strengths and weaknesses or ideas about how we can improve in our classrooms. Throughout the study it became clear that the participants found it beneficial to choose their own focus area during the peer observations. Mary Alice stated that, “This type of peer collaboration was different for me because I could provide my observer with a focus area that I chose, something I wanted to improve on. I had one of my peers follow a certain student for behavioral feedback, and I’ve never been able to do that before.” Willamena felt the same way, stating that, “This kind of collaboration was great because we were able to discuss specifics
topics that we were trying to improve on. I was able to get very helpful data from my peer observer and it was meaningful to me.” Grace felt that the CFG was a perfect tool for promoting professional growth. She wrote on her post collaboration survey that, “discussing the issues that teachers face everyday is an opportunity for professional growth. The CFG promotes positive criticism from our colleagues. You can’t get that from a conference or workshop.”

Theme 3: Impact on Student Learning

Basal Elementary implemented a ninety minute reading block prior to the CFG study. The staff spent several hours participating in staff development devoted to literacy stations and small group instruction. Many teachers participating in the study chose to focus on literacy stations during their peer observations. Their primary focus was on learner engagement during literacy stations. Since this was a common focus for most participants, there were good conversations during the CFG meetings about strategies and reading instruction. The teachers involved in the study truly want to create the best learning environment for their students and were devoted to improving student learning through the peer observation process.

Willamena, a first grade teacher, was one of the participants who chose to focus on learner engagement. During the first cycle of peer observations, she wanted to know what kind of “learner talk” was taking place during literacy station time. She had a peer script the conversations going on between students during station time. On her post observation conference form she noted that the “feedback from the CFG peer was helpful because it is impossible to be in close proximity to all of my students during stations. Most of the students who were off task needed help with directions. Now I know what I need to fix. I need clearer directions in the poetry station.”
Grace had an eye opening experience during the second cycle of peer observations. She too wanted to focus on learner engagement, however, she wanted to focus on a specific student. She had a feeling that one in particular student was completely off task during station time on a daily basis. She had the CFG peer shadow this student for a period of thirty minutes to see the quality of work being produced. She was “shocked” to find out that this student had “no regard for what he was supposed to be doing.” Reflecting on her lesson, Grace responded in her journal by writing, “I think it’s time to be more specific with certain students. They need to know exactly what I expect. With the data from the observation I can conference with the student and his parents and hopefully turn this around.”

Jill wanted to make sure that her students were interacting in a positive manner during literacy stations. During the second cycle of peer observations, her peer scripted the conversations going on during station time. Jill was relieved to find out that the interactions were positive and that the students were actually on task, despite her predictions. She stated on her post observation conference form that, “Independence in the stations is a good thing. It teaches the students responsibility. I feel like I can take more chances now and go one step further with the stations, perhaps adding some differentiation and more challenging material to focus on the students’ needs.”

Sadie had a similar experience during one of her observations. She admitted during a CFG meeting that she had a hard time “trusting her students and letting them be independent.” After choosing to focus on learner engagement during a couple of peer observations, she told the group at another meeting that, “I am more comfortable now with letting go a little bit. The students are more engaged than I thought. I feel like I can start integrating stations and adding new stations into the reading block. The students will get a lot more out of the stations when I
add more depth to them.” The CFG coach congratulated the participants for being honest with their assumptions about their student’s engagement. It is evidenced by the dialogue that the teacher’s found the data from the peer observations to be useful in improving their student’s learning. Throughout the course of the study, five out of the seven participants stated that the CFG made them “more reflective” and the other two participants stated that they were more “purposeful with their planning” while participating in the CFG group.

**Theme 4: Implementation of New Strategies**

At the conclusion of the study, the coach asked the participants to write down strategies they have implemented within their daily instruction as a result of the CFG. Table 1 summarizes the data that was shared from all seven members of the CFG. Altogether there were nineteen strategies implemented by the CFG members. The data demonstrates the ability of a CFG to introduce and share strategies to improve student achievement and daily instruction in the classroom.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Strategies Implemented During the CFG Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Willamena  | - Provide models and examples in literacy stations so students know the expectations  
|            | - Timers during literacy stations                                                                                                                                             |
| Susan      | - Different student groupings  
|            | - New room arrangement  
|            | - New way of managing stations  
|            | - More attention to student’s time of task during stations  
|            | - Detailed instructions on signs for use during stations                                                                                                                   |
| Sadie      | - Letting go of control  
|            | - More stations with specific directions  
|            | - Room arrangement ideas  
|            | - Giving students more freedom to choose anchor activities when they are done with assigned stations                                                                   |
| Holly      | - Enrichment activity ideas  
|            | - Individual contract method                                                                                                                                                 |
| Mary Alice | - Changed the number of literacy stations from six to nine  
|            | - Behavior management system during station time                                                                                                                            |
| Jill       | - Differentiation in stations  
|            | - More student choice in stations                                                                                                                                              |
| Grace      | - More mindful of quality of student work  
|            | - More intentional with literacy station skills                                                                                                                                 |


Post Collaboration Survey Results

At the conclusion of the study, the participants received another open-ended collaboration survey. The purpose of the survey was to receive each participant’s reflection about their collaboration experiences in the CFG during the six week study. Each participant’s reflection is presented separately.

Willamena

Willamena discussed her new views about collaboration after the CFG study. She stated, “Since our school is slowly learning about professional learning communities and that is the direction we are headed, the CFG was a good introduction to this concept.” When asked if the CFG changed your thinking and practice as an educator, Willamena responded that, “Yes, I value other teacher’s input. I was so excited to go into other classrooms and ask questions and learn. It was time well spent.” Willamena noted that a barrier during the study was “the end of year rush.” Since the study took place during the last semester, Willamena found it “difficult to make time to observe and coordinate observations with other teachers.”

Susan

Susan greatly appreciated the opportunity to participate in a group like the CFG. After the study, Susan reflected and stated, “I feel that more collaboration like this would make us better teachers. Being able to have open discussions in a non-threatening environment has been very beneficial to me. In my fourteen years of teaching, I have never experienced anything like the CFG.” The CFG also changed Susan’s thinking about her own practices. She wrote, “I am less weary of others observing me because I was able to choose the focus. The observation may flop, but knowing that someone is going to genuinely offer suggestions and coach me through it is a great feeling.” Susan also felt that time and scheduling was a barrier during the study. She
stated, “The scheduling and coverage worked out, but it took time and persistence. The experience was well worth overcoming the barriers.”

Sadie

Sadie reflected on her new views on collaboration in her school by stating, “I think the people in our group found it to be useful, productive, and risk free. We learned a lot from each other and discovered that many of us are on the same page and we are dealing with the same classroom issues.” The CFG changed Sadie’s thinking and practices as an educator. She wrote, “I feel more comfortable letting others help. They are not here to judge me, but instead help me to become a better teacher. I enjoyed visiting other classrooms too because I learned a lot by simply observing.” Like the other participants, Sadie stated that one of the barriers during the study was finding coverage while she observed. She noted, “At the beginning of the study I had an intern, so it was easy to find coverage, but towards the end when she left is was more difficult.”

Holly

Holly has been disappointed with her usual collaboration with her grade level. She stated, “We meet almost daily as a grade level, but I don’t believe I’m getting out of it what I should be. We really need to look at our goals and objectives for each meeting. I don’t think we are meeting them right now. I’d like to see us talking more about our teaching practices and digging even deeper into the curriculum with our planning.” Holly’s views about her own teaching practice changed during the course of the study. She wrote, “When I came back to my own classroom after observing a peer, I reflected more on what I could do differently. I’m a trained peer observer, so it was refreshing to go into classrooms and not be responsible for writing up a formal observation.” Holly introduced new barriers to the CFG coach. She wrote
that “members’ roles in the group were a barrier.” On the other hand, she noted that a supporting factor during the CFG participation was “the feeling that we are all in this together.”

Mary Alice

After participating in the CFG, Mary Alice had a new perspective on collaboration. She responded that, “It was refreshing to see that we all have a lot of the same concerns, especially in facilitating literacy stations. We talk about certain topics in grade level meetings, but I don’t always feel like we are being honest with each other. I felt like there was more honesty in our CFG.” When asked if the CFG changed your thinking and practice as an educator, Mary Alice responded, “Yes, I feel like we need more of this type of professional development. It helps me to get an outsider’s opinion instead of always being observed for an evaluation.” Like others, Mary Alice thought that time was a barrier during the study. She stated, “It was difficult to schedule time for the pre and post conferences.” She included that a supporting factor was “everyone in the study was flexible when it came to scheduling observations.”

Jill

When asked to reflect upon her experience in the CFG, Jill wrote, “It would be a great thing for us to start doing on a regular basis at Basal. We currently don’t collaborate in this way and it’s so different from what normally goes on in schools.” She commented about her change in thinking by adding, “Although it can be time consuming, it is helpful and it gave me the chance to discuss things with people that I never have the opportunity to talk with during the school day.” Time and coverage was a barrier for Jill as well. She stated that, “Everyone wanted to be observed during the reading block. Seeing as how everyone in the building is utilized at that time, it was hard to find coverage sometimes.” Jill also stated that she thought “it
would be more helpful to start a CFG at the beginning of the year because my peers may need more direction and structure then.”

*Grace*

Grace was honest with the CFG coach during her reflection, stating that, “I like the CFG more than I expected to. I thought it was going to be very time consuming and a lot of extra work, but I benefited from it so much. I feel more affirmed in the things I am doing in my classroom. By going into other classrooms, I realized that my peers are using some of the same strategies I am, plus we are all working to be better at the same things.” Grace stated that the CFG changed her thinking as an educator because “it inspired me to keep growing so I can be better teacher.” Grace commented that it “was tricky to get into other classrooms to observe because of our busy schedules.”

*Chapter Summary*

Chapter four presented the results of the data that was collected for this study. The themes presented through the data were trust and mutual respect, the ability of a CFG to act as a form of professional development, the CFG’s impact on student learning, and the shared strategies that improve student learning. The next chapter discusses conclusions and implications of this study.


DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses conclusions of the study findings and results. The implications for a Critical Friends Group in an elementary school will be discussed, as well as the barriers that arose during the study. The chapter will end with recommendations for future CFG research.

Discussion of Results

The results of this study indicate that a Critical Friends Group can be a successful form of professional development in an elementary school. As evidenced by the data, the participants had a positive reaction to this type of collaboration. The CFG coach witnessed the members being honest and open about their practice. The members shared strategies for improvement and had support during the implementation process. The positive communication and trust within the group led to the creation of learning community. The learning community created a high morale and had a positive impact on the student’s learning and the teacher’s practice.

Evidence of Trust and Respect

Previous to this study, most collaboration and professional development opportunities took place during grade level meetings, district workshops, and staff meetings. Participants expressed before the study that collaboration was limited and some participants admitted to rarely collaborating with other school staff. Grade level meetings were described as unorganized and off topic. By participating in a CFG, the members focused on weekly observations and organized meetings with set agendas. The conversations during the CFG meetings were light in nature. Members felt comfortable to discuss personal issues, student difficulties, and stressful situations that affect their instruction. Caring relationships were supported by open communication and trust (Hord, 1997).
Most members shared their negative views about formal observations by administrators or peers. Some members shared that they were stressful and not a real snapshot of what goes on in the classroom on a daily basis. The CFG members benefited from the feedback they got from their peers during the study. The members chose personal foci for the observations, admitting their weaknesses and displaying a deep desire to improve their own practice. Louis and Kruse (1995) cited that “a willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement is a huge part of being in a professional learning community.” The feedback from the observations was well received by the group members, providing a safe place for teachers to express their real concerns and real successes. According to Inger (1993), teachers in a professional learning community have the opportunity to get smarter together, supporting each other’s strengths and accommodating their weaknesses. During this study, the members had the chance to support each other in an inviting atmosphere without fear of judgment.

Evidence of Strategies Implemented

Throughout the course of their career, teachers are invited and mandated to attend professional development to improve their practice. Rarely do teachers have the opportunity to share relevant strategies with members of their own grade level, let alone members of other grade levels and departments. Defour & Eaker (1998) noted that the lack of tools and strategies to support staff development has resulted in a lack of commitment by the faculty. A total of nineteen strategies were implemented by the CFG members during the course of the study. This was a result of the teacher’s advice and suggestions offered during CFG meetings and observation debriefings. The majority of the strategies supported the implementation of the reading block, but a few were devoted to other areas of the curriculum. Similar to the study by Englart and Tarrant (1995), the participants realized the need to make instructional changes
based on collaboration with peer teachers. All seven CFG members stated in their reflections the positives of the CFG compared to other forms of collaboration. Particularly, they noted the benefits of a risk free environment and the opportunity to visit other classrooms free of evaluation.

Evidence of Student Learning

Although the study only lasted a short six weeks, it was enough time for the teachers in the group to recognize the impact that their practice had on their student’s achievement. Huffman and Jacobson (2003) stated that students’ academic achievement is greater in schools where teachers report high levels of collective responsibility for student learning. One participant, Willamena, had a feeling that some of her students were off task during literacy stations. After a peer observation by a CFG peer and a debriefing session, she realized her assumptions were true. She knew she had to change her expectations, so she implemented a new set of directions to be used at each station for better clarity. She later shared with the group how her student’s time on task had increased and she could immediately see its effects. David (2008) found similar results in the literature, noting that when teachers collaborate to discuss data about their own students, their practice changes and they become more knowledgeable. Another participant, Sadie, chose to focus on her classroom arrangement during one of her observations. She thought that her room arrangement might be a distraction during station transitions. When a CFG peer sat down and shared observation data with her, she noticed in the drawn diagrams where she needed to make a change. Without the change, students would be eventually lose time on task. The CFG has a direct effect on student learning, as evidenced by these examples from the teachers who participated.

Evidence of CFG as Professional Development
No Child Left Behind requirements have changed the way that schools focus on professional development. Teachers are faced with the pressure to raise student achievement, but are often not supported effectively (Zawaslin, 2007). The purpose behind a CFG is to go beyond traditional collaboration experiences and provide teachers with the support they need to improve their teaching abilities. The CFG members covered a lot of ground in this study. They participated in observations, collaborated across grade levels on specific foci, reflected on their experiences, and provided evidence of the new strategies they implemented during the study. During the last CFG meeting, Jill stated that, “I think all of us are more reflective on what we are doing each day, and we are more open to sharing our thoughts with our colleagues. We’ve become more proactive.” While some of the experiences the participants had during the study may be similar to other professional development activities, the CFG has demonstrated the ability for teachers to collaborate, share, and reflect on a deeper level. Through meaningful conversations about learning, the CFG members had the chance to get smarter together (Inger, 1993). Unlike the study by Curry (2003), the participants in the CFG felt a great deal of professional growth due to their participation and dedication to collaborating with their peers.

**Barriers**

The major barriers presented by the participants’ reflections were time, coverage, member roles, and other responsibilities. Hord (1997) stated that time is one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts. The members stated that it was difficult to arrange times for partners to observe each other during the instructional day. They also shared their difficulty finding supervision for their classroom while they were out observing. The study took place during the last semester of school which can be a busy time for testing, tutoring, and other school activities. Some participants expressed that these activities interfered with their ability to
take full advantage of the time in the CFG. One teacher, Holly, was the only one to mention that she was unsure of her role as she went into other classrooms. She stated during a CFG meeting that she “wasn’t quite sure where to draw the line with her advice and suggestions without seeming overbearing.” Despite the barriers presented, all but one participant completed all of the required observations and three out of the four CFG meetings were one hundred percent attended.

**Implementation Ideas**

Overall, the group felt the positive influences that a CFG can have on teacher collaboration. To be successful in the future, the following factors need to be addressed. The CFG should be presented as a voluntary activity and roles should be explained and accepted. The term “Critical Friend” should be defined in depth, as well as the purpose of a CFG. The members should know that the group is not intended for evaluation. Some members in the study even suggested that there should be a pilot group of teachers who could support new members in the future.

Another factor to consider is scheduling. The members in the group should not feel the pressure to observe, reflect, and debrief in a constricted amount of time. Time should be carved out during the instructional day, like grade level meetings, so that teachers may tend to their other responsibilities after school. With several days out of the week already reserved for after school meetings, CFG meetings could take the place of a few of those. Having a predetermined schedule for meetings would also cut down on the amount of absences.

**Future Research**

Further research is needed regarding the impact of CFG participation on teacher collaboration and growth, as well as the impact on student learning. In particular, researchers
need to assess what factors act as supports or barriers to successful implementation. Studies should be done in middle schools and high schools to compare the results and get a better understanding of the structures needed for implementation. Another area that researchers can focus on is how the CFG compares to other forms of professional development and if teachers benefit from one over another. In the future, the overall influence of a CFG in an elementary school can be assessed through student test scores, and school climate data.

Conclusion

The research indicates that the members of the Critical Friends Group had a beneficial experience during their time in the study and their thoughts about their practice changed as a result of their participation in the CFG. Teachers shared successful strategies to improve student learning, they became more aware of their reflective practices, felt is was more purposeful than other forms of professional development, and developed professional relationships with their peers. It is concluded that a CFG has the ability to influence teacher practices and collaboration within an elementary school setting.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Pre-Collaboration Survey

1. What do you know about a Critical Friends Group?

2. How often do you collaborate with your grade level?

3. How would you describe your current experiences with your grade level during collaboration?

4. What do you think it means to “collaborate?”

5. Discuss the positive or negative barriers that you encounter when collaborating.

6. Briefly explain your experiences and how often you collaborate with:
   a. administration
   b. Grave level peers
   c. Non-grade level peers
   d. School support (EC teachers, reading coach, community members, etc.)
Appendix B: Pre-Conference Reflection Form

CFG Pre-Conference Form

Teacher____________________
Observer___________________
Date of Pre-Conference___________
Date of Scheduled Observation_____________
Subject/Lesson_____________________________

***FOCUS____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________

1. What do you hope to accomplish in this lesson? What are your goals?

2. Give a brief explanation of why you want the observer to focus on this area? Are there specific issues in this area?
Appendix C: Post Conference Reflection Form

CFG Post Conference Form

Teacher____________________
Observer___________________
Subject/Lesson________________________________________________

**FOCUS_____________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
1. What were your initial thoughts after the lesson?

2. Reflecting on your lesson, would you do anything different?

3. Did you find the feedback from your CFG peer helpful? If so, how?

4. How does this kind of experience differ from other observations, conferences, or professional development?
Appendix D: Post Collaboration Survey

1. After participating in the CFG, what if any are new views on collaboration in your school?

2. Is the collaboration with the CFG similar or different to your past collaboration with peers? Explain.

3. Has the CFG changed your thinking and practices as an educator? Explain.

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

5. In what ways has the CFG impacted your students’ learning?

6. Please list specific strategies or ideas you have implemented into your daily instruction during your time in the CFG study.
Participant names and location, Basal Elementary, are pseudonyms.