

Research Article

Cite this article: Dunn, R. (2025). The Role of the Critical Friend in Supporting Principals to Lead School Improvement. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 14, e2025002. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2025.14.2>

Received November 15, 2024

Accepted December 20, 2024

Published Online January 02, 2025

Keywords:

Critical friend, principals, school improvement

Author for correspondence:

Ryan Dunn

 dunn.r@unimelb.edu.au

 the Faculty of Education, Melbourne University, Australia



OPEN ACCESS

© The Author(s), 2025. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

The Role of the Critical Friend in Supporting Principals to Lead School Improvement

Ryan Dunn 

Abstract

Background/purpose. This study explores the different ways in which critical friend roles are conceptualized. The critical friend role is adaptive by nature, with significant ambiguity surrounding it, which has resulted in disjointed and fragmented literature. This study sought to provide insights into the varied and potentially boundary-spanning roles that critical friends may need to draw upon when supporting school-based improvement work.

Materials/methods. A focus group methodology was adopted to examine the type of role that experienced critical friends anticipated that they would be required to undertake as part of a longitudinal school improvement program. A semi-structured interview protocol guide was used to uncover the participants' prior experiences when undertaking the role of a critical friend.

Results. This study analyzed the work of five critical friends whose primary role was to support principals to lead improvement in improving teaching and learning in mathematics. The results show that critical friends defined four key archetypes they anticipated to utilize during the professional learning program.

Conclusion. The study highlighted that the role of the critical friend in supporting improvement is quite varied. The critical friend role can differ depending on the context, level of trust in the relationship, and the core work that is to be undertaken.

1. Introduction

As described by Schleicher (2012), the fundamental role of school leaders is to establish a vision for the school community and to enhance its capacity to achieve it (OECD, 2012). Studies have also identified key leadership practices used by principals, such as setting a vision, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing teaching and learning programs (Leithwood et al., 2020). This takes place within a complex educational landscape, where schools are influenced by advances in science and technology, changes in demography, globalization, and pressure on the environment (Mulford & Edmunds, 2010).

Schools do not become high-performing in the absence of strong leadership. However, it is also apparent that single-point accountability for principals to improve teaching and learning is a heavy burden (Riley et al., 2021). Thus, principals are increasingly encouraged to cultivate support networks to assist them through key improvement initiatives. While there are various approaches principals can draw upon for support (see the principal supervisor role, Community of Practice, etc.). Another recognized mechanism for principal support is the use of a critical friend.

A critical friend is espoused as a highly adaptable form of support for the leadership of school improvement (Gurr & Huerta, 2013). Due to the adaptive nature of critical friends, there is a significant ambiguity surrounding their role.

As critical friendships continue to gain traction in educational settings, further research is needed to deepen the understanding of this multifaceted role and develop practical strategies for cultivating effective critical friend relationships. The aim of this study is to explore the perspectives experienced critical friends about the diverse roles they have played while undertaking the critical friend role.

The data presented in this study were derived from the first year of a longitudinal professional learning partnership between the Faculty of Education (FoE) and 45 primary school leadership teams. The professional learning program sought to build knowledge and capabilities related to improving mathematics. The 45 primary school leadership teams participated in 10 professional learning days over two years that were facilitated by FoE academics. In addition to professional learning workshops, school principals had access to a critical friend who would support their improvement throughout the duration of the program. The critical friend would visit each principal at their school twice every academic year to support the contextualization of the improvement work they were undertaking in mathematics. The critical role was conceptualized in the design of the program to offer customized, job-embedded support for principals as they navigated the school improvement work they would undertake as part of the longitudinal professional learning program.

Prior to commencing the critical friend role in the project, educational consultants were invited to be part of a focus group. The intention of the focus group was to clarify the types of roles that experienced critical friends anticipated they would play as part of the improvement initiative. The primary purpose of the focus group was to collaboratively conceptualize the critical friend role to ensure consistency in how they intended to support principals with the improvement program. The secondary purpose was to establish the way in which experienced critical friends conceptualize this important yet ambiguous role.

2. Literature Review

The concept of critical friends has emerged as a valuable approach for fostering professional growth, critical reflection, and collaborative learning among educators. A critical friend has been defined as 'a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend' (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 50). This has been extended to include helping schools make decisions, challenging expectations, playing a role that is interpretive and catalytic, helping shape outcomes but never determining them, alerting the

school to issues only half perceived, and being sympathetic to the school's purpose (Doherty et al., 2001). Although broad definitions that allude to aspects of the role have emerged, there is still considerable debate about how to capture the concept of a critical friend best.

Despite efforts to clarify the role, ambiguity persists in the literature, with researchers acknowledging the inherent tensions involved in the adaptive nature of balancing support and critique. Curry (2008) highlighted the potential for coercion or complacency to arise, diminishing the freedom to share ideas and provide honest feedback. Schuck (2011) echoed these concerns, noting the challenges in reconciling the friend and critic roles, which can hinder the effectiveness of the critical friend role.

Recent studies have further explored the adaptive and context-dependent nature of critical friendships as a means of addressing these challenges. For instance, Capobianco et al. (2024) found that critical friend groups enabled student teachers to leverage diverse expertise and perspectives within their groups, facilitating their development as both teachers and researchers. The authors emphasized the importance of trust, open communication, and a willingness to challenge one another as key factors contributing to the success of these critical friendships.

The adaptive and contextual nature of critical friendships is further exemplified in the study by Kenigs et al. (2023), which explored the implications of a critical friend's involvement in reshaping pedagogical leadership practices within a school. The authors found that the critical friend's continuous questioning and facilitation of collaborative reflection processes enabled the school's leadership team to reexamine their beliefs and practices, ultimately contributing to the development of a professional learning community within the school.

Collectively, these recent studies underscore the adaptive and context-sensitive nature of undertaking the critical friend role. Wepner et al. (2024) highlighted that as collegial sources of support, critical friends help leaders reflect on their practices, address their stressors, and ultimately boost their job performance and satisfaction. While challenging assumptions and providing feedback are crucial for fostering growth and reflection, preserving trust, empathy, and a positive relationship is equally important. Achieving this balance requires critical friends to be responsive to context, where critical friends continuously navigate the inherent tensions of their role, adjusting their practices to meet the evolving needs of their colleagues and the specific contexts in which they operate.

The critical friend role is viewed as adaptive, as it is crucial to be aware of and respond to the specific context of the individual(s) they are working with to determine the extent to which they move across the continuum from 'support' to 'critique' (MacPhail et al., 2024). An effective critical friend is one who can be quite fluid with support or critique, depending on what the context requires at any point—highlighting that this role is not static and may vary extensively from context to context or as the relationship evolves. It may not necessarily be sequential or linear as a critical friend moves from support to critique over time. Different aspects may be prioritized at different times as the context requires.

Arising from the ambiguous conceptualization of a critical friend is a lack of guidance on the exact tasks a critical friend should be expected to fulfill, their competencies, or the skills and behaviors that should guide their work (MacPhail et al., 2024). Differences arise due to the contextual needs of a given situation (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005), and there does not appear to be one universally accepted definition, perception, or role for critical friends in supporting and enhancing professional learning and development. This has led to disjointed and fragmented literature, which is challenging to synthesize and advance, and it is suspected to be replete with individuals in critical friend roles without calling them as such (MacPhail et al., 2024).

It has become increasingly clear that a critical friend must be fluid and adaptive to be effective. In terms of the role of the continuum of support to critique, there is still a lack of specificity. This study sought to provide insights into the varied and potentially boundary-spanning roles that a critical friend may need to draw upon when supporting a principal on an improvement initiative. This is achieved by analyzing the work of five critical friends whose primary role is to support principals in leading improvement in teaching and learning in a longitudinal mathematics professional learning program.

To undertake the study, a theoretical framework that can effectively allow for the generation of novel insights was necessary. Grounded Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory are two prominent theories that can be applied to this study. The grounded theory approach provides a robust theoretical framework for qualitative case study research (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Grounded theory is an inductive methodology that allows theoretical concepts to emerge from and be grounded in the data itself (Charmaz, 2014). When applied to focus group methods, grounded theory enables researchers to construct theoretical propositions through cycles of data gathering, coding, categorizing, and comparing findings across multiple focus group participants (Eisenhardt, 1989; Charmaz, 2014b). The depth and richness of case data, coupled with grounded theory's systematic yet flexible guidelines, allow for generating novel theoretical insights grounded in real-world contexts (Wiesche et al., 2017). Significantly, a grounded theory approach necessitates a theoretical sampling of cases based on their potential for illuminating the emerging theory (Urquhart et al., 2013).

Constructivist learning theory complements the Grounded Theory approach by emphasizing the active role of participants in constructing their own understanding and knowledge through experience (Dennis, 2014). In the context of articulating the core practices and roles of a critical friend, constructivist principles encouraged participants to construct knowledge through dialogic discourse with their peers.

3. Methodology

A focus group methodology was adopted to examine the type of role that experienced consultants anticipated that they would be required to undertake as part of the improvement program. Focus groups are particularly useful for discovering new insights (Gould et al., 2008) and, therefore, appropriate for examining critical friends' perceptions of the types of roles they anticipate will be required as part of the professional learning program. Their perception was based on their previous experience working as critical friends, coupled with their understanding of the professional learning program they were about to engage in. The focus group methodology is suited for obtaining in-depth responses (Morgan et al., 1998), which in this context means that the thoughts and diverse experiences of critical friends would be effectively surfaced. Focus groups also allow the researcher to seek clarity and ask participants to verify their statements (Krueger, 1998). Hence, if the critical friends lacked specificity, additional clarification was requested to ensure that the researcher's understanding of the role matched the critical friend's description. The focus group's intention was to generate themes that could be transformed into explicit descriptions of the role of critical friends when supporting principals in improvement work.

Critical friends were purposely sampled based on their previous experience in this type of role. The five critical friends in the focus group interviews had a minimum of 4-years of experience working with school leaders in this role. Two 90-minute focus group sessions were held over a two-week period. The focus group included five critical friends, a researcher, and a research assistant. Following standard focus-group guidelines (Morgan et al., 1998), both 90-minute sessions consisted of the same five participants as the research assistant to capture the discussion, and the researcher undertook the role of the group facilitator to guide the conversation and ask clarifying questions.

Both researcher and research assistant had extensive experience as educational consultants who have supported school improvement efforts.

The focus group began with a prepared introduction consisting of the study's purposes, types of questions to be asked, and rules to ensure that the process was as effective and transparent as possible for the five participants. The introduction is based on Morgan et al.'s (1998) rules for facilitating focus groups. A semi-structured interview guide was created based on the literature and prior experiences of the researcher and research assistant when supporting school improvement initiatives. Introductory questions about the consultants' experience of working with principals on school improvement work were used to facilitate group interaction and reflection, which has been successfully used in other focus group studies (e.g. Durand-Bush et al., 2004; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007).

Once the five consultants were engaged in the discussion, core research questions were posed to the group. The two main questions were, "What are the core roles you have played as a critical friend to support principals with improvement initiatives?" and "Can you outline any differences between the critical friend role you have undertaken in different contexts?" The group facilitator's role was to probe further when clarification was necessary, or the discussion warranted it. It was also the role of the facilitator in attempting to establish a consensus between the groups when key points of discussion arose. It was important for the group to be part of the consensus-building process to ensure that their views were part of the knowledge-building on how the critical friend was conceptualized by five experienced consultants. Moreover, the researcher or research assistant was free to probe points that were not in the interview guide, provided that the main research questions were covered in the allotted 90 minutes. Notes were collected by the research assistant to capture the discussion. They were reviewed by all five participants who affirmed or contested these summary notes at the end of the session as a mechanism to ensure the credibility of the data generated by the focus group (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In general, critical friends agreed with the accuracy of the notes taken by the investigator and offered only minor corrections.

Drawing on the data analysis framework designed by Gould et al. (2008). Using focus group session notes, patterns of meaning were categorized using content and constant comparative analyses (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This list was generated by initially undertaking a vertical analysis to establish what each individual participant had stated during the two focus group sessions. After the vertical analysis was completed, a horizontal analysis of the data was conducted to establish themes across participants (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). The researcher reviewed the transcripts and created a master list of themes from each focus group session. The research assistant then independently undertook the same process to establish a list of key themes. The thematic analysis included direct or paraphrased quotes reflecting a particular thought from the groups relative to the major questions posed to ensure that the themes could be connected back to the data generated from the focus groups. The two researchers then jointly verified all identified themes and organized them into categories of similar themes, creating hierarchical categories of greater generality. This process resulted in dimensions (i.e., the types of roles and why they were viewed as important) and subcategories (i.e., the characteristics of these roles and the type of support they offer principals).

Differences in labeling themes were discussed until a consensus was reached by both the researcher and the research assistant. This debriefing process enhances the trustworthiness of interpretations (Creswell, 1998) and reduces the likelihood of researcher bias (Gerdes & Conn, 2001). Potential biases were identified by openly discussing the interpretations made by each member; at times, interpretations were challenged. The final step involved counting the number of themes in each hierarchical level and connecting them back to the individuals, which indicated this thematic finding. This was to ensure that the themes generated were not solely reliant on one individual in the focus group but were reflective of consensus from a range of critical friends participating in the focus

group. For example, a theme mentioned by all focus group members or mentioned in a recurring manner throughout the focus group provided evidence of its importance within an expert focus group.

4. Results

The results are presented first by detailing the focus groups' overall experiences working as critical friends and then clear distinctions within how the critical friend role is conceptualized differently based on their work context. That is, the lived experience as a critical friend focus group began by asking participants about their general experiences as critical friends responsible for supporting principals on school improvement work. Through an analysis of the transcripts, the critical friends felt that there were varying ways to achieve positive outcomes as critical friends (mentioned by all critical friends). Reflecting on an agreement in the focus group that the critical friend role is varied and can evolve, critical friends explored their understanding of the role along a continuum from support to challenge. This aligns with MacPhail et al. (2024) findings, "it is apparent that critical friend relationships are not stagnant; they are growing and evolving" (p.6).

The focus group sessions enabled the five critical friends to highlight the key aspects of how they conceptualized the critical friend role. The discussion was closely aligned with the MacPhail et al. (2021) dual-continuum model, where one axis captures the extent to which there is support or critique, and the other axis represents the variance or similarity between expertise and experience within the critical friend relationship (figure 1). That is, how the critical friend role could be described when it is based on support to one that is based on critique, while at the same time, understanding experience and expertise also play a role in defining critical friend relationships.

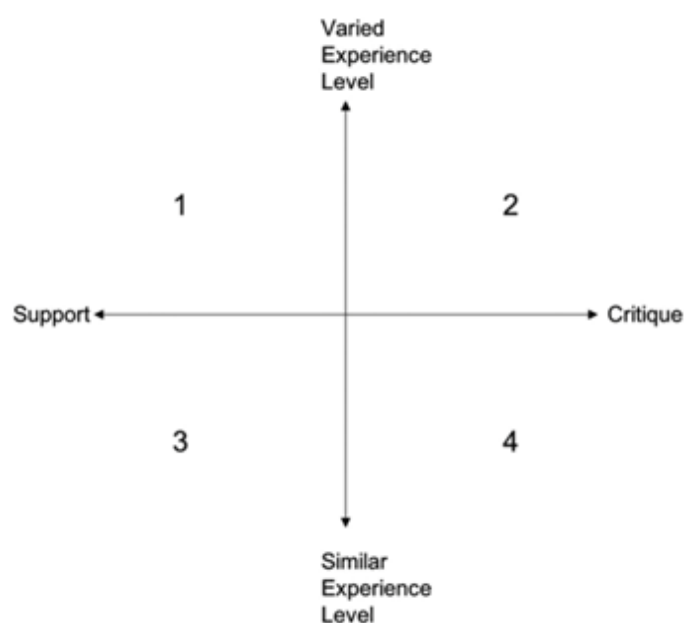


Figure 1. The dual-continuum model to conceptualize the roles and tasks of a critical friend (MacPhail et al., 2024)

Following the focus group interviews, the data were analyzed to identify patterns in how the critical friend role was conceptualized by experienced consultants working as critical friends with school leadership teams. From these patterns, four archetypes were derived to make sense of and provide insight into the range of experiences experienced consultants have had with the critical friend role to date and how they consider the diverse roles they may be required to undertake. Archetypes have been successfully used in education to describe educators' nuanced roles (Dunn, 2023).

Workshop participants confirmed that the archetypes reflected the varying beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors required for a critical friend to support school improvement.

The four key archetypes the critical friends anticipated they would utilize during the professional learning program and the working definitions they established are:

1. Mentor (high support)

A professional relationship in which an experienced person (mentor) supports and encourages a mentee to develop specific skills and knowledge to maximize their potential and improve their performance. Mentorship can be defined as an intense interpersonal exchange between a more experienced mentor who provides advice, counsel, feedback, and support related to personal development within the broader improvement initiative (Noe et al., 2002). The role was not solely focused on the functional elements of leadership but also included emotional and psychological support. One of the key behaviors associated with this role is encouragement, where the critical friend nudges and affirms bolster confidence (Coppola et al., 2021). Critical friends identified the mentor relationship as primarily about supporting the principal in developing their ability to lead an improvement agenda at their school. While the interaction may be centered on organizational improvement, the role was conceptualized as mainly a one-to-one relationship, where the critical friend worked closely with the principal to develop leadership practices.

2. Challenge Partner (high challenge)

The challenge partner's primary role was to offer constructive feedback to the principal regarding the improvement initiative. This role differed from the mentor's, as it was considered broader than advice for the individual principal to evolve and develop. The challenge partner role included advice and feedback on a range of elements of the organization that may enhance or hinder improvement efforts. This included organizational culture, team processes, decision-making, leadership for learning, and instructional practices. This role was articulated as critiquing current operational practices and guiding future possibilities within identified areas for improvement.

This role was underpinned by the deliberate and intentional goal of evaluating how the school operates. There was a consensus that the role was not supervisory and about evaluating principal performance. Although feedback on their practice could be part of this role, it was more about identifying key levers that the organization could address to improve performance. As such, the role included more evidence analysis and insight development than some other roles that were more conversational in nature. The challenge partner aligns with Swaffield and MacBeath's (2005) conceptualization of the role where the critical friend has undergone transformation by acquiring knowledge, skills, and experiences from outside the community. Critical friends present contrasting and enriched perspectives to develop practices, structures, and processes within the community from the known and accepted to the scrutinized and challenged (Fletcher, 2019).

3. More Knowledgeable Other (high expertise)

A More Knowledgeable Other refers to someone with lived experience and understanding of how to work through issues with which school leaders might grapple. The lived experience was used to support the current implementation strategy. The key behaviors linked with this role were to advise, recommend, and coach. The role was conceptualized as more directive than other roles, where critical friends worked at the coalface and explicitly influenced practices linked to the improvement initiative. Continual feedback was viewed as a key practice associated with the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), and the key purpose was to develop the principal's specific skills and knowledge to lead a specific improvement agenda.

The MKO role is task-oriented and centered on the concept that the critical friend supports the principal through a process they have encountered previously. It was acknowledged that context is

an important consideration and that adaptations will be an essential part of the improvement process; however, it was generally agreed that the critical friend played an active role in leading the principal through the process of improvement.

4. Knowledge Broker (strong professional networks)

A Knowledge Broker is an intermediary who seeks to develop relationships and networks to support school improvement. In the context of a critical friend, a knowledge broker connects school leaders to each other. This might be a school leader who has led similar improvement work or embarked on a similar journey. The knowledge broker role centered on the idea that the best support could be connecting the school principal with other colleagues who have embarked on a similar journey. Interestingly, while there was consensus with the group this was a distinct role; there was no consensus on how to nurture the relationship they were 'brokering.' Some saw this as simply connecting key people together and letting them develop a relationship, whereas others continued to be a conduit for the relationship to develop.

5. Discussion

Schools do not become high-performing in the absence of great leadership. There is an empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement, and there is substantial evidence that principals are critical for school success (Hattie, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson, 2007). A critical friend relationship aims to provide practical social support to the individual they work with. This is aligned with research on social facilitation, where it has been found that people improve their task performance when they are in the presence of others than when they are alone. Social facilitation is a concept in social psychology that refers to the influence of others' presence on an individual's performance. Social facilitation subsumes changes in behavioral performance associated with the passive or active presence of another person (Szymanski et al., 2017). This phenomenon has been widely researched and found to have a significant impact on a variety of settings, from sports to work in educational contexts (Guerin, 1999). However, in the context of being a critical friend, the social support required may be dramatically different depending on the expertise of the leader or, perhaps, the specific phase of the improvement work they are leading.

Critical friendship is a flexible and potentially powerful approach to support leadership and school improvement, as illustrated by the diverse conceptualization of the role of experienced critical friends. Evidently, the critical friend role varies and is fluid in its application. Critical friendships are generous yet rigorous relationships that can create a more emergent, formative quality of coaching and mentoring (MacKenzie, 2015). As Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) point out, a critical friend is an advocate for the success of the work and takes time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. This highlights the need for nuances in their role based on the identified contextual factors.

While the role is nuanced in its application, it was apparent in all four archetypes that the relationship is underpinned by mutual trust between all involved in the relationship. What can also be inferred from the way in which the role was conceptualized is that each critical friend understands the significant investment of meaningful time to create a critical friendship (MacPhail et al., 2024). It was clear that friendship is viewed as fluid and that an effective critical friend will be responsive to the context in which they are working. It was also apparent that the relationship tended to be longitudinal, with trust and reciprocity deepening over time. As Macphail et al. (2024) noted, "extended and ongoing professional relationships that invested in, with, and for each other continues over time, long after the initial project that prompted the critical friendship" (p.12).

The various conceptualizations of critical friendship roles described in this study suggest that the process is specific to the context and identified needs of the individual or team they support.

Underpinning this is the idea that critical friendship is developed through practical and voluntary partnerships rooted in a common task of shared concern (Campbell et al., 2004). While not part of this study, it is evident that key decisions about how to most effectively support leaders are undertaken in the initial stages of defining the work to be supported. A critical friend engages in a reciprocal relationship to establish the work to be undertaken while concurrently conceptualizing the optimal supportive role they could assume for the context within which they are working. Critical friendship is characterized by trust, provocative questioning to enhance reflection, and the challenge of assumptions through the provision of helpful critiques of participants' practices and viewpoints (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005).

While this study confirms that a critical friend role navigates a continuum of support (friend) to critique (critical) and identifies insights into specific roles within this continuum, future research could explore the decision-making process that critical friends utilize to establish the role they will undertake. In addition, it explores how the relationship evolves over time to fluidly move from one role to another as the relationships deepen in varying contexts. By examining the processes and nuances within the practical application of the critical friend role, there can be greater clarity on how this role can be utilized to support school improvement work.

The various conceptualizations of critical friendship roles described in this study suggest that the process is specific to the context and identified needs of the individual or team they support. Underpinning this is the idea that critical friendship is developed through practical and voluntary partnerships rooted in a common task of shared concern (Campbell et al., 2004). While not part of this study, it is evident that key decisions about how to most effectively support leaders are undertaken in the initial stages of defining the work to be supported. A critical friend engages in a reciprocal relationship to establish the work to be undertaken while concurrently conceptualizing the optimal supportive role they could assume for the context within which they are working. Critical friendship is characterized by trust, provocative questioning to enhance reflection, and the challenge of assumptions through the provision of helpful critiques of participants' practices and viewpoints (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005).

6. Conclusion and Implications

This qualitative study explored the diverse roles experienced by critical friends who anticipate undertaking support for principals in leading school improvement initiatives. Employing a focus group methodology guided by grounded theory, data were gathered from five critical friends with extensive experience in this domain. The four key archetypes that critical friends anticipated adopting directly answer the research questions by illuminating the varied and context-dependent roles a critical friend may need to fluidly navigate when supporting school leaders.

While previous studies acknowledged the inherent adaptivity of critical friendships (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005), this study offers novel insights into specific role conceptualizations along the dual continuum model outlined by MacPhail et al. (2024). Based on the findings, recommendations can be made regarding the need for critical friends to develop strategies for continuously (re)negotiating roles based on contextual considerations. Building trust and establishing processes for adjusting supportive stances as relationships evolve over time is also recommended.

While this study confirms that a critical friend role navigates a continuum of support (friend) to critique (critical) and identifies insights into specific roles within this continuum, future research should explore the decision-making process that critical friends utilize to establish the role they will undertake. In addition, future research could explore how the relationship evolves over time to fluidly move from one role to another as the relationships deepen in varying contexts. By examining the

processes and nuances within the practical application of the critical friend role, there can be greater clarity on how this role can be utilized to support school improvement work.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors have read and approved the published on the final version of the article

Conflicts of Interest. The author declared no conflict of interest.

Funding. The author received no financial support for this article.

Data Availability Statement. The data that supports the findings of this study are confidential as bound by the human ethics application.

Ethical Approval. Permission to conduct the research was granted through the University of Melbourne's Human Ethics Advisory Committee (HEAC no. 1954355.2)

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the five critical friends who contributed to the completion of this research.

References

- Campbell, A., McNamara, O., & Gilroy, P. (2004). *Practitioner Research and Professional Development in Education*.
- Capobianco, B. M., McCauley, V., & Flynn, P. (2024). The influence of critical friendships on secondary student teachers engaged in collaborative action research. *Educational Action Research, 32*(5), 746–771. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2023.2263492>
- Charmaz, K. (2014a). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2014b). Grounded Theory in Global Perspective: Reviews by International Researchers. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(9), 1074–1084. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414545235>
- Coghlan, D., & Brydon-Miller, M. (2014). Critical friend. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research, 1*, 245–246.
- Coppola, R., Rocha, D. J., & Woodard, R. (2021). Toward a Bidirectional and Co-Constructed Mentorship: Rethinking the Mentor and Student–Teacher Relationship. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice, 70*(1), 252–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23813377211033559>
- Costa, A. L., & Kallick, B. (1993). Through the lens of a critical friend. *Educational Leadership, 51*, 49–49.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Sage
- Curry, M. (2008). Critical friends groups: The possibilities and limitations embedded in teacher professional communities aimed at instructional improvement and school reform. *Teachers college record, 110*(4), 733–774. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810811000401>
- Dennis, B. K. (2014). Understanding participant experiences: Reflections of a novice research participant. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 13*(1), 395–410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691401300121>
- Doherty, J., MacBeath, J., Jardine, S., Smith, I., & McCall, J. (2001). Do schools need critical friends. *Improving School Effectiveness, 138*–151.
- Dunn, R. (2023). Teacher Inquiry: Towards a typology of a teacher's inquiry disposition. *Professional Development in Education, 49*(5), 884–898. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1879219>
- Durand-Bush, N., Salmela, J. H., & Thompson, K. A. (2004). Le rôle joué par les parents dans le développement et le maintien de la performance athlétique experte: *Staps, n o 64*(2), 15–38. <https://doi.org/10.3917/sta.064.0015>
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building Theories from Case Study Research. *The Academy of Management Review, 14*(4), 532. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258557>

- Fletcher, A. (2019). An invited outsider or an enriched insider? Challenging contextual knowledge as a critical friend researcher. *Educational Researchers and the Regional University: Agents of Regional-Global Transformations*, 75–92.
- Gerdes, D. A., & Conn, J. H. (2001). A user-friendly look at qualitative research methods. *Physical Educator*, 58(4), 183.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Gould, D., Collins, K., Lauer, L., & Chung, Y. (2007). Coaching life skills through football: A study of award winning high school coaches. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 19(1), 16-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200601113786>
- Gould, D., Lauer, L., Rolo, C., Jannes, C., & Pennisi, N. (2008). The Role of Parents in Tennis Success: Focus Group Interviews with Junior Coaches. *The Sport Psychologist*, 22(1), 18–37. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.22.1.18>
- Guerin, B. (1999). Social behaviors as determined by different arrangements of social consequences: Social loafing, social facilitation, deindividuation, and a modified social loafing. *The Psychological Record*, 49, 565–577.
- Gurr, D., & Huerta, M. (2013). The Role of the Critical Friend in Leadership and School Improvement. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 106, 3084–3090. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.12.356>
- Hattie, J. (2015). High impact leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 72(5), 36–40.
- Kenigs, O. A., Bravo, C. V., Turra, Y., & Hernández, M. E. M. (2023). Implications of a critical friend in the resignificance of pedagogical leadership practices. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13603124.2023.2272137>
- Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Analyzing and reporting focus group results*. Sage.
- Kuckartz, U., & Rädiker, S. (2019). Analyzing Focus Group Data. In U. Kuckartz & S. Rädiker, *Analyzing Qualitative Data with MAXQDA* (pp. 201–217). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15671-8_15
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newberry Park.
- MacKenzie, B. (2015). Critical friendships for coaching and mentoring in writing. *The Future of Coaching and Mentoring: Evolution, Revolution or Extinction? Part 2*.
- MacPhail, A., Tannehill, D., & Ataman, R. (2024). The role of the critical friend in supporting and enhancing professional learning and development. *Professional Development in Education*, 50(4), 597–610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1879235>
- Morgan, D. L., Krueger, R. A., & King, J. A. (1998). *The focus group guidebook*. Sage.
- Mulford, W., & Edmunds, W. (2010). *Educational investment in Australian schooling: Serving public purposes in Tasmanian primary schools*. University Of Tasmania.
- Noe, R. A., Greenberger, D. B., & Wang, S. (2002). Mentoring: What we know and where we might go. In *Research in personnel and human resources management* (pp. 129–173). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- OECD. (2012). *Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century: Lessons from around the World* (A. Schleicher, Ed.). OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264174559-en>
- Riley, P., Rahimi, M., & Arnold, B. (2021). The New Zealand Primary Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey 2020 Data. Deakin University. <https://www.nzeiteriuroa.org.nz/assets/downloads/The-New-Zealand-Primary-Principal-Occupational-Health-Safety-and-Wellbeing-Survey-2020data-Final2.pdf>
- Robinson, V. (2007). *The impact of leadership on student outcomes: Making sense of the evidence*.

- Schuck, S. (2011). Resisting complacency: my teaching through an outsider's eyes. In Schuck, S., & Pereira, P. (eds) *What Counts in Teaching Mathematics. Self Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices* (vol 11). Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0461-9_5
- Swaffield, S., & MacBeath, J. (2005). School self-evaluation and the role of a critical friend. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 35(2), 239–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640500147037>
- Szymanski, C., Pesquita, A., Brennan, A. A., Perdakis, D., Enns, J. T., Brick, T. R., Müller, V., & Lindenberger, U. (2017). Teams on the same wavelength perform better: Inter-brain phase synchronization constitutes a neural substrate for social facilitation. *NeuroImage*, 152, 425–436. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2017.03.013>
- Urquhart, C., & Fernández, W. (2013). Using grounded theory method in information systems: The researcher as blank slate and other myths. *Journal of Information Technology*, 28(3), 224-236. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2012.34>
- Wepner, S. B., Henk, W. A., & Broege, N. (2024). Critical friend mentoring: Strategic sounding boards for academic deans. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 32(5), 553–574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2024.2372282>
- Wiesche, M., Jurisch, M. C., Yetton, P. W., & Krcmar, H. (2017). Grounded theory methodology in information systems research. *MIS Quarterly*, 41(3), 685-A9. <https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2017/41.3.02>

About the Contributor(s)

Ryan Dunn, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia. His main research interests include educational leadership and administration, middle leadership, teacher professional learning and implementation science.

Email: dunn.r@unimelb.edu.au

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5853-0739>

Note: *The opinions, statements, and data presented in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributors and do not reflect the views of Universitepark, EDUPIJ, and/or the editor(s). Universitepark, the Journal, and/or the editor(s) accept no responsibility for any harm or damage to persons or property arising from the use of ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.*
