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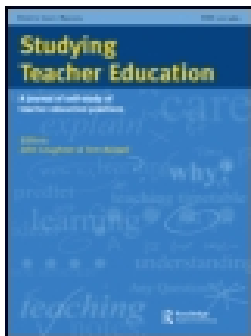
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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Investigating Critical Friendship: Peeling Back the Layers

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### ABSTRACT

This self-study documents two teacher educators' professional inquiry into the notions of critical friendship. Specifically, we asked: How does our interactive inquiry on the topic of critical friendship lead us to new understandings of critical friends? Three theoretical perspectives framed this study – More Knowledgeable Others, Thought Collective, and reflection. Data sources included (a) artifacts from the self-study scholarship/literature, (b) written and real-time (audio recorded) dialogue, and (c) critical friend response memos. We systematically analyzed our data, linking the initial themes to our theoretical frame. These themes led to three findings about critical friendship: flexible definitions, complex characteristics, and multiple learning phases. Based on these findings, we created two research tools useful for researchers enacting critical friendship – the Critical Friend Definition Continuum and the Critical Friend Guide for Quality Assurance. Ultimately, we assert that we, along with our colleagues, must be responsible brokers of critical friendship by explicitly explaining our purposes, definitions and uses of critical friendship within our work as self-study researchers.

### KEYWORDS

Critical friendship; reflection; collective thought; self-study methods

The concept of critical friendship has been encouraged (Samaras & Roberts, 2011; Schuck & Russell, 2005) and extensively documented within self-study methodology (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Indeed, “a defining feature of self-study research and practice is its emphasis on collaboration with others” (Berry & Russell, 2014, p. 195). We, two teacher educators and close friends (personally and professionally) from the United States, have been conducting self-studies over the past 10 years, often employing critical friendship. However, not until this self-study did we realize we were not always responsible brokers of this complicated term. In other words, after scrutinizing other self-study scholarship and our previous self-studies (Frambaugh-Kritzer & Stolle, 2016, 2014) we noted that the term critical friendship is often referenced superficially, often without a clear description of how critical friendship was overtly applied. Although humbling to declare, we recognize that identifying this limitation in our own scholarship allowed us to work towards a “pursuit of enhanced understanding” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 840). This study focuses on peeling the onion, a well known visual metaphor that offered us a way to peel away the various levels of meaning found in critical friendship, while also helping us to rediscover layers that had become transparent to us in our own familiarity with the term.

We recognize critical friendship is not an exclusive term for self-study methods (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009), and we are not the first to inquire about critical friendship as many have explored definitions (Costa & Kallick, 1993), offered critiques (Russell & Schuck, 2004), explored diverse roles (Kember et al., 1997), argued for the need and process (Loughran & Northfield, 1996), and presented models on the developmental phases critical friends may go through (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009). One of the clearest differentiations we noted in the literature is how the term critical friendship is applied most consistently in two areas. The first area surrounds one or more critical friends supporting/coaching the transformation of another's teaching. The second area surrounds one or more critical friends supporting the trustworthiness of research methods. This distinction became particularly important to our work, as we have always applied critical friendship within the research vein. Thus, we sought to answer: How does our interactive inquiry/peeling the onion on the topic of critical friendship lead us to new understandings of critical friends? With that, we hoped to fill a gap in the literature around critical friendship as a research tool, thus improving ourselves as self-study researchers. Our rigorous investigation actually informed our understandings of critical friendship in a more holistic way – both as a research and pedagogical tool.

## Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical perspectives served as our lens for examining and reflecting on critical friendship. First, social constructivism guided our work. In particular, Vygotsky (1978) explained the notion of More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), which means looking to others who have deeper or different understandings. Vygotsky further stressed the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition, as he believed these interactions were central in the process of making meaning. Therefore, we embraced Vygotsky's ideas to generate understandings through talk by inviting two additional critical friends to serve as MKOs.

We also drew from Fleck's (1935/1979) notions of Thought Collective, which situate the discovery of new epistemological cognition within the greater environment of knowledge. In this, Fleck understood knowledge creation as a social practice dependent on a shared framework. Considering both our personal understandings about critical friendship and the collective, our knowledge discovery was an interaction between the discovered phenomenon (new understandings of critical friendship), the discoverers (authors and critical friends), and the existing pool of knowledge (literature defining and using critical friendship). By situating this knowledge discovery within the self-study community, we noted how Collective Thought and self-study involved similar processes as we sought to gain deeper knowledge of critical friendship both to grow us as individual researchers while also growing the field.

Finally, we drew upon Dewey's (1910/1933) conceptual work on reflective thinking. The term reflective thinking, like critical friendship, has become loosely defined and commonplace. Rodgers (2002) synthesized Dewey's work, paring reflective thinking down to four criteria. Reflection is: (1) a meaning-making process highlighting relationships, (2) systematic and grounded in scientific inquiry, (3) collaborative and happening in community, and (4) personal and valuing intellectual growth. As we engaged in this inquiry, we noted how our thinking displayed these criteria while complementing the MKO (Vygotsky, 1978) and Collective Thought (Fleck, 1935/1979) perspectives and generated new meaning with others through reflection. We noted power in these three perspectives coming together, providing space to discuss and question, reflect, challenge, and push our thinking and learning.

## Methods

### *Participants*

We both self-identify as white, middle-aged females working as tenured literacy teacher educators at different universities in the United States. Prior to this self-study, Elizabeth had been engaged in self-study research for seven years, while Charlotte had ten years of experience in self-study methods. Even with these years of self-study experience, we recognized we often fell short in how we explained our use of critical friendship as a research tool. Additionally, we considered the limitations in only serving as critical friends to each other, which is often how we engaged in the use of critical friendship. Thus, to overcome these limitations, we embraced “a layered approach to critical friendship” (Fletcher, Chróinin, & O’Sullivan, 2016, p. 302). We strategically invited two more participants, outsiders to our study, to serve as additional critical friends in this study – a second layer of critical friendship. Part of our deliberate invitations also aligned with our theoretical framework of MKO, as we sought different kinds of MKOs to interact with us in this study. So, we layered in Anne Freese, a U.S. self-study scholar, to act as our MKO/expert in the field of self-study. She has published multiple self-studies and is also cited extensively for her contributions. Anne is a colleague and friend of Charlotte, but stranger to Elizabeth which provided another layer relationship status in our collaboration. Additionally, we layered in Anders Persson, a veteran sociologist in education from Lund University in Sweden. He acted as our MKO/expert in critical research, but a non-expert in self-study. Anders is a colleague of Elizabeth and stranger to Charlotte. 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.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

To address our research question of peeling the onion, we collected the following data sources: (a) artifacts from the self-study scholarship/literature, (b) written and real-time (audio recorded) dialogue, and (c) critical friend response memos.

When we began our artifact collection, we ambitiously planned to review every single Castle Proceedings, starting from the first year (1996). However, to meet this goal, we needed more time; thus, we reconsidered our parameters for what to include and exclude. Although we only analyze the 2008–2016 Castle Proceedings, in our initial analysis, we concluded that these later studies represented a more robust and mature collection of self-studies since its infancy. We completed both digital and manual scans to obtain any article that applied or mentioned critical friendship and/or critical friends. Next, we created a table to chart: each conference proceeding reference identified in our search, the research questions the authors posed, and a summary of use and definitions of critical friendship and/or critical friends. We used frequency counts to categorize the data and establish patterns for how critical friendship and/or critical friends was defined and implemented. In our initial analysis, we noted, similar to our own work, critical friendship was often referred to shallowly (i.e. name dropped or brief sentence mentioned) without describing the “how”

of critical friendship. We wondered if this was largely due to word-space limitations in the Castle proceedings, or the presumption that other self-study scholars (the main audience) already know what critical friendship means. Hence, we expanded our review to examine reputable teacher education and self-study journals spanning the past 10 years. Although initial findings suggest that overall these articles were more robust in critical friendship explanations, we are still thick in this data collection and analysis. Yet, our intensive review provided multiple examples of the characteristics of critical friends, which will be explored in the findings.

While simultaneously collecting the artifact data, we exchanged lengthy written responses shared in a Google drive document over a 7-month period of time. We also orally dialogued 1–2 times a month and took notes of those meetings, serving as critical friends who sought to co-construct critical friendship in a safe space. Next, we determined clear goals/expectations (Russell & Schuck, 2004) for Anne and Anders, asking each to write “critical friend memos” (Samaras & Roberts, 2011, p. 45) to our dialogue and manuscript drafts with the following guiding questions: (1) What questions do you have that can push our thinking about critical friendship?; and (2) Do you notice any blind spots in our thinking? Based on these response memos, we continued our dialogue, writing two more responses and engaging in two additional real-time conversations. These memos were included as data sources to consider, unpack, and juxtapose with our own initial thinking and findings.

After all our data was collected, we each individually read and reread the data, systematically coding for recurring themes. Using critical friendship as a research tool, we further applied Coia and Taylor’s (2009) “real-time dialogue”, which became critical “to process and discuss meaning” (p. 177). Our analysis occurred as we spoke in real-time, which led to the determination of our initial themes. Moreover, these meaningful exchanges allowed us to enact our theoretical belief that thinking is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). In that, we also called upon Anne and Anders to provide an additional layer of trustworthiness, requesting feedback and critique of our analysis and thinking. Combining these various methods allowed us to systematically analyze our data (Samaras & Freese, 2009), and link the initial themes to our theoretical framework, which resulted in the following findings.

## Findings

### *Flexible Definitions*

Through our content analysis and collaborative dialogue, the data implied critical friendship is diversely defined and actualized and takes on variance. Despite this reality, in analyzing the critical friend response memos, we noted our own insistence on pinning down a definition of critical friendship. For example, in our written dialogues Elizabeth continuously sought to reign in the term, even resorting to look up “critical” and “friend” in the Webster dictionary for a more-narrow definition.

I looked at the definition of ‘friend’ on my friend ‘Webster’. I found two definitions that resonate with our thinking. Definition #1 encompasses a deeper, more felt relationship, whereas Definition #2 encompasses understandings of kindness or ‘friendly’, but not a connection.

Elizabeth’s insistence on an actual definition influenced Charlotte to seek a narrower understanding as well. However, our critical friends independently prompted us to continue peeling

**Table 1.** *Critical Friend Definition Continuum.*

Close Friend(s)	Stranger(s)
Insider(s)	Outsider(s)
Expert(s)	Non-Expert(s)
Fully Involved	Loosely Involved
Reciprocal in Nature	One Way
Multiple Critical Friends	Single Critical Friend
Productive	Not Productive
Defined Expectations	No Defined Expectations

the onion to consider establishing a more flexible understanding of critical friendship that embraced the layered complexities of the term. For example, Anne wrote in her memo, “Do you need to pin it down? Or can it even be pinned down? Why do you insist on this rigidity?” With this new insight, we created a continuum we call the Critical Friend Definition Continuum (see Table 1). Each descriptor within the continuum, both on the left and the right, reflects the ways critical friends can be enacted as evidenced within the literature. For example, the descriptor “insider” describes how a critical friend can be positioned as an insider, or participant embedded in the study, versus an “outsider”, an individual situated outside the actual study. Additionally, an “expert” could entail detailed knowledge within a specific content area, research field or institution, while a “non-expert” might be a researcher outside of one’s specific discipline or context. Therefore, critical friends should be selected based on the specific role he/she will play and his/her ability to contribute constructive feedback and alternate perspectives. Still, we emphasize that these terms do not imply value (e.g. critical friends who are close friends are more effective/productive than strangers, or vice versa), but rather demonstrate variance in the term as it can be applied.

Constructing this continuum illustrated the dynamic interactions in relation to the Thought Collective, which ultimately made what appeared complex and messy into something clear, flexible, and useable. Charlotte reflected, “Anne and Anders have opened my eyes. It was their encouragement that has brought me more flexibility to the critical friendship definition”. Elizabeth also noted that she no longer felt rigid about this term. Rather, she felt new freedom in how she could apply critical friendship within her own research, thus recognizing that each use of critical friendship promises a different experience. Additionally, both Charlotte and Elizabeth identified the continuum as a useful tool for future endeavors, helping each to frame and articulate the roles and purposes of their critical friends.

**Complex Characteristics**

We also identified three characteristics central to an effective critical friendship: vulnerability, reflection, and skepticism. However, influenced by our new understandings of a continuum, we found variance exists in how each characteristic is employed, valued, or enacted.

**Vulnerability**

We align with Brown’s (2013) definition that vulnerability means uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. Our content analysis showed vulnerability as a central concept of critical friendship, yet a range of experiences was described in the literature, thus requiring us to peel back the layers around this characteristic. Our dialogue exposed the conundrums we have faced in our own critical friendship work surrounding vulnerability. For instance, as close



friends, we feel safe to take risks in our collaborations. Yet, we recognize our limitations such as: worrying about hurt feelings or our limited perspectives. For example, Elizabeth wrote:

My gut reaction is that self-study researchers need to be ‘tougher-skinned’ and less sensitive. However, does sensitivity lead to honest insight? ... Ultimately, if we avoid vulnerability, we block out uncomfortable feelings, yet we also lose on the joy of discovery. Vulnerability gets to meaning.

Charlotte embraced vulnerability more readily. In fact, our discussions assisted her in rediscovering this layer that had grown transparent for her over time:

I recall 10 years ago my doctoral advisor suggested I make my vulnerability visible in my dissertation, which used self-study methods ... I agree vulnerability is critical to critical friendship, but I already know *vulnerability* is a central notion to self-study in general.

We also noted our own taken-for-granted vulnerability within this study – inviting our critical friends, Anders and Anne, to the study to bring in additional critical lenses. Anders added to the data set by asking, “So what kind of relation is needed if critical friendship is going to work? Critical friendship is about having a friendly (meaning trustful) relation so that you, if needed, can give hard critique.” We agree, specifically recognizing the importance of establishing trust so vulnerability can be embraced in order to both give and receive the “hard critique”. However, with our critical friends, we experienced a range of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure based on the various dynamics of the relationships. That is, vulnerability with a friend feels different than with a stranger. And, vulnerability with a critical friend positioned as an expert is different than a non-expert. Thus, peeling back our own vulnerability assisted in understanding this essential characteristic in critical friendship.

### Reflection

Using Rodgers’ (2002) synthesis of reflective thinking, we came to see the importance of true reflection within critical friendship, specifically when we systematically reflected on “definite units that are linked together so that there is a sustained movement to a common end” (Dewey, 1910/1933, p. 5). This resonated with our understandings of Fleck (1935/1979) in that our knowledge discovery was an interaction between our new understandings of critical friendship, us (the participants), and the current literature defining and using critical friendship within the field. Therefore, reflection required the ability to move between personal discovery to an appreciation for the shared framework of critical friendship in the literature, or Thought Collective (Fleck, 1923/1979). For example, Elizabeth wrote:

To think through these ideas, I’m exploring the literature. First, I looked at how researchers have used critical friendship as a data analysis tool. Then, I looked at how others have written about critical friendship. Today I read two pieces that unpacked complexities within critical friendship; there is much to read around critical friends.

Charlotte responded:

I read the Russell and Schuck (2004) article you referenced earlier – this as an influential study using critical friendship. They write, “A critical friendship becomes an additional layer of self-study...” This can be a starting point for our paper as we identify a gap in the literature.

Analysis of the data revealed reflection provided us a rigorous way of thinking about critical friendship, as we sought to make meaning in logical, yet connected and interactive

ways. And, as critical friendship is essentially a specific form of collaboration, it seamlessly relates to Dewey’s notions that reflection happens in community.

The human interactions afforded by a critical friendship allows the reflection to be dynamic and multifaceted. This is seen in our interactions with our own critical friends, who were instrumental in our reflection. For example, Anne consistently encouraged us to explore on the role of reflective practice within the field of self-study, not just within critical friendship. With that, we could situate our own inquiry within the larger field of self-study, thus noting the importance of reflection as a tool for new and deeper understandings (Freese, Kosnik, & LaBoskey, 2000). Anders offered critique that at times our reflection was too individualistic, and we needed to look at the collective perspective of critical friendship. Thus, grounding our reflective work in the greater conversations, often with those we considered MKOs, provided confirmation, as well as critique, as we matched our reflection against the Thought Collective.

*Skepticism*

We came to understand skepticism as a healthy characteristic of critical friendship as the data highlighted recurring questions we contemplated, such as: How do we know a critical friend has met his/her responsibilities? For example, Charlotte wrote:

Although there are many requirements of critical friends (i.e., fresh eyes, alternative perspective, overcoming bias), I still wonder – what if the critical friend fails to do this? What if the critical friend thinks he/she is offering fresh eyes, but actually isn’t? How can we better ensure the critical friend meets these goals overtly? Is there a better checklist, especially when critical friends come from the same sociocultural worldviews?

Elizabeth offered a solution to some of her own skepticism when writing:

As I take a personal look at our work as critical friends, I wonder if we are limited in our abilities to ask the critical questions always necessary to push our thinking further because we are best friends. This is where the ‘outsider’ is key to insure critical friendship is effective.

Still, our content analysis showed that knowing if a critical friend met his/her responsibilities was not always clearly presented in the literature where critical friendship was applied. This seems unfortunate, especially as the term critical friendship is often used as a way of ensuring trustworthiness. In thinking about the responsibilities of critical friends, Anne suggested specific questions that should be asked when using critical friendship within a study, which we refer to as our Critical Friend Guide for Quality Assurance (see Table 2).

Asking these questions at various points throughout a self-study could bring more clarity and purpose to the use of critical friendship, while also providing a tool to assist in honest reflection around the quality and effectiveness of a critical friendship. Thus,

**Table 2.** Critical friend guide for quality assurance.

Start	Why should I have critical friends?
	What is the purpose of the critical friendship?
	What do I hope to gain?
Throughout	What do the critical friends do?
	What should the critical friends reflect on?
End	How did the critical friendship impact the study?
	Did the critical friends offer alternate perspectives, lead you to new insights, or help to reframe your thinking?

healthy skepticism can encourage the critical friends' success, while also opening the door for more transparent articulation of the critical friends' contributions to a study.

### *Multiple Learning Phases*

Anne and Anders identified phases we experienced in our learning process of peeling the onion, similar to others grappling with complicated terms. We embraced these phases as additional layers to our inquiry, noting how these phases led to deeper understandings of critical friendship.

### *Phases of Understanding*

Anne compared our inquiry to her own when she first started self-study. Like us, she sought to lock down a definition of self-study versus seeing it on a continuum. She and her co-authors (Freese et al., 2000) went through five phases they identified as: (a) confusion, (b) conflicting agendas, (c) multiple agendas, (d) understanding, and (e) internalization. After reading our dialogues, Anne shared, "every scholar, at some point in self-study, takes his/her turn at being confused, while other self-study researchers, who have been exploring critical friendship for a number of years, may have moved to a different level/understanding of critical friendship". The data shows we progressed through various phases of understanding, similar to the phases Anne highlighted. We embrace this reality, thus situating our current understandings of critical friendship within the Collective Thought, recognizing we may arrive at new phases of understanding as we continue to use and peel back the layers of critical friendship in our own work as scholars.

### *Phases of Enactment*

Anders explained in one memo that critical friendship could entail a range of enactment phases; one being a "traditional academic seminar", which he came to know as "the purgatory" during his doctoral studies. In this purgatory setting, critique is brutally honest with no rules, as often the actors are unsure of the purpose of the critique (a contribution to the other's text or a show of the critic on a stage called the seminar). The other extreme includes what Anders referred to as the "safe room" – an overregulated space that is too friendly, and thus less productive.

The data revealed multiple ways we attempted to make sense of these various enactments of critical friendship. For example, we considered the differences between critical friends and blind reviewers, in relation to the roles one enacts in terms of loyalty. Anders suggested critical friends should be loyal to the person being criticized, especially the text, idea etc. created, while the reviewer is supposed to be loyal to the community he/she represents. Our dialogue identified an attempt to distinguish these different enactments. Elizabeth highlighted a quote from the Forward of the 2016 Castle Proceedings:

We strive to look at our data systematically, to ensure that we do not attend only to the findings that support our hopes and wishes. We work to ensure our interpretations are ones others could support, and this is the reason why self-study requires not only a critical friend, but also a critical community. (Trumbull, 2004, pp. 1225–1226)

Elizabeth then wrote, “So, is the whole S-STEP community my critical friend, and if yes, then does a blind-peer review act as a critical friend? Where does that fit within Anders’s range of enactment?”

In this finding, we have come to see how the phases of understanding and enactment are tightly linked to a critical friends’ role and effectiveness. Misalignment of phasing could produce a less effective critical friendship. That is, one’s phase of understanding could lead to a particular phase of enactment that fails to meet the needs of the person inviting the critique. Thus, unpacking these phases within a critical friendship appears key to the insurance of a successful endeavor.

## Discussion

Our interactive inquiry fills a gap in the literature – not only expanding meaningfulness of critical friendship for our own purposes, but for the self-study community as a whole. Our three theoretical perspectives, which showed learning from our MKOs (Vygotsky), reflection (Dewey), and knowledge gained via Collective Thought (Fleck) coincided with our peeling the onion metaphor as these three perspectives further illuminated our understandings.

Applying Rodgers’ (2002) four criteria, we, the researchers (Elizabeth and Charlotte) of this self-study, systematically dug into the term critical friendship to reflect and enlighten ourselves. Recognizing our own shortcomings, we layered in two critical friends/MKOs to serve as resources. Together, we collaboratively used the research question to determine goals and purposes for their inclusion. In this pursuit, we constructed the Critical Friend Definition Continuum (see Table 1), which we hope serves as a valuable contribution to the field. To us, the Critical Friend Continuum offers a guide as researchers operationally define the role of critical friends within a specific research study. For example, Anne’s role as *expert in self-study methods* encouraged us to peel more layers as she shared veteran wisdom. Anders acted as a *non-expert in self-study*, yet he shifted our understandings through another country (Sweden) where his landscape, fresh eyes, and expertise in critical research gave us new layers to consider. Each layer positioned critical friendship differently, offering something unique and acting as a distinct resource, specifically when we faced obstacles. Seeking transparency, both critical friends recommended alternate views for us to consider, often highlighting unexpected issues that we didn’t anticipate or recognize. This self-study became a highly infused experience as Elizabeth and Charlotte acted as critical friends and co-researchers while layering in Anne and Anders. And, although the publication of our Castle Conference proceedings demonstrated our initial peeling of the onion, we experienced an additional removal of layers as we engaged in dialogue at the Castle Conference presentation.

## Castle Conference Presentation

Presenting our work on critical friendship at the Castle Conference offered another opportunity to peel back the layers of critical friendship as we received valuable feedback, thus deepening our understandings. After introducing ourselves (Elizabeth, Charlotte, and Anne were at the conference) and sharing the impetus of our work, we spent a few minutes reflecting on the variety of definitions of critical friendship within the presentation room, recognizing that each participant brought a unique perspective. Elizabeth and Charlotte then proceeded to share the methods for data collection and

analysis. The participants particularly appreciated our in-depth content analysis of the literature, noting the significance of gaining a broad understanding of the diverse ways critical friendship is used within the field of self-study research.

As we shared the findings, we offered additional opportunities for the participants to contribute ideas and pose questions, acting as additional critical friends in this exploratory inquiry. With our first finding, and the introduction of the Critical Friend Definition Continuum (see [Table 1](#)), we asked the participants to answer: Are we missing any definitions as you consider your own work with critical friendship? This question launched us into a rich discussion around the definition of these terms and the possible inclusion of additional terms. Based on the questions of definitions, we have added a bit of clarity within this publication when introducing the continuum, sharing a few examples of how we are defining a number of the terms. With that, one participant questioned the inclusion of the term “Not Productive” on the continuum, wondering if that term can legitimately describe a critical friend, as critical friendship implies a valued contribution. Another participant suggested we include the notion of reciprocal benefits within a critical friend relationship, which we did choose to include in the continuum, as we find this to be another valuable distinction in the role of a critical friend. Finally, another participant asked if a text could be a critical friend, as she went on to explain her own use of text as a critical friend. As literacy scholars, we already adopt an expanded view of text and literacy tools that can help individuals achieve meaning making, so this suggestion was intriguing to us. Further, this suggestion to the continuum yielded rich debate for other audience members, with many questioning a text’s ability to truly offer critique in the dynamic way of a human critical friend. Although we are willing to consider this suggestion, the data we analyzed never offered an example of text serving as a critical friend, so we cannot justify it from our current collected data. In the end, we offer our continuum that evolved from the data, but remain open to additions as we continue in this work of understanding critical friendship.

## Implications

Although the layers of an onion can be an overused metaphor, it assisted us in reconciling the diverse use of critical friendship as we peeled back the layers of this complex concept. Just as an onion is often described as an illuminating bulb, we hope our findings provide more illumination for how critical friendship could be used in future endeavors. We grew as self-study researchers, but also added to the Thought Collective around critical friendship, both as a research tool, and potentially as a pedagogical tool. Therefore, we assert from our learning that we must be responsible brokers of critical friendship by explicitly explaining our purposes, definitions and uses of critical friendship within our work as self-study researchers.

Therefore, drawing on our findings, we commit to the following implications for our work. First, we will use the Critical Friend Definition Continuum we developed as a guide for situating critical friends and the roles they play in our work. That is, articulating and understanding the various definitions of our critical friends opens the door for deeper understanding of the interactions and guidance afforded us through the critical friendship. Second, we will use the Critical Friend Guide for Quality Assurance constructed from Anne’s questions. With this guide, we will seek to work within clear goals while ensuring meaningful contributions from our critical friends. Additionally, this guide can help us engage in healthy conversations around the characteristics of an effective critical

friendship, while providing structure around the systematic reflection necessary for the deep thinking. Finally, we will attune ourselves to the phases of understanding and enactment, recognizing the intricate connections between thinking and action and the impact of these connections on a successful critical friendship.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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