

Critical Friend Intimacy and Individual Transformations

Melva R. Grant & Signe E. Kastberg

Critical Friends

Intimacy

Identity Transformation

We have been investigating how critical friendships develop and we found that our critical friendship evolved in ways that went beyond what is in the self-study teacher and teacher education practices (S-STEP) foundational research literature. We continue to wonder about the power of critical friendship for supporting individual transformation. This paper is an elaboration about the essence of critical friend intimacy and its complicity in influencing individual transformations by those in the relationship. We examined S-STEP literature to determine how critical friend intimacy is discussed and if others connected it to individual transformations. We found 13 refereed empirical S-STEP reports from the Studying Teacher Education journal about critical friendships for our interpretive qualitative study to address our research question. We found examples of critical friend intimacy within this literature, and we found evidence of others reporting connections between intimate critical friendships and individual transformations. However, the norms of S-STEP reporting disguise these examples and evidence. We share implications of this research and offer opportunities for future research.

Context

We are two critical friends who have been investigating how critical friendships develop. We found that our critical friendship seemed to evolve in ways that went beyond those described by the critical friend self-study teacher and teacher education practices (S-STEP) foundational research literature (e.g., Shuck & Russell, 2005; Stolle et al., 2019). In our initial report, we investigated our critical friendship using characteristics found in the literature, such as engaging in honest communication, listening, and valuing one another's perspectives, but also being critical (e.g., Costa & Kallick, 1993). We noticed that our relationship evidenced two new critical friendship characteristics – significant otherness (i.e., a desire to emulate another) and conversation residue (i.e., conversation(s) that inspires agency) – that we credited as supporting professional identity transformation (Kastberg & Grant, 2020). After additional analysis of our data corpus of recorded critical friend conversations and new conversations about recollections from key moments in our critical friendship, we recognized the space created by our friendship as racialized. This recognition promoted acceptance and curiosity about the racialized nature and implications of our relationship. Our inquiry into the racialized space created by our critical friendship included that our relationship had evolved with substantive intimacy. Such critical friend intimacy enabled us to share in racialized conversations freely and without risk and led to one of us experiencing an identity transformation toward antiracist praxis (Berman & Paradies, 2010). The adoption of an antiracist praxis can be directly linked to key experiences during the development of our critical friendship (Grant & Kastberg, 2022). Since then, we have been wondering about the power of critical friendship to support individual transformation.

Aim/Objective

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on the essence of critical friend intimacy and its complicity in influencing or supporting individual transformations by those in the relationship. All critical friendships are not equivalent (Bullock, 2020), even though many critical friendships share similar characteristics and performative processes with respect to the S-STEP literature (Stolle, et al., 2019). Bullock (2020) identified ways that critical friendships may involve “boundary crossings” including social, conceptual, and institutional (when friends are geographically distanced) that render the friends to be more vulnerable. While our past research findings about critical friendship were specific, contextual, and likely different from others, the essence of our critical friendship that led to transformations and praxis is not unique. Our critical friendship supported individual transformations and praxis through intimacy that emerged after professional identity façades were abandoned (Grant & Kastberg, 2022). In addition, our critical friend intimacy was supported by what we termed transformative characteristics, significant otherness (i.e., a desire to emulate another), and conversation residue (i.e., conversation(s) that inspires agency) (Grant & Kastberg, 2022; Kastberg & Grant, 2020). We found that members of intimate critical friendships experience deeper and more substantive conversations that incite an individual's desire for change with sufficient agentic potential for transformation. Conversely, when there is insufficient critical friend intimacy, that agentic impetus for change may be forfeited or perhaps lacks sufficient agentic potential to manifest as transformation.

In this paper, we examined S-STEP literature to determine how critical friend intimacy is discussed and if other researchers have connected critical friendships to individual transformations. Such findings would strengthen our claim of connections between critical friend intimacy and individual transformations. And support calls for further and more detailed descriptions of the role of critical friendship in self-study methodology (Bullock, 2020).

The questions that guide this S-STEP literature-based inquiry include: (a) What is the essence of critical friend intimacy in the S-STEP research literature? (b) What evidence exists in the S-STEP literature that connects critical friend intimacy and transformation of individuals in these intimate relationships?

Methods

Our research approach was qualitative and interpretive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We searched the *Studying Teacher Education* journal as the primary source of peer-reviewed S-STEP reports of empirical studies about critical friendships. We found 13 articles that included “Critical Friend(s)” or “Critical Friendship(s)” prominently featured in the title. Our effort was to identify contemporary peer-reviewed articles with descriptions of critical friendship rather than to conduct a systematic review.

Table 1

Critical Friendship Empirical Studies from Studying Teacher Education Journal

Author(s) (date)	Title (Vol. #, No. #)
Schuck & Russell (2005)	Self-Study, Critical Friendship, and the Complexities of Teacher Education (Vol. 1, No. 2)
Loughran & Brubaker (2015)	Working with a Critical Friend: A Self-study of Executive Coaching (Vol. 11, No. 3)
Fletcher, Chróinín, & O’Sullivan (2016)	A Layered Approach to Critical Friendship as a Means to Support Pedagogical Innovation in Pre-service Teacher Education (Vol. 12, No.3)
Martin & Russell (2018)	Supervising the Teacher Education Practicum: A Self-Study with a Critical Friend (Vol. 14, No. 3)

Author(s) (date)	Title (Vol. #, No. #)
Sabatier & Bullock (2018)	Living in Plurilingual Spaces: Self-Study, Critical Friendship, and the Plurality of Publics (Vol. 14, No. 3)
O'Dwyer, Bowles, & Chróinín (2019)	Supporting Collaborative Self-Study: An Exploration of Internal and External Critical Friendships (Vol. 15, No. 2)
Olan & Edge (2019)	Collaborative Meaning-Making and Dialogic Interactions in Critical Friends as Co-Authors (Vol. 15, No. 1)
Stolle, Frambaugh-Kritzer, Freese, & Persson (2019)	Investigating Critical Friendship: Peeling Back the Layers (Vol. 15, No. 1)
Appelget, Shimek, Myers, & Hogue (2020)	A Collaborative Self-Study with Critical Friends: Culturally Proactive Pedagogies in Literacy Methods Courses (Vol. 16, No. 1)
Baker & Bitto (2021)	Fostering a Critical Friendship between a Program Coordinator and an Online Adjunct to Achieve Reciprocal Mentoring (Vol. 17, No. 2)
Edge & Olan (2021)	Learning to Breathe Again: Found Poems and Critical Friendship as Methodological Tools in Self-Study of Teaching Practices (Vol. 17, No. 2)

We viewed Schuck and Russell (2005) as a foundational publication about critical friendship and is often cited by researchers in the S-STEP community when discussing this topic. The other articles are contemporary empirical research reports, published between 2015 and 2021 (6 most recent years). Of the 13 articles, there were two editorials that we excluded, and we used the 11 remaining studies for this investigation (see Table 1). We do not claim that this data set is exhaustive, but it supports our very focused inquiry into how critical friendships are discussed in peer-reviewed articles published in the *Studying Teacher Education* journal which is highly valued by the S-STEP research community.

The data for this investigation comes from these 11 peer-reviewed published empirical studies and two empirical reports of our prior research about critical friendship development (Grant & Kastberg, 2022; Kastberg & Grant, 2020). We used qualitative interpretive methods to analyze the empirical studies searching for evidence of critical friend intimacy, individual transformations, as well as descriptive examples of significant otherness or conversation residue (i.e., transformative characteristics of critical friendships). Our goal was to identify evidence from the S-STEP literature descriptions of critical friend intimacy to support or refute findings from our research about our critical friendship development and transformation. We hypothesized that if evidence of these characteristics was found in the S-STEP literature our findings would be strengthened.

Analysis of the 11 published empirical studies by each critical friend researcher began in the fall of 2021 and continued through the summer of 2022. We used MaxQDA Plus (2020) data analysis software to carry out our individual analyses, using a collaboratively developed codebook. We hoped this would ensure that we might meet a reasonable standard of intercoder agreement from our individual analyses. Thus, we purposely used a narrow codebook to maintain our individualized focus. The codebook included 13 first-level categorical codes inspired by our prior research and our aims for this investigation. Examples of first-level codes for this analysis included: Context, Transformation, Critical Friend Intimacy, Power/Hierarchy, Conversation Residue, and Significant Otherness. After we each coded one or two articles, we discussed our categorical codes, clarified code meanings, and considered adding, removing, or combining codes.

On occasion, during our regular critical friend conversations, one or the other of us might bring up something significant about our analysis. Fairly early on during the analysis, we discussed that we noticed that critical friends who were geographically distanced, like ourselves, had different perspectives about the Power/Hierarchy of the critical friend relationship. So, we added a subcode, Geo-Distanced, to the first-level code Context to capture this idea within the analysis. After we both completed analyzing the empirical studies, the individual MaxQDA analysis projects were merged into a single project, and further analyses were done to examine the intercoder agreement. The individual codes were examined in search of miscoding or missed coding between the two coders. Finally, the actual data connected with the coding were analyzed for interpretive meaning-making (i.e., results) from which findings emerged. As described, our research paradigm and beliefs are aligned with constructivists, critical theorists, or more generally interpretive tradition (e.g., Grant & Lincoln, 2021; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

We used our extant research to inform interpretations throughout our analyses to describe the essence of critical friend intimacy and connections to individual transformations. Our analytic interpretations were further informed as we engaged in new conversations inspired by this study as we considered the essence of our critical friend relationship. Trustworthiness is garnered through triangulation, as we both agreed on interpretations, findings from analyses, and reporting. Additionally, trustworthiness is realized through ontological authenticity because these results are manifestations of our knowledge of ourselves being revealed through this report (Grant & Lincoln, 2021; Lincoln, 1995).

Outcomes

During this investigation, we found that there was significant intercoder agreement across the 11 published empirical studies for the key categorical codes that were of interest given our research questions. Using MaxQDA Plus (2020) data analysis software, we analyzed the combined coding of both authors. When we compared our individual coding across all articles and codes, we found intercoder agreement across all articles for five codes we agreed on 245 codes (38.2%) of the total (see Table 2). Additionally, we coded the same five categories for the same text segments (overlapping by at least 25%) a total of 642 codes across the 11 S-STEP articles.

Table 2

Intercoder Agreement for Key Categorical Codes With Highest Percentage Agreement

Code	Agreements	Disagreements	Total	Percent
Conversation Residue	64	84	148	43.2%
Critical Friend Intimacy	93	158	251	37.1%
Transformation	24	72	96	25.0%
Significant Otherness	38	82	120	31.7%
CF Geo-Distanced	26	1	27	96.3%
TOTALs	245	397	642	38.2%

We noticed that the Transformation category had the least agreement, 25%. After examining the underlying data, it was clear that the descriptions of individual transformations are typically described very generally and most lack specificity within the S-STEP literature examined. By design, S-STEP literature reports primarily focus on improvements for teacher educators' teaching or practice and not their individual transformations, and this is true even when reports purport to focus on critical friendships.

Table 3

Frequency Counts Coded for Documents and Text Segments

Five Key Codes	Code Frequency of Docs	Percentage	Code Frequency of Text Segs	Percentage
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Conversation Residue	21	95%	148	23%
Critical Friend Intimacy	20	91%	251	39%
Significant Otherness	19	86%	120	19%
Transformation	17	77%	96	15%
CF Geo-Distanced	15	68%	27	4%
# of Analyzed Data	22		642	

The frequency of coding was extensive across the 11 articles (i.e., documents) and the total number of text segments coded for both researchers was 642 (see Table 3). Note the number of documents must be counted twice because each researcher coded the documents independently prior to merging the MaxQDA project used for this analysis.

Essence of Critical Friend Intimacy

There is substantive discussion about critical friend intimacy in the S-STEP literature that we examined, and the idea of critical friend intimacy is not new. For example, Fletcher and colleagues have cited Costa and Kallick (1993) who described critical friends 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 (p. 50).” We assert that embedded in this definition is the assumption that some level of intimacy exists in the relationship. We specifically discussed the emerging intimacy with respect to our developing critical friendship (Grant & Kastberg, 2022) in ways that support our interpretations during the analyses for this inquiry. Within the 11 articles examined, there were myriad (i.e., 251 coded or 39.1%, see Table 3) examples of critical friend intimacy. Stolle et al. (2019) articulated “three characteristics central to an effective critical friendship: vulnerability, reflection, and skepticism” (p. 23). We assert that these characteristics suggest critical friend intimacy within effective critical friendships. We noticed that many of the examples identified within the 11 articles used these characteristics to describe critical friend intimacy; vulnerability and reflection were the most prevalent.

Examples of critical friend intimacy were found in nine of the 11 articles. With respect to our analyses, critical friend intimacy was among the top two categorical codes identified by the researchers (see Table 2 and Table 3). Some of the instances coded were interpreted by us as examples of intimacy and other instances were more explicit not needing our inferences. We highlight several examples of descriptions from the S-STEP literature of critical friend intimacy (see Table 4). The Stolle et al. (2019) critical friend intimacy example offers a well-articulated description of a relationship that has grown over time with intentionality. Similarly, the O’Dwyer et al. (2019) intimacy example is well-articulated and developed over time but is perhaps less formalized and intentional compared to the Stolle et al. example. Appleget et al. (2020) describe intimacy using the Stolle et al. (2019) characteristics – they use the word “vulnerable” and then they describe a reflective practice related to their conversations.

We asked, what is the essence of critical friend intimacy in the S-STEP research literature? Critical friend intimacy is discussed extensively within the S-STEP literature when critical friendship is a focus. Sometimes intimacy is well articulated explicitly, and other times different language is used in lieu of intimacy, but the intent appears to be clear. Developing critical friend intimacy is described as taking time to develop. In our critical friend development we noticed that in time a relational shift occurs that we called “dropping professional identity façade” (Grant & Kastberg, 2022, p. 130). After dropping an identity façade the participant reveals their authentic self without barriers that afford greater critical friend intimacy to develop. Fletcher et al. (2016) discuss dropping professional identity façades in terms of revealing and hiding parts of themselves until the relationship interactions became less risky (p. 310). Critical friend intimacy is not established by following defined processes or protocols to establish relationship credibility or trustworthiness during research. Instead, attempts to follow critical friend guidelines or communication templates may constrain the development of intimacy. Fletcher et al. (2016) describe ways guidelines for engaging in critical friendship could result in contentious commentary. “Tim also felt pressured to be contentious even when he agreed with Déirdre’s pedagogical decisions or actions” (p. 312). We too experienced such feelings as we began our critical friendship when our actions were overly constrained by critical friend tenets. We now look to the evidence and connection between critical friend intimacy and transformation.

Table 4*Examples of Transformations & Critical Friend Intimacy*

Author(s)	Transformation Descriptions	Critical Friend Intimacy Descriptions
Appleget, Shimek, Myers, & Hogue (2020)	Through critical friendship, we were motivated by each other's actions, inspired to try new things, and reflective of our own practices more deeply (p. 303)	By sharing our personal experiences, being vulnerable, and listening to the perspectives of each other, we more clearly defined practices we felt encouraged CPP and revisited our conversations in ways that continue to stretch us as educators. (p. 302)
O'Dwyer, Bowles, & Chróinín (2019)	Richard shared how he learned more about his individual coaching through participation in the collaboration: . . . I realised . . . my coaching situations to date, I've always been most comfortable as a leader, not wanting to give too much control of the session to anyone else. On Wednesday, I felt very comfortable with our division of duties where we both work autonomously. (p. 147)	. . . Anne and Richard had got to know each other personally and shared experiences and understandings, . . . were important to support openness and honesty in the process, and to develop a foundation of trustworthiness and sensitivity (Nilsson, 2013). (p. 142) As coaches, who also shared the same work-space, there were many informal conversations and reflections in the staff room or walking to the car park after training sessions. (p. 144)
Stolle, Frambaugh-Kritzer, Freese, & Persson (2019)	With these two distinct layers of critical friendship – Elizabeth and Charlotte acting as critical friends in a more traditional sense, insiders embedded in the actual study; and Anne and Anders acting as critical friends external to the study – we both noted how we experienced our own growth more exponentially compared to previous self-studies. (p. 21)	Our dialogue exposed the conundrums we have faced in our own critical friendship work surrounding vulnerability. For instance, as close critical friends worrying about hurt feelings or our limited perspectives. . . researchers need to be 'tougher-skinned' and less sensitive. . . does sensitivity lead to honest insight? . . . if we avoid vulnerability, we block out uncomfortable feelings, [and] . . . lose the joy of discovery. Vulnerability gets to meaning. (pp. 23-24)

Evidence of Critical Friend Intimacy & Individual Transformation

The S-STEP research literature generally does not address individual transformation directly because by design the emphasis of S-STEP research is the improvement of teaching or teacher education practice. Even in the case of the 11 articles we examined for this inquiry whose focus was critical friendship, individual transformations were still not addressed directly. However, despite this design or feature of S-STEP literature, researchers readily share instances or utterances about individuals' transformations. The examples of transformation shared are shown beside the examples of critical friend intimacy (see Table 4). There were many examples to select from for transformation (96 or 14.95%) and critical friend intimacy (251 or 39.1%) (see Table 3). There were only two S-STEP articles (i.e., Martin & Russell, 2018 and Sabatier & Bullock, 2018) that researchers did not identify any evidence of one or both categories (i.e., critical friend intimacy or transformation).

We asked, what evidence exists in the S-STEP literature that connects critical friend intimacy and transformation of individuals in these intimate relationships? Descriptions of individual transformations in the S-STEP literature we reviewed made general or implied statements with occasional connections to critical friendship influences. Critical friend intimacy is generally not explicitly stated in connection with individual transformation. Our examples (see Table

4) are more the exception than the rule with respect to connecting critical friend intimacy and individual transformation within the S-STEP literature. This lack of explicit connection in relation to critical friend intimacy and individual transformation follows the norm in S-STEP research reporting.

The O'Dwyer et al. (2019) transformation example described Richard's professional transformation from an implied stance (see Table 4). We postulate that Richard's transformation might be a professional identity transformation related to delegation within his coaching; this is our interpretation. He also connects his transformation, explicitly to his critical friendship. The interesting thing about this transformation is that Richard was the experienced senior coach, and the expectation was to develop Anne's coaching. She was a novice coach and a recent elite player who was a key player and the focus of the research. Richard's transformation is very similar to the transformation we documented in one of our research reports (e.g., Kastberg & Grant, 2020). Melva's teaching and practice were the focus of our S-STEP research, but Signe was impacted because of the transformative characteristics (i.e., conversation residue and significant otherness) that influenced her transformation. Similarly, Richard's and Anne's critical friendship led Richard to reflect on his coaching as he reflectively considered Anne's coaching and engaged in interactions with her (O'Dwyer, et al., 2019). Additionally, there is clear evidence of critical friend intimacy in their relationship. This is a strong example of what we found in our critical friend development research.

For the other two transformation examples (i.e., Appleget et al., 2020; Stolle et al., 2019), the actual individual transformations are not explicated with specifics but are strongly implied for all researchers (see Table 4). In these examples, unlike O'Dwyer et al. (2019), we cannot decipher each individual's transformation. However, these authors make clear that their transformations are tightly connected to their critical friendships that possess a high level of intimacy. Again, these are two more examples of critical friend intimacy connected to individual transformations but written using the normalized style of S-STEP research reporting.

Implications of Geographical Distance

This S-STEP literature inquiry revealed a new influencer of critical friend intimacy, "geographical distance" (Bullock, 2020). Bullock identified ways geographical distance can invite and constrain the sort of conversations critical friends have. In our critical friendship, we recognized that our geo-distanced context served us well and enhanced our ability to establish critical friend intimacy across differences in rank and institutional structure. When we started our relationship, Signe was at a higher rank than Melva, and we recently questioned how our relationship may have been impacted had we been within the same institution. Loughran and Brubaker (2015) identified possibilities for concerns related to confidentiality when critical friends are at the same institution and must manage confidentiality concerns. While managing distance and hierarchical power dynamics can influence S-STEP work, geographical distance can influence power dynamics as well as sociocultural and epistemic risk-taking, which may influence relational intimacy potential.

Schuck and Russell (2005) experienced geographical distance during their S-STEP research as well as rank and experience differences. Sandy felt these differences significantly, but they were imperceptible to Tom. Sandy was unsure about what and how to interact with Tom and Tom welcomed whatever Sandy offered (p. 109). Further, they posited that email alone is "an obvious constraint on the quality of our communication; had even one face-to-face observation and discussion been possible, we expect the quality of our critical friendship would have improved considerably" (p.113). Conversely, Schuck and Russel offered

[f]ace-to-face observation enables the critical friend to ask at any time, 'What would I be doing in a similar situation?' and this means that both members of the critical friendship can be considering their teaching at the same time. It also allows the critical friend to observe aspects of the class that might not have appeared significant to the practitioner. (p. 118)

This idea of reflecting on one's practice during observation positions all participants to experience transformative characteristics, conversation residue, and significant otherness, that create opportunities for individual transformation (Kastberg & Grant, 2020). These transformative characteristics can influence the individual critical friends and inform their reflections about their teaching, practice, and lives. Sometimes critical friend relational experiences can incite sufficient agency that leads to substantive transformations to the individual that is typically outside of the scope of the

S-STEP research and critical friendship. When that happens there is a connection between critical friend intimacy and an individual's transformation. We discuss specific examples of this in Grant and Kastberg (2020, 2022).

Conclusions

We described the essence of critical friend intimacy as articulated in the S-STEP research literature by sharing several specific examples and comparing them to research about our critical friendship development. We then described connections between critical friend intimacy and individuals' transformations in these intimate relationships. We shared three examples that supported findings from our research and hence strengthened our research findings about connections between critical friend intimacy and individual transformations. Going forward ongoing study of critical friendship intimacy and connections to individual transformation is a promising aim. Geographical distance and critical friendships offer another context-rich space for future inquiry as well.

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Melva R. Grant

Old Dominion University



Signe E. Kastberg

Purdue University

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