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# Reflection through critical friendship: Promoting growth of teachers

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This narrative inquiry draws on the longstanding collaborative work of the Portfolio Group (a cross-school, cross-institution teacher/teacher educator/researcher group) to explore the role of collaborative critical friendship in our group's reflective practice and the influence on our individual growth as teachers/teacher educators/researchers. Narrative methods were employed, aided by a conceptual frame of reflection, critical friendship, and optimal experience. Results and discussion highlight how teacher practice is enhanced and strengthened when teachers come together as critical friends to share stories of experience, to examine experiential currents, undercurrents, and riptides (i.e., plotlines, dilemmas, contexts, interactions, politics, etc.), and to provide meaningful feedback that supports colleagues' professional growth.

## KEYWORDS

critical friendship, knowledge communities, optimal experience, reflective practice, teacher collaboration, narrative inquiry

## Introduction

School reform grant award were the originating events in which our longstanding cross-school, cross-discipline knowledge community (Craig, 2007) was birthed in 1998 for the purposes of evidencing our work *via* school portfolios (Craig et al., 2020; see also Lyons, 1990, 2010). Back then, we were mostly a group of teachers with one university professor, Cheryl Craig, our schools' Formative Evaluation Researcher spearheading the group. From the beginning, our campuses (Cochrane Academy, Heights Community Learning Center, Jefferson Middle School, Eagle High School) employed school portfolios as reflective tools to chronicle our reform efforts, thus showing each campus's unique school story as a counter narrative to the prevailing high-stakes accountability approach.

The Portfolio Group was comprised of representatives from each of our campus portfolio committees, guided and mentored by Cheryl. We explored literature on how to evidence our work (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Eisner, 1997), shared

our teacher/school stories, and provided feedback to one another. Individual stories told/retold resonated (Conle, 1996) among the group, breaking down imagined barriers of district boundaries, grade levels, and content specializations. In this way, our shared knowledge, learning, and experiences flowed from our campuses to the larger Portfolio Group and back to the campuses with new insights. Consequently, we came to better understand the situated experiences of others, creating portals (Xu and Connelly, 2010) for better understanding not only our own campus experiences, but those of educators in the broader education landscape. Furthermore, we developed relationships characterized by reciprocity and support, forming critical friendships and becoming a knowledge community (Craig, 1995).

When the school grants ended in 2002, so did funding for teacher stipends and grant coordinators. At some campuses, administrative support for the Portfolio Group's work dried up as well. Consequently, our numbers diminished as individuals were given other campus duties and responsibilities that preempted participation. While at the time we were aware of some stories of leaving (Craig, 2014), others are still coming to light. Some individuals, however, remained, continuing the reflective practice, critical friendship, and collaborative work of the Portfolio Group independent of fixed institutional ties. Where once we were mostly a collaborative teacher group, we now describe ourselves as a collaborative teacher/teacher educator/researcher group.

Our consensus is that the Portfolio Group is a generative space that benefits individual professional growth and fulfills the personal need for interaction with other reflective practitioners. We acknowledge that such collaboration requires time and energy and demands mindfulness and presence. Concurrently, it requires a willingness to be vulnerable in sharing one's own experiences, to be open to new ideas, and, more importantly, to change. To better understand how collaborative groups like ours are fruitfully sustained, our collaborative work has taken up recurring streams of inquiry:

How can we learn from one another? What does it mean to be in relationship and in collaboration? In what ways does reflection improve practice? What are we taking back to our individual practice and school communities? (Curtis et al., 2013, p. 178).

These questions remain pertinent because there is no truth for all time but rather a truthiness that shifts with gained knowledge, understanding, and experience. The intent or inquiry behind them shifts according to our contemporary situations, professional growth, and experiences. These recurring questions were the provocations for this inquiry into the role of critical friendship in promoting group reflection and the ways in which group reflection shapes individual growth as teachers/teacher educators/researchers.

## Conceptual framework

### Reflection

Our perspective of teacher reflection draws on the notion of “teachers as knowing persons” (Clandinin, 1993, p. 25) whose “teaching practices [are] expressions of personal practical knowledge...the experiential knowledge that [is] embodied in us as persons and [is] enacted in our classroom practices and in our lives” (p. 1). Lyons (1990) argues that ethical and epistemological dilemmas of knowing need to be included as part of teachers' work (see also Lyons, 2010); Schön (1983, 1995) believed this knowing-in-action called for a new epistemology. Reflexivity and criticality are essential components in purposeful reflection aimed at professional growth and improvement (Ovens and Tinning, 2009). According to Fook (2015), both reflective practice and critical reflection “involve an ongoing scrutiny of practice based on identifying the assumptions underlying it” (pp. 441–442). Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) suggest that “reflective practice is a challenging, demanding, and often trying process” (p. 2) that is frequently most successful as a collaborative endeavor.

### Critical friendship

The idea of a critical friend or critical colleague has been attributed to Stenhouse (1975) in his writings on action research in curriculum development where he suggested that engaging one's colleague(s) in the process provides different perspectives and meaningful feedback. Costa (2008) defines a critical friend as “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers a critique of a person's work as a friend” (p. 124). The primary purpose of feedback is aimed at supporting, and advocating for a colleague's work and professional growth rather than for evaluation and judgment purposes (Costa, 2008; see also Costa and Kallick, 1993). Early in our collaboration, Portfolio Group members participated in Critical Friends Group® (CFG®) professional development which was designed to promote teacher reflection and dialogue; providing tools that enhanced our group reflective practice and fine-tuned feedback.

### Optimal experience

Building on Dewey's (1938) notion of experience as not being a thing, but a “doing,” and rooted in the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), optimal experience is “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else [matters as much]; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it...for the sheer joy of *doing it*” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4; italics added). We have come to see that optimal experience has been foundational since the Portfolio Group's inception. While our individual work in school sites has often been riddled with complexities and tensions, the opportunity to unpack the intricacies of these experiences in community with one another has been not only

cathartic, but uplifting. These discussions rise to a higher plane as all members have experienced the phenomenon in question in one way or another. When deeper communication happens through critical introspection, the flow of shared experiences and understandings increases. This heightened awareness and interactions flow as experiences are added and connected to what was originally shared.

## Purpose

We sought to improve our practices by better understanding the interplay between reflection and critical friendship in collaborative groups such as ours and the ways in which that interplay shapes individual practice both inside and outside the group. To that end, two wonderings guided our examination: What has been the role of critical friendship in our group's reflective practice? And in what ways has reflection influenced/shaped individual growth as a teacher/teacher educator/researcher?

## Materials and methods

In examining individual teacher growth through collaborative group reflection, we adopted the narrative inquiry research method (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), a storied method employed to unpack narratives of experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Caine et al., 2022). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that:

..Experience, not narrative, is the driving impulse...narrative inquiry [is] a way to study experience...narrative is the closest we can come to experience...our guiding principle...is to focus on experience and to follow where it leads (p. 188).

Experience, as we understand it, pulls on the past and is informed by the present even as it reaches into an unknown future.

We each responded to our inquiry questions *via* online reflective writings. As a form of triangulation, we reached out to past Portfolio Group members from Eagle High School (Mari, Sandi, Paul, and Ron), adding their reflections to our data pool (used here with permission). We (the authors) then individually and collaboratively analyzed the reflective writings for emergent themes that sometimes crossed boundaries of campus portfolio committees and the larger Portfolio Group. Three interpretative devices underpin our chosen research method: (1) broadening, (2) burrowing, and (3) storying-restorying (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), all of which instantiate Dewey's (1938) concept of education as "reconstruction without end." To promote trustworthiness, we purposefully selected exemplars

from the reflective writing pieces that showed transparency and authenticity of experience. Mishler (1990) explained that the essential criterion for such judgments is the degree to which we can rely on the concepts, methods, and inferences of a study, or tradition of inquiry, as the basis for our own theorizing and empirical research (p. 419).

## Stories of experience

Analysis revealed various themes running through the group's individual reflections like currents and undercurrents, along with occasional riptides. Like river currents, some narratives of experience underscored the flow of group interactions moving in a common direction toward professional growth. Other times, like powerful undercurrents, our stories highlighted the deep influence of reflective group practice and critical friendship on individual and school change. Still others called attention to the ways in which group reflection within a trusting knowledge community allows for the sharing of difficult stories that could potentially carry us out to sea like riptides, if not for the continued support of the group.

## Current: Coming together as reflective practitioners

Reflections from Portfolio Group members present and past commonly began with beginning stories of coming together as reflective practitioners. Because their story resonated with what was happening across campuses, we chose to highlight a beginning story from Portfolio Group members Michaelann, Mari, Sandi, and Paul, all of whom worked at Eagle High School and were engaged in their campus portfolio committee. In this collectively retold story, the quartet reflected on how the threesome-turned-foursome came together around a common purpose and student success, even though there were distinct differences in their content areas, leadership styles, and personalities. We begin with retired social studies teacher, Mari, who explained.

Teachers and administrators called us the Trinity—Michaelann, Sandi, and I. We had great success working together resulting in our school receiving many grants. I think one reason for our success is that we were deeply rooted in our school's and community's cultures. Paul became an essential part of our collaborative group a bit later...he brought the student/alumni perspective...[and] the Trinity became the Four Seasons. Another contributing factor is that we all brought different talents. We celebrated these talents, but we also each understood our deficits and were comfortable with another team member reigning us in.

Retired English language arts teacher Sandi described the group.

We were a strange team, bound together by the love for our students. . . We only knew each other while passing in the halls, but a burden to create a better school for our kids knitted us together in a beautiful tapestry. We became a model for our campus in reflective practices, sharing our triumphs and failures openly with the Portfolio Group.

Sandi continued, explaining,

The one thing that we focused on was our students' and school's needs. Writing times stretched long into the nights, groping for the right word, the correct phrase that would showcase those sometimes-overwhelming needs. Each of us looked through different lenses, yet when put together, [it] became a beautiful kaleidoscope.

Paul (former mathematics teacher now mathematics consultant) had this to say,

The earth has seasons because, according to astronomical geometry, sunlight strikes the earth's surface at different angles and with different intensities at different times of the year. Each season, with its differing amount of sunlight energy, comes together to paint a full picture of a year in time for any particular landscape. Likewise, four teacher leaders came together during Eagle High School's ongoing reform journey. Each of us came to this leadership group with differing experiences. . . Each of those experiences yielded differing perspectives that came together, like the seasons do, to provide a fuller picture of our collective work in improving teaching to improve students' learning experiences.

Regarding the whole group, Mari had this to say,

I guess what made our collaborative group work so well together. . . is that while we each brought something different to the table, we all shared a vision of what "could be." We had all been trained in various reflective practices and critical friendship protocols which. . . allowed us to focus on the work and to really get to the heart of knowing how we knew something.

## Unpacking

This story from the Portfolio Group teachers at Eagle High School echoes what occurred across all of our schools. The contemporary reflections illustrate the value placed on the poly-vocal, poly-perspectival aspect of group reflection. Mari's statement of "sharing [their] triumphs and failures

openly with the Portfolio Group" exhibited vulnerability and transparency, showing how critical friendship helped to create a safe space in which authentic reflection could take place, leading to professional growth. Gayle's reflections (former grant coordinator/administrator at Heights Community Learning Center now program manager/post-doctoral researcher in higher education) summarized the role of reflective feedback in the larger Portfolio Group.

The feedback given by the Portfolio Group is. . . evidence of the intersection of reflective practice and critical friendship within the group as responses are mindful and aimed at supporting one another in our campus and individual growth. There has often been a narrative flow of experiences in the group in which experiences shared by one person. . . have later been experienced by others. . . This is when narrative plotlines seem to come full circle.

## Current: Group reflection as a change in practice

Coming together with others as reflective practitioners was sometimes a new—or at least different—experience for Portfolio Group members. Donna (former English language arts teacher at Jefferson Middle School now at a local private PK-12 school), retold an originating story about reflection that occurred alongside other Portfolio Group members.

The first time I remember being asked to "reflect" rather than just "offer feedback" or "write in your journal" was at my Critical Friends Group® Coaches Training Seminar in 1998. At the end of the first day of our five-and-a-half-day training session, the facilitators asked our group of about thirty local educators to turn in written "reflections" that responded to the simple prompts "What worked?," "What didn't work?," and "What do you need?" I dutifully responded on the triplicate paper with bland comments such as "Thank you for sticking to the agenda" and "I need more of the same!" (personal reflection; June 22, 1998) (Reid, 2013, p. 11).

Donna recalled her reaction when the group leaders responded to participant reflections, saying,

I was flabbergasted. The assurance that the leaders had actually read the individual reflections and changed their practice in response to our needs was incredibly empowering, and the act of sharing the written reflections aloud helped turn our group into a true community. Even if my exact words were not shared, I knew that I was not alone when I heard a similar thought in somebody else's

words. Often participants had radically different responses to the day's activities, and that helped broaden our own perspectives. By the end of the week, I was writing more and more in my daily reflections (Reid, 2013, pp 11–12).

Similarly, the Portfolio Group introduced a safe reflective space for Annette, former community liaison at Cochrane Academy (now a district in-home parent trainer of children with disabilities).

As a woman of color, working with the Portfolio Group was the first time I was able to sit with a group of educators and talk about the ways in which culture shapes teaching and learning—especially the cultures of students at our different schools. Together we were able to dissect different learning styles and modalities of our students, like how some students need time to reflect and others need kinesthetic activities. When looking at the African American community at my school, for example, using different modalities from the arts, such as movement, music, visual arts, and drama, often enhanced student learning. Using these strategies across the content areas helped students grasp the concepts of math, science, language arts, and other subject areas. These conversations with fellow Portfolio Group members were enlightening to me. They . . . gave me relevant feedback to take back to and share with other campus teachers.

For Michaelann (former Eagle High School visual arts teacher now university assistant professor), the Portfolio Group introduced her to group reflection.

The Portfolio Group was the one place that my practice was challenged with questions of why and how rather than when and what. It was the first place that I was asked and expected to think about my teaching and the students' learning. In my school, we were asked to do, to produce, and to prove that what we were doing in the classroom was "right." The reflective piece came first for me. . . I started keeping journals. . . which were the foundation to my new learning. The collaboration was much more difficult for me, but very beneficial and rewarding. Now, I find myself wanting to engage in collaboration more and more in different contexts, as it enhances my individual practice.

## Unpacking

These reflections suggest that while the Portfolio Group members may have engaged in reflection in their own practice, group reflection and discussion of practice was not a common occurrence on their campuses. The stories illustrate school contexts and the lack of space provided for teachers to engage in professional dialogue. Developing

an organic approach to group reflection created an optimal experience across members within the Portfolio Group as illustrated in Donna writing more and more in her reflective journal, Annette finding a place as a woman of color in which she could engage in critical professional dialogue (Placier et al., 2005) about the influence of culture in teaching and learning, and Michaelann looking for other collaborative spaces through which she experiences professional growth.

## Undercurrent: Power of reflection and critical friendship in bringing about change

Individual reflections revealed the deeper influence on personal practice that came about through collaboration and group reflection. Reflecting on the group's work, Sandi stated,

Our . . . team became a force that helped bring about great change in our school and presented opportunities for our kids. There's a type of magic that happens when a team works toward a common goal.

Similarly, Michaelann wrote,

It seems the reason that we were able to do so much and accomplish so much with our campus portfolio work and in the larger Portfolio Group is because we were just working together to do our best for the students.

Considering the insights gained through group reflection on her campus, Donna shared,

The activities that first brought the Portfolio Group together. . . were also highly reflective and highly social. I spent so much time with other members of my school's portfolio committee, and those shared discussions were invaluable to creating the feeling of shared mission and values that helped us take on social justice issues such as de-tracking academic classes. Reflecting as a group. . . gives people explicit insight into other people's thinking and learning.

For Ron (retired Eagle High School visual arts teacher), the Portfolio Group introduced him to group reflection as a path to teacher growth.

The new practices of looking at my work through lesson plans and the evidence of artwork flipped a switch in my brain. I immediately saw a difference in my students' written and visual work—which I had already thought was great. The members were across content areas and grade

levels, but their input really helped me grow as a teacher and as a reflective practitioner. Looking back, it was because of the collaborative work at Eagle High School, the Portfolio Group, and critical friendships that I went from being a good teacher to a great teacher and can still be that life-long learner.

Annette shared a different perspective to group reflection within the Portfolio Group as she had left the group before the grant ended and recently returned after 20 years.

As a reflective educator, I left the group equipped to go out and be a leader. I know and understand how to engage teachers and administrators in critical conversations about what students need to achieve at their highest level. I am much more knowledgeable about teaching strategies, how to learn by listening to my colleagues' reflections on their work and mine, and how to be a culturally responsive teacher for student cultures other than my own.

Paul shared the role of reflection in his campus group's work saying,

A commonly held strong belief in the power of reflective practice tied the four of us together in common purpose and passion for our work. . . Our school's espoused theory was that a careful combination of theory, action, and reflection would lead to better teachers which would then lead to better student learning. That espoused theory became reality through the power of reflection and critical friendship.

Gayle summed up her thoughts on the group's reflective practice, saying,

It seems to me that reflective practice and critical friendship have simply become part of my identity. Both inform my practice and have helped to make me a better educator, a more caring collaborator, and a deeper-thinking researcher.

## Unpacking

These reflections shared by individual Portfolio Group members show how their campus portfolio committees bonded around "passion," "shared mission," and "common purpose" in the school reform work which they then brought to the larger Portfolio Group's work. They reveal the value that Portfolio Group members placed on reflectively engaging with critical friends in order to bring about individual change in practice, school change, and student success. This suggests that, for the Portfolio Group at least, reflection and critical friendship walk hand-in-hand, as do reflection, school

improvement, and student success. As a result, the cross-school Portfolio Group became a safe haven where continuous streams of lived challenges were shared and tentative responses were entertained.

## Riptide: The role of collaborative groups in navigating career challenges

Teachers/teacher educators face a myriad of challenges every day. The news presents us with school shootings, racial discrimination, and child abuse that teachers in our PK-12 schools must confront daily. One of the biggest challenges that receives very little media attention is how to be a good educator for all students in the ever-changing educational landscape. One way the Portfolio Group members navigate those treacherous waters is through collaboration, reflection, and critical friendship. Considering the interplay of reflection and critical friendship in our collaborative group, Gayle shared,

Reflective practice entered the Portfolio Group early on through the telling and retelling of our teacher stories/school stories which. . . gave rise to a great deal of professional dialogue—a group characteristic that continues. Importantly, these were (are) not stories shared as complainers but rather as professionals trying to make sense of our experiences or situations within particular settings. For example, when I needed to have a difficult conversation with an administrator about inappropriate behavior, the Portfolio Group provided a space in which to debrief the awkward but critical situation.

Despite the benefits of group reflection and dialogue experienced by Portfolio Group members, our school contexts were not always the most positive environments. Some campuses did not appreciate or value the role of reflective practice and teacher dialogue in promoting teacher growth and school improvement for student success. This underappreciation sometimes extended to teachers that had become school leaders or to teacher positions that had been created to carry out grant purposes. Such was the case for Mari, Paul, and Annette. Mari and Paul had taken on school leadership roles during the grant years. When funding ended and the administration no longer needed to rely on their skill sets, however, the principal began an organized plot to reclaim perceived leadership and power from the Four Seasons (Mari, Paul, Sandi, and Michaelann). Without disclosing details, the riptide became so powerful that Mari sought early retirement and Paul moved to another school district.

Annette had been hired as her campus' community liaison to work extensively with parents and the community, offering education-related support and breaking down barriers between home, community, and school. When a

change of administration occurred, Annette found herself in a less-than-favorable and unsupportive environment of accountability which initiated her story of leaving (Craig, 2014) both the school and the Portfolio Group. She shared,

Even in the midst of all of the great school reform work happening and students thriving on our campus, we were getting push back from our new principal. A year before the grant ended, she was very concerned about the grant budget, especially in regard to paying grant-funded teacher stipends and salaries after the grant ended. She often made mention of not being able to continue to pay my salary, which came from grant money, the next year. This talk made me feel as though my salary was taking away money from students. After repeatedly hearing from my principal, I made a very hard decision to leave the school and its reform work and return to the classroom as a special education teacher at a different campus. It was such a deflating situation that I left the Portfolio Group without explaining what happened.

Annette's story of leaving (Craig, 2014) only came to light when she returned to the group in 2021. Her reflections on the years away from the Portfolio Group give insight into the personal and professional toll of her leaving the group.

During my time away from the group—my time at sea, so to speak—my path would cross with Michaelann's. I was happy that the Portfolio Group was still together, because I know how much it helped me reflect and collaborate on my teaching practices. I also felt sad that I was not still a part of the group because no other district staff developments provided the opportunity to discuss what and how I teach students that included reflection, collaboration, and acknowledged my experiences.

Fortunately for us, Annette's story of leaving became a story of returning when she serendipitously met Cheryl in a mall parking lot, leading to her return.

I had not worked with Cheryl and the group for years, but because of the professionalism and comradery of friendship she fosters, I received a warm and gracious welcome back. We all know that we can build on how well we worked together in the past, with Cheryl's guidance, to do future initiatives to effectively develop teachers, and ultimately increase student success.

## Unpacking

These reflective accounts show different ways the Portfolio Group supports one another in navigating career challenges

and how some career challenges become stories of leaving. The story of Mari and Paul leaving public education suggests that teacher leadership may sometimes be interpreted as vie for power within school contexts. Because other Portfolio Group members left the group when the reform funding ended, we erroneously assumed that Annette's departure followed the same plotline. It did not occur to us that an administrator with an ulterior motive had intervened and forced her hand. Annette's story also reflects her valuing of reflecting as critical friends in community.

## Riptide: Intersecting experiential stories of institutional narratives

What follows is a very recent example of the pinpointing of institutional narratives that Cheryl, Michaelann, and Gayle brought to the surface for critical examination over the course of this study. Some people think of narratives of experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990) as being unique to us as individuals. Interacting with Portfolio Group colleagues as a knowledge community (Craig, 1995, 2007; Olson and Craig, 2001) engaged in critical friendship over time, however, have made us think otherwise.

When Cheryl shared her “fish jumps over the dragon gate” (Craig, 2020b) experience with the Portfolio Group a few years back, members quickly laid their personal stories alongside Cheryl's (Curtis et al., 2018). Recently, Michaelann shared a fresh plotline of experience, one that Cheryl previously had experienced, but not one that she had heard from others in the group or had had the opportunity to reflect on deeply. Within days, Cheryl had a second experience of the same variety and Gayle had chimed in with her own similar story. Each had encountered situations within their institutions in which they were encouraged to take certain actions that would acknowledge their work and positively impact their careers, only to be later informed that it was “not your turn.” Through engagement in critical perspective talking and group reflection, they were able to unpack and discuss similar situations in community. They realized that their institutions had unspoken plotlines and that they had been totally unaware of these under-the-surface narratives, naively thinking that decisions were based solely on meritorious activity. However, when the language of “whose turn it was” surfaced, they began to see their experiences nested in other institutional history and commitments. Fortunately, each of them had encountered faculty/staff who spoke truth to power, which aided their sense-making.

## Unpacking

Despite Portfolio Group members being in different professional contexts, they experienced a shared bumping up of places where their personal stories collided with other

institutional narratives. This revelation was more profound because three members experienced it and engaged in critical conversations in community.

## Discussion: Currents, undercurrents, riptides, and present horizons currents

The micro-exemplars illustrated in the findings reflect how optimal or near-optimal experiences became the current in which the Portfolio Group members “swam.” Many times, we turned to past experiences and built on previous learning to continue our group and individual growth. The constant flow in the Portfolio Group was the collaboration among its members and their institutional backdrops. The reflective process utilized in the group was founded in our study of Schön’s (1983, 1995) work and CFG© professional development which became embedded in our way of working and being together. The act of critical friendship was no longer prescriptive and regimented but was an organic and professionally fulfilling approach to living and working toward a common goal of improvement of teaching and learning in each individual in a collaborative and highly reflective way.

### Undercurrents

Underlying the reflective practice and critical friendship of the larger Portfolio Group and various campus portfolio committees was (and is) the deeper significance, or undercurrent, of working collaboratively for teacher professional growth and school change—all aimed at promoting opportunities for students that lead to their success. This undercurrent of improving student learning was the motivation for school reform work initiated in the Portfolio Group schools prior to the grant award and continued to be the driving force behind both our school-based and Portfolio Group-based collaborative work. Portfolio Group members found that, through reflection, collaboration, critical friendship, and shifting mindsets, teachers have the ability to act as conduits for change in the larger school and educational landscapes.

### Riptides

We have found in later research discussions that in some instances running with the current was not the optimal experience for all and became their story of leaving. Mari and Paul chose to leave their school rather than remain in a contentious setting. Similarly, Annette’s story paints a picture of professional fatigue in fighting against the administrative agendas. Just as a swimmer becomes fatigued fighting against the

riptide, so did Mari, Paul, and Annette. They all voluntarily left their positions, but in retrospect their decisions were anything but voluntary. Still, these retired and former teachers desired to author their own stories in their own words—laced with their own experiences—thus showing how their sense of critical friendship and collaboration have transcended time, place, and profession. Mari now pours her strengths into church, cycling, and philanthropic endeavors, contributing greatly to education’s informal spaces and standing as exemplary role models of “stories to live by” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998) in their respective communities of knowing. Cheryl, Michaelann, and Gayle, through their interconnecting stories, make public the underlying plotline of something “not being their turn.” They highlight how institutional agendas crash, causing riptides for those who have been predestined to be part of their plotlines.

### Present horizons

Past Portfolio Group members Mari, Sandi, Paul, and Ron have become better teachers through reflection, critical friendship, and collaboration and have continued on that journey, having taken up very different—although complementary—pathways in education’s informal spaces. Continuing their work in formal education landscapes, Michaelann, Donna, Annette, Gayle, and Cheryl not only attribute reflection, critical friendship, and collaboration in the Portfolio Group to their professional growth, but also to their remaining in education. Their professional longevity stands as a counterpoint to what Texas A&M psychologist and professor of business administration Anthony Klotz coined “the Great Resignation” (Lodewick, 2022).

### Closing thoughts

The final piece of the puzzle, the one that brings the whole Portfolio Group picture into focus is the school’s university-based external formative evaluator. The schools in the Portfolio Group had many things in common, but what turned out to be the most important commonplace was the interactions of the school committees under the guidance of Cheryl Craig. She brought to the table both the understanding of and experiences with collaboration and reflection that the school-based teachers had never before experienced. The theoretical and practical experience Cheryl had in Canada at the University of Alberta seemed to be what our schools most needed. She showed Portfolio Group members how to be and interact collaboratively rather than competitively. Cheryl also guided the group into understanding the difference between “proving” and “improving,” beginning with our school portfolio-making. The shifting of members’ perceptions and perspectives into seeing multiple ways of knowing (multiperspectival knowing)



while claiming their narrative authority (Craig and Olson, 2002) was (and is) pivotal to the longevity of the Portfolio Group. Cheryl's eyes were (and are) cast on shared experiences, which we have neither linked nor critically unpacked. She has known that ongoing critical inquiry around shared experiential stories is the glue that would hold our group together long after the reform-based portfolio work and funding ceased.

Optimal experience is intense in the doing and perhaps these micro-exemplars are even more optimal because such experiences were had and unpacked alongside others/in community with one another. For example, Donna's story of having leaders value your reflections would have been powerful in and of itself, but possibly because it happened in collaboration with other Portfolio Group members was even more optimal. The opening story of Eagle High School illustrates how working in a reflective group was the right undercurrent or optimal experience to swiftly move a school campus from one of independent educators to a school with a single mission: student success (Reyes and Phillips, 2003).

What made less-than-positive experiences optimal, was not the experiences themselves which were negative, but the critical reflection and unpeeling of the experiences, making critical reflection in community the optimal experience and the less-than-positive experiences merely pathways to richer understandings. This was recounted in the riptide of Cheryl, Michaelann, and Gayle having to "wait their turn." Others that had had negative experiences such as Annette's story of leaving found their optimal experience in the reflective practice and collaboration with the Portfolio Group and ultimately her story of returning to her knowledge community.

According to Conle (2001), "narrative is used both for the gathering and the representation of data which are usually created and revised collaboratively between researchers and their "subjects" (p. 21). We, the members of the Portfolio Group, walked on both or probably multiple sides of the line between researcher and researched through the years. Many times, we were looking as teacher researchers and reflecting upon our classroom/educational setting and then other times we were both researcher and subject. Gathering and re-examining our group's history through storied experiences also highlighted the ways in which the skillsets gained through our collaboration (e.g., group facilitation, interpersonal communication, being non-competitive in the group but competitive outside the group in applying for funding, composing collaborative texts, etc.) improved our individual practices and our range of experience, which was particularly important as some moved to district positions or to university settings. The common thread across the stories is our work...from teaching to school portfolios, to examining literature together, to action research to improve teaching/learning, to teacher research on broader

education topics...consistently returning us to our shared scholarship and optimal experiences. And, as Conle (2001) points out,

This seems appropriate if one considers good teaching not primarily as an accomplishment in appropriate planning, excellent techniques, and thoughtful pedagogical moves, but as a lived accomplishment that is intimately linked to the way one lives one's life and relates to people and deals with patterns of teaching and learning that were acquired earlier in life (p. 22).

In the beginning and as we continue, we are a group of educators collaboratively living and working to become better teachers. Through reflective learning, we thrive as we become our best-loved selves (Craig, 2013, 2017, 2020a; Li et al., 2019; McDonald, 2021; Schwab, 1954/1978) in a knowledge community buoyed by critical friendship.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

MK, GC, and CC: research topic, methods, and design. MK, GC, CC, DR, and AE: data collection, analysis, and research text. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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