Critical Friend Groups: The Unexpected Relationships Among Education Majors During Study Abroad

Meredith K Jones[1] & Carol P McNulty[1]

[1] College of Education, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina, USA

Correspondence: Meredith Jones, College of Education, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, N.C.., USA.

Abstract

Critical friendship is an innovative method used to strengthen an individual's professional skills, including critical reflection, thinking, and problem-solving abilities in educational settings. Critical friendships can occur through one-on-one relationships or in groups known as critical friendship groups (CFGs). Literature on CFGs examines the benefits of structured CFGs integrated into teacher preparation programs. CFGs that form beyond university walls, like a study abroad context, have not been discussed in the literature even though these experiences can be the catalyst for CFGs. This case study illustrates how a CFG was formed during a study abroad trip to Belize with undergraduate and graduate education students that resulted in five major findings. Implications for both teacher education and study abroad programs are discussed.

Keywords: critical friendship groups, preservice teachers, study abroad, international, higher education

1. Introduction

Critical Friendship (CF) is an innovative method used to strengthen individuals' professional skills like critical reflection, thinking, and problem-solving abilities in educational settings. Critical friendships can occur through one-on-one relationships or in groups known as critical friendship groups (CFGs). Much of the literature on CFGs examines the benefits of structured CFGs integrated into teacher preparation programs or other educational settings like school systems. For example, van Swet et al. (2009) found that structured CFGs with graduate students and mentors enhanced and supported graduate student's completion of their theses. Caudle et al. (2017) noted pre-service teachers (PSTs) who participated in a virtual CFG demonstrated deeper reflection compared to their peers who did not participate. In Fahey's (2011) research on CFGs for school district leaders, principals strengthened their leadership skills by participating in the CFG. However, less is reported on critical friendships that emerge spontaneously and informally.

The purpose of this study, as framed by our research question, was, what are the experiences of graduate students who informally created Critical Friendship Groups (CFG) during a short-term study abroad program? The question emerged as the first author accompanied graduate and undergraduate students in education programs on a study-abroad experience to Belize, where all students worked toward a common goal of a service-learning project in the community – a language and literacy camp for young children in San Pedro, Belize. We were particularly interested in graduate students' perspective of the experience. At the time, these students were enrolled in an early childhood education leadership program. The following case study presents findings of seven graduate students' perspectives resulting from involvement in critical friendships that emerged during the study-abroad experience.

The CFG evolved naturally as the graduate students, who were all employed and experienced educators, assumed a critical friend role by engaging undergraduate preservice teachers in thoughtful reflection and dialogue throughout the lesson planning and implementation process. They provided constructive criticism of their work and solicited reflective feedback from the undergraduates about their learning experiences.

The Critical Friends Model was developed in 1994 out of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University as an educational reform to professional development (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997; School Reform Initiative, 2010). It aligns with the broader context of social constructivist theory popularized by theorists such as John Dewey (1938), Lev Vygotsky (1978), and Jerome Bruner (1966). Such theorists believed

that optimal learning occurs in a social, interactive process by which the sharing of ideas and understandings results in the creation of new knowledge, or the deepening of existing knowledge. The Critical Friends Model propels the notions asserted by social constructivist theorists by structuring deliberate time to reflect and collaborate on professional growth that is directly linked to student learning. It is of importance to note that in this model, the word "critical" is used as a synonym for "essential" or "important."

Various researchers have characterized and defined Critical Friend Groups (CFG). For example, Costa and Kallick (1993) note that Critical Friends (CF) include trust, provocative questioning, an alternative perspective, and constructive critique and advocacy for group members. Swaffield (2008) describes a CF as someone who provides both support and challenge within a relationship that may be one-to-one or include multiple people working together. Swaffield also notes a CF is concerned with both the learning of the person or people they engage with directly and the success of the project's goal. Curry (2008) describes a CFG as a space where educators work collaboratively, develop a shared mission, offer strong support, and nurture a learning community. The relationship between the members of a CFG must be one where open and honest communication can occur to create an opportunity for the critical friend to question and offer critique. At the same time, the recipient is open and receptive to their feedback. This element of mutual trust is paramount for effective professional learning and development (MacPhail et al., 2021). Once trust is established, people in the group are more likely to be vulnerable with each other and willing to share their personal experiences and perspectives (Appleget et al., 2020).

Critical Friends has been used to strengthen pre-service teachers' critical reflection on their professional practice in teacher preparation programs, largely because the model can help identify one's underlying assumptions that drive teachers' actions and draw upon the reflective practice that is deeply enriched by learning from experience (Fuentealba Jara & Russell, 2023). Gonzalez Smith (2019) explored four undergraduate teacher candidates engaged in critical friendship to reflect on personally recorded instruction videos delivered to elementary-age English Language Learners. Findings from this study note that the teacher candidates strengthened their reflection on teaching English as a second language by participating in the structured CFGs (Gonzalez Smith, 2019). Bognar and Krumes (2017) examined the benefits of CFGs conducted through the learning management system Moodle with pre-service teachers (PSTs). Students reported a positive experience participating in the CFG and recommended critical friendship discussions be included in other teacher education courses (Bognar & Krumes, 2017). Finally, Behizadeh et al. (2019) found CFGs provided a space for PSTs to engage in collaborative reflection and critical thinking as part of their professional skills. In their study, participants demonstrated critical reflection and problem-solving skills.

Fahey (2011) found through a case study that early career school leaders benefited from CFGs that led to an increased understanding of the complexity with which they viewed leadership, determined clearer connections between organizational theory and practice, understood and valued the CFG, and improved their teaching practices. Some research (Henriksen, 2021) has suggested that the use of Critical Friends can also enhance the development of school leaders, such as principals, when paired with superintendents, given the importance of a shared vison and goals. In all cases, the use of Critical Friends has opened a needed space for dialogue, reflection, and opportunities to refine practice or performance.

These studies highlight the benefits of critical friendship in traditional teacher preparation and educational settings. However, this study utilized critical friendships that were formed beyond university walls, in a study abroad context, as an additional means of creating unique learning opportunities and experiences. We offer this context as another consideration for those working with preservice teachers as ways to expand their current understanding of CFGs.

International programming provides students opportunities to create new perspectives, develop interests in political, cultural, and global issues, and cultivate an increased appreciation for linguistic and cultural diversity (Müller, 2023). Such experiences, even short ones, can contribute to educators' development of global competencies, that are so imperative as classrooms becomes increasingly culturally diverse (Arthur et al., 2020). Likewise, an added benefit is that students build relationships and interactions with people with whom they may otherwise never engage. Depending on the goal of the trip, study abroad programs can offer a unique environment for students to work collaboratively and learn from each other. As reflected in Urlaub and Essein's (2023) study of an undergraduate 8-week study abroad experience, some of the most valuable learning occurs in the field rather than in the classroom, particularly with focus on a shared project. Ray's (2006) investigation on adult participants on study abroad trips notes that participants reported greater levels of trust among students on the study abroad trip and utilized each other as resources which provided a variety of perspectives beyond information provided solely by the instructor. Similarly, Lalley (2009) noted that students who participated in a

short-term study abroad course reported they were surprised by the unexpected positive group experiences. Students reported a stronger sense of comradery as they successfully acted as a team to make decisions and felt they built strong connections with one another because they shared common goals (Lalley). Finally, Coryell (2011) explored interpersonal learning through observations during group reflection time throughout a study abroad trip. Findings from this study suggested the relationships between students created rich opportunities for learning (Coryell, 2011).

2. Method

Because international study trips can vary in purpose and design, and a case study design by nature is unique in its context and dependent on rich description (Stake, 2008), below we offer a descriptive narrative to better understand this case. Specifically, we share descriptions of the following: the location chosen for the study-abroad experience and the purpose of the trip, the structure of the literacy camp, and a description of the trip participants, from which the study participants were derived.

2.1 Description of the Study Abroad Trip and Camp

Students and faculty from two universities traveled to San Pedro, Belize. Midwestern University (pseudonym) took six undergraduate students and one faculty member from their teacher preparation program. Students from Midwestern University ranged in their experience working in the field of early childhood education. A few students had recently completed their first few courses in the program, and others would begin student teaching the following academic year, however, the majority of students were in the middle of their teacher preparation programs. Most of these students knew each other as classmates. All students from Midwestern University reported this travel experience as their first out of the United States.

The second university, Southeastern University, took eleven graduate students and two faculty members. These students represented the following fields within education: teaching English as a second language, elementary education, and leadership in early childhood education. Students from Southeastern University all had professional experience in their respective fields and had varying experiences traveling abroad. Interestingly, none of the students from Southeastern University knew each other in person, as each of their respective programs were primarily conducted in an asynchronous online format. Students had some limited knowledge of each other from online course interactions but did not know each other beyond those interactions.

Officials from Belize's Ministry of Education and university faculty agreed that the primary focus of this study abroad trip was to provide a literacy camp for preschool-aged children in San Pedro. The Ministry of Education assumed responsibility for promoting the camp to families, determining the camp location, and providing snacks for the children. The Ministry of Education decided to hold the camp at one of the local high schools in the central part of downtown San Pedro so that it would be easily accessible and within walking distance for most families. The university students (with faculty oversight) were responsible for the planning, organization, and implementation of the literacy camp learning activities.

All students attended virtual pre-departure meetings via Zoom and were informed of the required assignments to earn course credit. These included planning and implementing daily literacy sessions for the camp, keeping a travel blog or journal, and writing a reflective paper at the conclusion of the trip. The pre-departure-meetings oriented students to the culture of Belize, reviewed the logistics of the trip, and allowed time for students to prepare activities and lessons for the campers. Students worked in pairs to plan literacy lessons and activities for preschool age children. It was during the pre-departure meetings that all students learned there was a mix of undergraduates and graduates participating in the experience. However, there was no mention of mentoring or critical friendship among the group. Once in Belize, the students met with the faculty members daily to debrief and discuss their reflections of camp each day and agree on any necessary adjustments needed for the following day. Several group meals were provided throughout the trip, but most meals were arranged independently by the students. Bicycles were the primary mode of transportation around the island and students were encouraged to explore the local community during their free time. Cultural excursions took place on Friday and Saturday and included trips to both historical and tourist destinations.

The camp was structured to hold daily morning and afternoon sessions, Monday through Thursday, for two weeks. Children could attend one or both sessions. Each day of the camp included a teacher-led, whole group segment, which consisted of a structured literacy lesson around skills such as story recall, vocabulary, and using pictures as context clues. Small group lessons followed, which were learner-focused, and included hands-on, interactive learning activities, such as working with playdough to form letters, or using puppets to retell a story. Students from the U.S. formed teams consisting of one undergraduate and one graduate student, and teams took turns leading the planning and teaching of the daily literacy camp activities. All students were present each day

and if not leading the lessons, acted as supports for the instructional activities.

At the conclusion of each day, the university faculty members met with the U.S. students to prompt reflection. These informal meetings were held around a picnic table on the school grounds. Debriefing questions included, for example, "What went well today in the whole/small group(s)?" and, "What should we do differently tomorrow?" Such reflection provided a chance for the day's leaders to both offer their reflections and hear suggestions from their peers, which in turn served to better prepare the next day's leaders to implement any needed adjustments. It also modeled for undergraduate students who were learning to teach, how such daily reflection can and should result in immediate modification of daily lesson plans. After the instructional debrief, at some point during the evening, the university instructors held individual conversations with the graduate students to discuss "how it was going" with their teammates, thus using this time to discuss leadership skills. These discussions were less structured, and took place, for example, over meals, on walks, or while relaxing in the common room.

2.2 Participants

Seven graduate students from Southeastern University enrolled in an early childhood leadership program – the same program researcher one teaches in – were invited to participate in this study. The first researcher planned on conducting a study with the students from her program to learn about how this study abroad opportunity impacted or strengthened their leadership skills in relation to their program of study. University IRB permission was obtained prior to the study abroad trip. Participant descriptions are included in the findings section.

2.3 Research Design

Peel (2020) asserts that case study research is "an appropriate approach for meeting the purpose of applied research intended to provide a rigorous, ethical exploration within contemporary educational contexts" (p. 2). A case study design provided us opportunities to collect a broad spectrum of rich data to better understand participants' perceptions and practices of serving as a critical friend during the study abroad trip (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2017). A two-week study abroad experience to Belize served as our "case," which was bounded by a particular time and place (Merriam, 2007; Yin, 2017), and allowed us to examine multiple rich sources of data provided by our participants. As such, participants were able to "tell their story" (Tannebaum & Cridland-Huges, 2015) through multiple data sources that included artifacts such as trip blogs, photos, videos, and final reflection papers, however our primary data source derived from the focus group interviews that were conducted at the conclusion of the trip.

The first author conducted the focus group with the participants on the last full day of the international experience in Belize. The focus group was conducted at the same picnic table at the school that was used for the daily debriefing. It was a semi-private location where participants felt free to share their thoughts. The focus group lasted for approximately 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Participants responded to questions about their intentions for the group conversations and interactions, for example, by answering, "Did you enter the experience with a sense of responsibility for mentoring the less experienced undergraduate teacher education students?" The researcher also encouraged elaboration on topics that were mentioned during the focus group. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

2.4 Data Analysis

We systematically organized the data and conducted thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to determine patterns in the data. Thematic analysis is a flexible method, one not tied directly to a particular epistemology or theoretical framework. The authors conducted the analysis independently at first, and then came together for discussion and comparison. First, we compared memos that we noted in the margins of the transcripts and discussed the inductive codes we assigned. We completed a side-by-side comparison of the codes (and code descriptions) we noted independently, along with the corresponding supporting data. Then we compared the categories we created from the codes. From this process of data reduction (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Miles et al., 2019), we were more easily able to make sense of the data, that ultimately led us to final overarching themes. Though our independent reviews resulted in different descriptive words, the meanings and generated themes were very similar and needed little refinement. Through our discussions, we clarified the categories and themes, ultimately resulting in the final five themes provided. The sections below discuss these findings of graduate students' perceptions of the critical friend relationships.

3. Findings and Discussion

The recognition, emergence, and strength of critical friendships among students evolved over the course of the trip. Interestingly, most graduates did not recognize themselves as mentors or leaders throughout these

conversations, as they were more focused on the impact of the learning experiences of the campers. They practically dismissed their roles as mentors to developing teachers because they felt like they were simply doing what needed to be done to ensure campers' learning. For most participants, it was not until the focus group that they began to fully articulate their roles as leaders and mentors. Participants identified five essential "ingredients" to the success of their Critical Friend Groups, and we have framed them here as dichotomies to emphasize the power that the CFGs played in relation to a traditional mentoring experience. The themes are: Critical Friends were necessary, but not planned; Critical Friend feedback was intentional, yet informal; Critical Friends served as confidants, not evaluators; and Critical Friends were reciprocal, not unidirectional.

3.1 Critical Friends Were Necessary, but Not Planned

Participants collectively responded that they did not think about assuming this role until the first day of camp. Participants noted they were primarily focused on tasks that needed to be completed before the trip, not necessarily what would occur during the trip. For example, Noelle (pseudonym), a coordinator for a state level organization with over 20 years of experience in the field of early childhood education, stated,

> Honestly, before I left home, I wasn't thinking about mentoring the undergraduates. I didn't think about it until we got to Belize. Leading up to this trip I was in survival mode making sure I got everything done and organized. I was focused on completing my assignments for the semester, work responsibilities, and making sure my family's needs were in order before I left.

Other participants agreed with Noelle's statement as they were all faced with school and work responsibilities before leaving, and most had families to consider.

Some participants discussed how their work is typically dependent on their own actions, so naturally they were more focused on completing tasks for the pre-departure meeting, rather than necessarily making sure the undergraduate students had a chance to contribute to the lesson planning. During the focus group, Desiree, a research assistant on an early childhood project at a state university with seven years of experience in the field, reflected on her preference to work independently on the lesson plans needed for the pre-departure meeting. Through this self-reflection she realized this was an area of professional growth for her. She said,

> For me, when we were told we were going to work in groups, that really stressed me out at first. Like in class, when you assign a group project, I'm the one asking if it can be done independently. In my job I work alone and work at home by myself and I'm just used to doing everything on my own. I had to get used to working in a group and leading camp with others. When we were working on our lesson plans for the pre-departure meetings, I wrote the whole thing by myself and literally didn't give her [undergraduate partner] a whole day to respond to my email. I texted her that I sent it to her and before the day was over, I already finished it. I know that is something I need to work on professionally… making sure everyone has a chance to contribute instead of doing it all on my own. I was not thinking about how I could help her [undergraduate partner].

Once the first day of camp was under way, the graduate students quickly realized they needed to provide some guidance or support for the undergraduates to make the most impact for the children with whom they would work. The graduate students knew the undergraduates were pre-service teachers, however they did not necessarily realize how inexperienced they were until the first day of camp. University faculty coached and modeled for the undergraduates as needed but the graduate students also had a personal investment in ensuring the undergraduates were successful at operating the camp, because they were collectively responsible for ensuring the success of the camp, ensuring a smooth operation with engaged children. Several participants described situations where the undergraduates noticed the graduate students were more successful at redirecting children, but the undergraduates also wanted to "prove themselves" to the graduate students. Ramira, a pre-kindergarten teacher assistant with eight years of experience in the field, noted,

> … the undergraduates were struggling when the kids were running all over the place and they would say, "catch that kid!" but then they saw how we [more experienced teachers] had the children under control. They looked at us like, "How are you able to do that?"

Desiree added, "The first couple of days they [undergraduates] were trying to figure it out on their own like, "We gonna get this!" but when they saw it wasn't working that changed real quick. They had a look of "somebody come help me!"

The first day of camp provided numerous opportunities for the graduate students to recognize the role they needed to assume to help the undergraduates. The participants discussed that they felt it was their responsibility to provide help and guidance to the undergraduates that was different from what faculty were providing in

university coursework. Although they did not explicitly define their help akin to Critical Friends, they described their role using similar language to that of researchers defining Critical Friends. For example, participants stated how they felt it was important to balance being friendly and supportive while still providing constructive feedback.

3.2 Critical Friend Feedback was Intentional, Yet Informal

Friendships were formed because students shared rooms, ate most meals together, worked the literacy camp together, and went on cultural excursions together. Building on these friendships, the graduate students described how they saw an opportunity to be a Critical Friend. They found themselves in a position to offer critical and constructive feedback to the undergraduates while still being friendly. Graduate students noted how they knew they were in a position to give this critical feedback because of their experience in the field and they could provide it in a more informal way than the feedback from university faculty. The participants described specific examples of when they noticed a shift in their thinking to provide intentional critical friendship for the undergraduates. John, a director of an early childhood resource program with 15 years of experience in the field, discussed how the undergraduates initially deferred to the graduate students and waited to be told what to do and how he recognized the need to be intentional with his instruction or feedback. He noted,

> I thought it was interesting that some of the undergrads were almost deferring to us in an unspoken way…just waiting for us to tell them what to do. I think being in positions of leadership we are used to that so I just fell into that role then I took a minute to remind myself, "No, I need to take a minute and have her [the undergraduate] tell me what *she* would need to do in this situation to be successful." So that was interesting.

Wendy, an early care and education manager with over 15 years in the field who joined the group in Belize a few days late, shared a similar sentiment on how she viewed her role and how she provided feedback to the undergraduate students. She said,

> I wanted to share with the undergraduates what I saw them doing well so they could hear positive feedback from someone other than their instructor. Like, "hey, I overheard your interaction with that child, and you did a nice job of redirecting the child." I would call it appreciative leadership. I enjoyed watching them and seeing the different stages they were at in their career.

Mandisa, an executive director of a child development center with 13 years of experience in the field, shared,

> I did see myself as a mentor because I feel like that is my job in life, no matter where I am or what I am doing my job is to empower someone else. It wasn't like "we are better than them." They looked at us like "what trick can you show us? What tool do you have that can help me?" I tried to put myself in their shoes and thought about "what would I want? What would help me different from what an instructor can show me?"

Noelle shared similar thoughts as the other participants and described what it was like for her to figure out how she wanted to approach her feedback and interactions with the undergraduates especially when speaking to the camp children and using a positive tone. She noted,

> The interesting thing for me when observing some of the undergrad students who have not had classroom experience…they were really struggling with "how do I say this, what do I do?" I think all of us experienced frustration just trying to figure things out. I just tried to make sure I used appropriate language with children, you know use an assertive voice when they were doing something unsafe. So, when I had an undergraduate with me, I tried to model my interactions with children and really talk things through without being directive or explicitly saying, "you need to do it this way" or I would ask questions. Like, "do you think this child has ever been to school before? I'm not so sure…" to try to get the undergraduate to take a different perspective.

Noelle then described the first day she and her undergraduate partner led the whole group activities for camp. She said,

> The first day I was a camp leader with an undergrad, she [the undergraduate student] had never led a group time before so it was her very first. So, no pressure there {laughing}…you have three professors watching you and all these other adults watching and a whole camp of children. She said something to me, right before we walked up to lead the group time. She said, "I've never led a group time before." So, I stopped and said to myself, "ok, we have to adjust how we will do this." I told her, "We have two opportunities to do a read-aloud today. I can do the first one and you can help facilitate. The second one, you do it, and I'll facilitate." That made her feel like, "okay, I can breathe a little." That night she and I chatted about the day.

> We talked about what she observed me do, what went well while she led camp, and what she can do differently. It felt very comfortable and non-threatening while I gave her feedback. I think that day brought the two of us closer.

Through their reflections, the participants illustrated that they were assuming a critical friendship role as defined by Costa and Kallick (1993). They were mindful in asking provocative questions to the undergraduates rather than giving them the information and became aware of the unique role they were in on the trip.

3.3 Critical Friends Were Confidants, Not Evaluators

As the trip progressed, the undergraduates began confiding in the graduate students regarding typical challenges college students face. This included confiding to graduates about being nervous when debriefing with university faculty and seeking advice on assignments related to the trip. Mandisa noted this by saying,

> The undergraduates were really nervous when writing their blogs for this trip. They would ask us [graduate students] to read their blogs and to let them know if they were on the right track. I would say we were very encouraging to them and would give them positive feedback or encourage them to think about something deeper. We would ask them questions about things that happened that day at camp and have them reflect on the experience. I felt comfortable with this because that is part of my job at home. I also feel like no matter where I am or what I am doing I find myself empowering others. So, when the undergraduates asked us for help about basic stuff that comes with being a college student, I was happy to let them know, "I know what you're going through…" I think we were all happy to listen and to show compassion.

Marie, a pre-kindergarten teacher with five years of experience, added to Mandisa's comments as she reflected on how nervous the undergraduates were before debriefing at the end of the day. Debriefs included a large group debrief with all students and university faculty. The undergraduates also had individual debriefing sessions with their university instructor on the days when they led camp. Marie added,

> The undergraduates were so nervous to debrief with their instructor at the end of each day. They were nervous about debriefing as a whole and individually. They were so stressed out and negative about the situation. We tried to uplift them before their individual debriefs with their instructor. I understood what they were feeling. It is definitely stressful when you aren't used to getting individual feedback from your instructor about your teaching. I remember being in their shoes. It was through these conversations with the undergraduates that we realized how much they looked up to us and trusted us.

Through these reflections, the participants describe the trust that was built between the graduates and undergraduates. Aligned with Costa and Kallick's (1993) definition of critical friendship, participants were careful to provide critiques and feedback in a friendly manner different from the feedback they perceived provided by university faculty.

3.4 Critical Friends Were Reciprocal, Not Unidirectional

As the undergraduates confided in and displayed trust in the graduate students, the graduate students also began to view the undergraduates as Critical Ffriends. The graduates began to explicitly ask undergraduates for feedback on how activities and lessons went at camp and encouraged them to provide constructive criticism as needed. This also required patience and prompting from the graduate students, but they recognized this was a skill set the undergraduates could benefit from practicing. Not surprisingly, most of the undergraduate students had not experienced opportunities to give others constructive criticism, especially outside of the university classroom. This eventually led to a reciprocal critical friendship relationship. John explained how he encouraged undergraduates to give him more meaningful feedback rather than superficial. He also noted that he deliberately wanted to give the student credit for the idea during a whole group debriefs. He described,

> At first it was like pulling teeth to get them to give us any feedback beyond "it was great! It was great!" but then they did and the feedback they gave us was really insightful. For example, [undergraduate] said, "You should put the chairs in a horseshoe to get them [children] to participate more." We used her suggestion, and it worked really well. I wanted to make sure I acknowledged her and gave her credit for that idea during the whole group debrief. I thought by recognizing her in front of the whole group this could boost her confidence and help her see that she, and the other undergraduates, had valuable feedback and ideas that strengthened our task at hand.

Marie also discussed how she encouraged her undergraduate partner to give her critical feedback while working together at camp every day. She stated,

> In the second week of camp, my undergrad partner nervously made a suggestion about a math activity we

were doing with the children. As she worked with a child, she adapted the instructions of the activity to meet the needs of the child. She noticed the child I was working with wasn't as engaged and she suggested I took her advice and adapted the activity the way she did, and it worked out great. When we had a moment together after the activity, I thanked her for the suggestion and told her to please give me any other pointers because she also has good ideas. She was receptive to this and seemed to be more willing to offer me suggestions. I don't know if this made us equal in the level of feedback, we were giving each other, but I did feel that our relationship was more reciprocal.

These comments illustrate how the participants recognized that they could further strengthen their relationship with the undergraduates, and the overall camp experience, by encouraging the undergraduates to offer suggestions and feedback on their performance. Additionally, these reflections illustrated how participants were deliberate in advocating for, and acknowledging, the undergraduates in the whole group debriefs.

4. Implications for Practice

Over the duration of this two-week experience, critical friendships evolved between graduate and undergraduate students. This evolution began by graduate students recognizing the need for critical friendship, then acting intentionally as a mentor, followed by the undergraduates exhibiting trust in the graduate students by confiding and seeking advice from them, and finally, the undergraduates reciprocating critical friendship. The dichotomies that we emphasized in the themes are essential to the success of the Critical Friend Model success in this particular case. The more traditional elements of mentoring, while useful in many settings, would not have had the major impact it did, had the mentoring not been adapted as it was in this study abroad experience.

Even though participants did not set out to create Critical Friend Groups, they were quickly established. The trip leaders facilitated the planning and teaching interactions of the literacy camp, and the reflections of teaching in such a way that CFGs naturally resulted. Thus, this international teaching experience proved to be a positive learning experience for both groups of students. The undergraduates benefited from these relationships as they received informal yet critical feedback and support on their teaching practice from more knowledgeable peers who held no formal evaluative role. This feedback was viewed as equally or more valuable as the feedback provided by university faculty. Particularly, the participants of this study benefited by engaging in critical reflection of their own leadership skills and identified learning outcomes of their graduate program. We note several implications for teacher-educator programs.

4.1 Introduce Critical Friends Groups Early

Although this case study was uniquely defined by a time and place, findings and interpretations may apply to teacher preparation programs and university study abroad programs in many settings. CFGs are valuable for creating opportunities for pre-service teachers to engage in critical reflection, dialogue, and critical thinking (Carlson, 2019). These groups can enhance student learning during field experiences like internships and student teaching requirements. However, for groups to be most successful, the introduction of CFGs should happen early in the teacher preparation program (Carlson, 2019). Students need opportunities to practice critical dialogue and reflection in classes leading to their internship or student teaching experience. This is particularly important for undergraduates, as illustrated by students on this trip who had never experienced giving critical feedback to peers before. Further, trust and openness are key features of successful CFGs. Students in teacher preparation programs need opportunities to work together to begin building trust with each other.

Likewise, while partnership teachers can and do serve as valuable mentors to student interns, we can also see the value from this study in interns developing CFGs with experienced teachers who hold no evaluative position. Undergraduate students in this study found it useful to share their apprehensions and concerns in ways they might not be willing to if they perceived they must show their mentor their "best performance." Traditionally, the partnership/mentor teacher plays a key role in determining the student intern's final grade as well as the primary source of all daily and summative feedback. Teacher education programs should consider facilitating ways for interns to solicit multiple opportunities and sources of feedback on their teaching that includes other teachers, recent graduates, administrators, and peers (Harlin, 2000; Lammert & Tily, 2022). Building authentic relationships with such mentors can serve undergraduates in ways that university supervisors and assigned partnership teachers may not be able to, given the power dynamics at play.

4.2 Pair Graduate and Undergraduate Students

The relationships described in this study highlight the value in having undergraduate and graduate students working together when they are in the same professional field. Such studies have been well-documented in areas outside of education. For example, ElZomor et al. (2018) reported in their study, which paired undergraduate and

graduate engineering students, that the framework influenced persistence in the career for the undergraduate students and both populations reported growth in professional skills related to career development. Similar positive results were noted by Bendickson et al. (2020), who reported improved student learning outcomes for undergraduate students and increased mentoring and leadership skills for graduate business students who were paired for an entrepreneurship pitch competition. Not only would undergraduate students' teaching benefit from such relationships but working together would provide a window into the instructional decisions that teachers grapple with and insight into their decision making based on experience. The opportunities for graduate students to develop skills in mentoring and leadership are often those targeted in graduate education programs.

As noted in this study, graduate students who have years of experience in the field offered unique feedback and insight in the field that differed from university faculty, which can sometimes elicit a variety of emotions including disappointment and frustration (Mahfoodh, 2017). CFGs can offer bi-directional benefits to those who engage (Holvikivi, 2019). Teacher preparation programs should consider ways to provide additional mentorship programs between graduate and undergraduate programs of study that would enhance the learning of both groups of students. Integrating graduate and undergraduate education students may not be that challenging. For example, preservice teachers could simply be paired with a graduate student for a semester, and work side by side in the development of unit and lesson plans. This would be particularly helpful as PSTs engage in instructional design and methods courses. Through the use of technology, there are no geographical limitations. While the PSTs can work with a non-evaluative critical friend, the seasoned teachers can reflect on their mentoring, coaching, and leadership skill development. Likewise, these pairs could together watch video recorded lessons of practically any teaching segment and discuss the instructional delivery in all aspects. While students would both be engaged in parallel instruction in their courses, these one-on-one Critical Friend sessions would effectively mirror the real-world for both parties.

4.3 Intentional Planning for Mentoring in Study Abroad Programs

Implications for university study abroad programs can also be gleaned from this study. We contend that international teaching opportunities can serve as a catalyst for reaching many of the objectives we strive for in the teacher preparation classroom. Though study abroad trips for educators may not happen with the same frequency as other disciplines given the complex licensing requirements for preservice teachers and the demanding schedule of practicing teachers, research suggests that when such experiences are conducted, they can be particularly impactful for educators (Okken, 2019). Results such as increased self-efficacy, appreciation for curricular materials, exploration of teaching methods, and increased competence in teaching diverse students, have all been cited in the literature and were also reported by the participants of this study. Teaching students effectively requires skills in cultural competence (Gay, 2000) as well as an international orientation needed to work with diverse children of many backgrounds (Huberts, 2016).

Findings from this study echo Croyell's (2011) study suggesting collaborative group experiences conducted abroad allow for trip participants to co-construct new knowledge and perspectives. Students will share resources, tools, experiences, and be required to problem solve within their group; in this study specifically a CFG. University faculty leading study abroad programs should consider applied learning experiences that be a focus, or at least a main component, of the program (Croyell, 2011). Further, this study reports similar findings to Roy (2006), Lalley (2009), Coryell (2011), and Baker and Coryell (2017) that suggests study abroad trips provide opportunities for students to connect deeply with one another thus creating the opportunity for more candid conversations regarding learning, trust, and openness to different perspectives. DeJordy et al. (2020) suggest that these social networks contribute positively to perceptions of international experiences as well as achievement of learning outcomes (including increased intercultural sensitivities) no matter the age, gender, or other demographics of the participants. Similar to Baker and Coryell (2017), students in this study formed stronger bonds in part because they shared lodging and ate meals together. The friendships that were formed were strengthened due to the informal conversations and time spent together during leisure time on the trip. Not only is shared lodging a financial benefit to students, but it also quickly fosters collaborative relationships.

5. Limitations and Future Research

While this study highlights numerous benefits to how an informal CFG strengthened the experience for students on this study abroad trip, there are several limitations that should be considered. The reflections and data represent only a portion of the students on the trip. The selection of participants was deliberate as we wanted to learn about the leadership skills among students in the graduate program, however, the addition of the perspectives of the undergraduate students may provide valuable insight into how they experienced the CF relationships. Having both data sets would not only contextualize the data but would help us draw important

comparisons. This study was reliant on the graduate students' perceptions and thus all data was filtered through their interpretations. In further studies, we would want to ascertain how undergraduate students perceived the CFGs impacted their professional development. Additionally, conducting this research with graduate students from other education programs (specifically those not focused on leadership skills) could provide insight as to how they viewed their role and relationship with the undergraduate students, and whether this experience was beneficial to their own leadership development in education.

This study contributes to an existing dearth of literature examining the use of Critical Friends in short-term study abroad experiences, particularly those focused on teaching experiences. This study has clearly indicated the value of such, and as a result, we encourage teacher educators to find ways to creatively engage students who have a range in experience, skills, and abilities in projects that can lead to organic learning from each other.

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