

**Critical friends in school leadership: A case study of
the development of departmental heads in high
schools**

by

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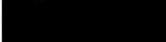
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Date Submitted: January 2024

DECLARATION

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SUPERVISOR'S STATEMENT

This dissertation has been submitted with my approval.

Signature: 

Prof Inbanathan Naicker (Supervisor)

Date: 06 January 2024

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I begin by expressing my deepest gratitude to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Your grace and mercy have been my guiding light throughout this dissertation. Anchored in the profound Psalm 9:1, *"I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds,"* your constant presence has provided me with strength, and courage through every step of this journey.

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A special thank you goes to my six participants, whose sacrifices and commitment to this study are deeply appreciated. Your involvement has enriched this work, and I am forever grateful for your contributions.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Your boundless grace has been the guiding force behind every word written, every discovery made, and every milestone achieved. I firmly believe that this work marks the inception of a greater purpose that you have set within me. May this endeavour stand as a testament to your unwavering guidance and the beginning of the profound journey you have ordained for me.

ABSTRACT

In the intricate tapestry of human connections lies a unique facet: critical friendships. These alliances, characterised by trust, guidance, and diverse perspectives, hold particular relevance in school leadership, notably for Departmental Heads (DHs). This study explores Critical Friends (CFs) within high school leadership, drawing from Transformational Leadership Theory and Transformative Learning Theory, tracing their historical underpinnings and evolution. Utilising a case study methodology, this research pursues three primary objectives: firstly, identifying the contributors to DHs development as CFs; secondly, exploring the expansion of CF networks among DHs; and lastly, delineating the leadership domains where CF guidance is sought. Using semi-structured interviews and Metaphorical Photo-Elicitation (MPE), this case study delves into the dynamics of CFs in school leadership. Purposeful sampling ensures a mosaic of insights, capturing the kaleidoscope of participant perspectives. The findings of the case study further identify pivotal elements imperative for the cultivating and sustaining of CF networks. Among these elements, participants underscored the indispensability of listening skills, confidentiality, and honesty within such relationships. Trust emerges as a cornerstone in critical friendships, intricately intertwined with the practice of active listening. Participants in the study highlighted the pivotal role CFs play in supporting school improvement initiatives, particularly in low-performing schools, as observed in both research schools. DHs expressed engaging with CFs to strategise and implement approaches aimed at elevating their schools from the low-performance zone. This exploration serves to spotlight the indispensable role of CFs in the landscape of school leadership development, shedding light on their multifaceted contributions to growth, transformation, and resilience in DHs.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS / ACRONYMS

CF	Critical Friend ('critical friendship' is used in its expanded form throughout the study)
CFG	Critical Friends Group
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DH	Departmental Heads
DP	Deputy Principal
FDP	Former Deputy Principal
MPE	Metaphorical Photo Elicitation
MPES	Metaphorical Photo Elicitation Schedule
NSC	National Senior Certificate
PAM	Personnel Administrative Measures
PLC	Professional Learning Community
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team

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CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUALISING THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Critical Friends (CFs) are a creative and versatile form of support for school leaders (Gurr & Huerta, 2013). I draw on this concept to introduce my study that focuses on CFs in school leadership, particularly in the development of Departmental Heads (DHs). Swaffield (2004), argues that the forming of critical friendships is a catalyst in a range of school improvement, and personal improvement and has implications for leadership. In South Africa, some pressing educational issues impede the progress of effective teaching and learning. These include overcrowded classrooms, classroom indiscipline, violence in schools, poor academic performance, underqualified teachers, and teacher absenteeism (Maddock & Maroun, 2018; Singh, 2015). To overcome these challenges and promote school improvement, it is necessary for leaders to receive support in the form of critical friendships (Gurr & Huetra, 2013). Through these CFs, leaders can gain the knowledge and skills to address these issues and develop effective strategies for improving the overall quality of education (Villalobos, 2014).

The chapter commences with an exposition of the study's background and the research problem that it seeks to address. This is followed by a comprehensive articulation of the rationale of the study. Additionally, the significance of the study is explicated, emphasising the potential contributions that the study can make to the existing body of knowledge and its relevance to the practical concerns of various stakeholders. The chapter further outlines the key research questions that underpin the study, serving as a guide for subsequent research activities. To facilitate a clear understanding of the study, an explication of the key concepts used in the research is provided. Finally, the chapter concludes with a succinct presentation of the organisation of the study.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There is a constellation of relationships in the world: family, colleagues, friends, and teammates, to name a few. Critical friendships are another type of relationship and just as the name suggests, a CF is a trusted person who is committed to the friendship and helps to make appropriate decisions while also offering constructive feedback and various viewpoints (Schuck & Russell, 2018; Gurr & Huetra, 2013). Even educational leaders such as DHs require

a trustworthy, dependable, and supportive confidant as the position of leadership may engender feelings of isolation and solitude (Madrid, 2016).

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has mandated that DHs in schools play a crucial role as teacher leader, mentor, and subject specialist, and are responsible for ensuring the effective functioning of the department, as stipulated in (*Act 76 of 1998*). However, it can be argued that fulfilling these multiple roles requires additional support. In this regard Ghaviifer and Ibrahim (2014), highlight the importance of DHs mobilising teachers and establishing channels of communication and development, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), to equip themselves and others with knowledge, expertise, and skills.

PLCs have been defined as communities of teachers who share common values and focus on enhancing student learning, school performance, reflective discussions, and collaborations (DuFour & Eaker, 2009; Auslander & Haardorfer, 2018). In line with the DBEs integrated strategic planning framework for teacher education and development in South Africa, the establishment of PLCs has been put forward as a key strategy to enhance teacher capacity and promote professional growth (Personnel Administrative Measures) (PAM, 2022).

According to Auslander and Haardorfer (2018), one type of PLC is a Critical Friend Group (CFG), and they conceptualise CFGs as having similar aspects as PLCs, but there is more emphasis put on structured conversations via protocols to guide the member's learning process. The emergence of critical friendships among leaders is often attributed to changes in policies, work contexts, and aspirations for professional and personal growth, as well as a desire to enhance school improvement as noted (Auslander & Haardorfer, 2018). The support provided by CFs depends on the competencies of the participants and their specific areas of expertise requiring assistance (Auslander & Haardorer, 2018).

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Public schools across South Africa suffer from inadequate resourcing. DHs like many other educational leaders, confront substantial pressure to surmount obstacles. These leaders encounter numerous challenges such as limited financial resources, large class sizes, inadequate technological infrastructure, inadequate human resources, and, various other factors as noted (Melikhaya, 2020).

DHs face a significant challenge stemming from corporate managerialism, as noted by Akala (2021). This practice involves the re-conceptualisation of education, encompassing finance,

management, teaching, and learning, and viewing the education system as a business. Neoliberal strategies are then implemented to reduce government expenditure by curtailing costs (Akala, 2021), leading to a consolidation of management roles. As a result, DHs may encounter subjects in which they lack knowledge, skills, and expertise. An example of this would be the English educator at my school who serves as a DH for IsiZulu, Afrikaans, and Dramatic Arts teachers. Given her limited proficiency and expertise in these subjects, she relies on CF networks, such as DHs from other schools, subject advisors, and teachers from other schools, to enhance her professional development and empower and enrich her subordinates.

Given this research problem, the focus of my study is to explore the experiences of DHs in critical friendships. The purpose of this study is threefold. Firstly, it seeks to know more about the personal and professional identity of CFs. Secondly, it explores the procedures or actions taken by DHs to cultivate CFs. Thirdly, it seeks to describe the areas of school leadership where assistance is sought from a CF.

1.4 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This section deals with the rationale of the study. It draws on theoretical justifications, professional justifications, and personal justification (Clandinin, 2013).

1.4.1 THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION

The literature on CFs in leadership is extensive, with scholars exploring the benefits of CFs in various contexts. Fahey (2011), argues that CFs can enhance teacher learning and professional development, while Gurr and Huerta (2013), suggest that CFs can improve teacher practice and promote a culture of inquiry in schools. Villalobos (2014), notes that CFs can lead to increased teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction, while Kasterberg and Grant (2020), suggest that CFs can support teacher resilience. However, in the growing body of literature on CFs in education there is limited research on the role of CFs in the development of DHs. I have not found a study as yet that seeks to get a complete picture of the role of CFs in the development of DHs. My study seeks to fill this important gap in the literature.

1.4.2 PROFESSIONAL JUSTIFICATION

Understanding how CFs contribute to the development of DHs and how they facilitate this growth has captured my interest, as I've observed numerous colleagues participating in CF networks throughout my teaching career. In 2020, I had no other option but to engage with CFs, as I was asked to teach the subject of Dramatic Arts. Having no formal qualification or

experience as a Dramatic Arts teacher proved to be a challenge for me. I had to engage with Dramatic Arts teachers from other schools and the subject advisor to gain more perspective on the subject and further develop myself. This CF network was successful and assisted me in my development and improved my teaching practice, I was able to learn so much and in 2022 a 100% pass rate was obtained for Dramatic Arts in the National Senior Certificate Examination. This motivated me to want to know more about CFs in leadership in particular DHs because I am an aspiring DH.

1.4.3 PERSONAL JUSTIFICATION

As a young person, I had an inherent interest in leadership roles, which manifested itself in various settings, such as the playground, at school, in the classroom, and church I would naturally gravitate towards leadership roles. The church in particular played a vital role in my passion for leadership. The church leaders and instrumental friends encouraged and supported me to take up various roles of leadership in the church. For the last 11 years, I have been the young people's leader for the Durban Central area in KwaZulu-Natal. When I took up this colossal role in the church, I was young and initially lacked expertise and skills pertaining to leadership. At first, I was overwhelmed and daunted by the task. Friends helped and supported me in overcoming this, and I quickly began to thrive as a young people's leader and began to see the influence of my CFs on my life. My success as a young people's leader led to a heightened interest in the role of CFs in personal and professional development, and this aspiration for leadership extended into my career as an educator with the goal of becoming a DH.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the experiences of DHs through participation in critical friendships. Although there is a considerable amount of literature regarding CFs, limited research has focused on how DHs develop through participation in critical friendships. Therefore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on CFs and in school leadership. The study provides new insights into the role of CFs in the development of DHs and contributes to the ongoing discourse on the effectiveness of professional development strategies in school leadership.

Additionally, the study has practical implications for educational policymakers, administrators, and teachers. The findings of the study may be used to develop policies and programs that support the professional development of teachers and DHs, including the establishment of CF

networks at schools. Moreover, the study's findings can inform the design and implementation of training programs for DHs that take into account the role of CFs in their professional development.

1.6 KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Collectively, this study is underpinned by the following research questions:

- What are the personal and professional identities of critical friends that contribute to the development of Departmental Heads in the case study schools?
- How do the Departmental Heads grow their critical friend networks in the case study schools? (This question focuses on the processes, procedures, or actions DHs use to build and sustain critical friend networks.)
- What are the areas in which critical friends contribute to the development of Departmental Heads in the case study schools? (This question seeks to describe the areas of school leadership (e.g. induction and mentoring, curriculum development, staffing, conflict management in DHs work assistance is sought.)

1.7 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

In this section, I provide definitions of key terms and clarify how I used them in the study.

1.7.1 CRITICAL FRIENDS

Costa and Kallick (2008), describe this concept as a friend who offers constructive criticism of another person's work and analyse information from various perspectives while supporting and wanting the friend to succeed. Similar views are presented by Swaffield (2004), and Gurr & Huebra (2013). They add that critical friendships are challenging yet a very rewarding type of relationship that has implications for teacher practice, school leadership, and improvement. In this study, I use CFs to mean the people that the DHs engage with that offer them support and motivation, influence them, and guide them through constructive criticism that contributes to their development.

1.7.2 LEADERSHIP

Leadership and management are two intertwined concepts that play crucial roles in the success of an organisation. According to Bush (2007, 2020), leadership is the process of influencing and motivating followers to achieve a shared vision or goal. It involves having a clear sense of

direction, effective communication skills, and the ability to inspire and empower others to achieve their full potential. In the context of education, Bush (2020), notes that formal structures of leadership, such as principals are responsible for setting the vision, goals and priorities of the school, as well as providing guidance and support to staff.

According to Leithwood and Day (2007), management is concerned with planning, directing and controlling resources, including people, finances and materials to achieve specific objectives. In the context of education, management involves task scheduling, curriculum development and, ensuring policy and procedures are followed, management is more concerned with details and short term management (Bush, 2020).

Both leadership and management are necessary for the success of an organisation as they complement each other. This view is supported by Klingborg and Moore (2014), as they assert that effective leadership provides clear direction and motivation for followers, while effective management ensures that the necessary resources and processes are put in place to achieve the goals set by leadership. In the context of this study, the term leadership is used to refer to the formal structures of leadership within a school, with a particular focus on the role of DHs.

1.7.3 LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

According to Kets De Vres (2010), and Carroll (2019), leadership development focuses on the growth of social capital and the development of leadership as an influence process. This process is structured, holistic and continuous, with the goal of developing effective leaders who can bring about favourable progress for the organisation. Kjellstrom et al. (2020), also suggest that leadership development involves building networks that connect individuals within and outside the organisation in a collaborative manner.

In the context of this study, leadership development can be defined as the meaningful support provided to DHs to assist in their professional development, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes of the school. This support may include targeted training, mentoring, coaching and networking opportunities. By investing in the development of DHs, schools can foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement, which can lead to enhanced leadership capacity and improved overall performance (Kjellstrom et al., 2020).

1.7.4 DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In the context of education, a DH is an individual who is responsible for managing a specific department within a school. According to the PAM document a DH is responsible for ensuring

the effectiveness of their department, managing the curriculum, overseeing extra and co-curricular activities and performing management duties while also engaging in class teaching. Bush (2003), notes that in countries such as the United States and Britain, DHs are often referred to as middle managers, as they are responsible for managing a specific department within a larger organisation.

In the South African context DHs are the first line of the School Management Team (SMT), as they play a crucial role in ensuring the delivery of quality education and supervising curriculum development (Mpisane, 2015). In this study I use DHs to mean school managers who are responsible for managing a specific department within the school.

1.8 ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY

This section presents an overview of the five chapters in this study.

Chapter one – Conceptualising the study

This chapter aims to set the scene for the study by providing the background of the study and the research problem. I then highlight the justifications for this study. The significance and the three research questions underpinning this study are then presented. The key concepts are then outlined for further understanding of DHs critical friendships in this study.

Chapter two – Unravelling the threads: A scholarly exploration of the literature

This chapter begins with an intensive review of the literature and the key debates relating to CFs in school leadership are presented. The theoretical framework underpinning this study is provided.

Chapter three – The explored research terrain

The focus of this chapter is the research design and methodology of the study. This study is embedded in the interpretive paradigm using a qualitative methodology and therefore I discuss the qualitative methodology adopted in this study, which is a single case study. The methods of data generation, the data collection plan, and the analysis of data are then provided. The validity and ethical issues are then discussed.

Chapter four – Data presentation and analysis: unveiled insights

This chapter deals with the analysis of the data generated through the semi-structured and metaphorical photo elicitation interviews. The thematic approach will be used to analyse the

data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), mention a six-step plan for thematic analysis, and these include familiarisation with and immersion in the data; generating codes through labeling; identifying similarities and themes; analysis of themes; defining and naming themes; writing up the discussion of findings.

Chapter five – Echoes of inquiry and trails of wisdom: conclusions and contributions of the study

The summary of the entire study is presented in this chapter. The findings derived from the data and, the recommendations are provided.

1.9 CONCLUSION

The opening chapter of this study serves as an apt prelude to the study's overall focus and objectives. Commencing with a succinct exposition of the research problem, the chapter transitions into a compelling rationale for undertaking this research endeavour. The significance of this study is subsequently underscored, with an emphasis on the potential contributions to knowledge and practical applications. This is further reinforced by the presentation of three key research questions that will guide the subsequent research activities. To ensure conceptual clarity, the chapter outlines the key concepts that will be utilised throughout the study. Finally, a lucid overview of the organisation of the study concludes the chapter, highlighting its various sections and respective aims. My key learning in this chapter was that there is a dearth of literature that seeks to explore the experiences of DHs in critical friendships.

The ensuing chapter delves into an extensive exploration of the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks that are germane to the study. The next chapter offers a comprehensive review and synthesis of existing scholarly works. The literature review will encompass a critical analysis of past studies that have shed light on related topics, exploring key findings, limitations, and gaps in the literature.

CHAPTER TWO

UNRAVELLING THE THREADS: A SCHOLARLY EXPLORATION OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to provide a rigorous and methodical examination of the phenomenon of CFs in school leadership, through a comprehensive review of the existing literature. The metaphorical concept of "Unravelling the Threads" is particularly fitting for this purpose, as it implies a systematic and thorough approach to understanding the various components that make up the phenomenon of CFs in school leadership. This literature review builds upon the preceding chapter, which introduces the research problem, justifications for the study, research questions, and key concepts used in the research. The primary objective of this chapter is to unravel the literature on CFs in school leadership and provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic in order to lay the foundation for the study.

The literature review is divided into two sections, Section A and Section B. Section A presents a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic of CFs, specifically in relation to their role in the development of DHs. This review engages with various debates and discussions around CFs, including their impact on DHs, their role in school reform, their impact on leadership practices, and their influence on student-teacher identity, professional development, and facilitation of change. The literature review process involved an extensive search of various academic databases, including Google Scholar, Research Space, Google, and The University of KwaZulu Natal library. The selected studies were analysed and synthesised to create a cohesive narrative that presents a comprehensive understanding of the CFs in school leadership. Section B of the chapter focuses on the framework. A study can use many theories that combine to form a theoretical framework. This section provides a critical analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of the research, exploring the key concepts, assumptions, and perspectives that have shaped the study's approach. The theories explored in this section include Transformational Leadership Theory and Transformative Learning theory.

SECTION A – REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.2 CRITICAL FRIENDS

CFs have been recognised as a crucial form of PLCs in schools for many years. The concept of a CF was initially introduced by Stenhouse (1975), in the context of action research in curriculum development, where involving colleagues in the process could offer valuable perspectives and feedback. Costa and Kallick (1993), suggest that a critical friendship comprises a pair of individuals where one assumes the position of the learner and the other serves as the CF. The roles can be interchanged as well. The learner receives constructive feedback and encourages their CF to ask questions and provide assessments of their professional practice, thus allowing them to reflect on their actions and thoughts.

According to Macphail et al. (2021), CFs are characterised by three key elements. The first element is a reciprocal and collaborative relationship, where both parties engage in an exchange of information and resources for mutual benefit, while also enhancing each other's capacity to achieve a common purpose. This notion is consistent with Himmelman's (2002), definition of collaborative relationships. The second defining characteristic is a willingness to be challenged, which entails a receptive attitude towards receiving critical feedback or actively seeking opportunities to challenge oneself by providing meaningful critical feedback to the other party. This element requires a significant investment of time and effort into the critical friendship relationship. Lastly, Macphail et al., (2021), posit that intrinsic motivation is a crucial element for sustaining CFs over time, even though extrinsic motivators may also play a role. The authors argue that CFs should last only as long as they serve their intended purpose.

According to Costa (2008), a CF is an individual who is trustworthy and provides valuable insights by posing challenging questions, presenting data that can be examined from alternative perspectives, and offering constructive feedback in a supportive manner. The primary purpose of feedback in the context of critical friendship is to support and advocate for a colleague's work and professional development, rather than to evaluate their performance (Costa, 2008). Swaffield (2004), provides a more precise definition of a CF as someone who offers a unique perspective of the school from the outside and helps to shift the focus by bringing fresh insights to familiar situations.

Although the term "critical friend" may be misunderstood due to the negative connotations associated with the word "critique" it is important to note that critique is an essential part of the evaluation and the ability to view a situation through different lenses (Villalobos, 2014, p.28).

Costa and Kallick (1993), argue that having a CF is necessary to continually change one's focus and find the best fit for their situation. However, there are differing opinions among teachers regarding the balance between critique and friendship in the context of critical friendships. Achinstein and Meyer (1997), found that teachers had varying perspectives on how critical and how friendly their CFs should be. On the other hand, MacBeath (1998), suggested that a CF should first establish a friendship before moving into the role of a critic. Swaffield (2004), emphasised the dual nature of the role of a CF, which involves both providing support and offering critique. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise the complexity of the CF role and establish a clear understanding and agreement on its purpose and expectations.

Subsequent studies by scholars such as Greco (2016), Costa and Kallick (1993), Patterson and Wattson (2017), and Phillips (2003) have highlighted the significance of CFs. CFs have been identified as contributing to school reform (Villalobos, 2014), and influencing leadership practice (Fahey, 2011). In the subsequent section, a detailed examination of the identified studies is presented.

2.2.1 THE IMPACT OF CRITICAL FRIENDS IN SCHOOL REFORM

The significance of CFs in school reform, as noted by Villalobos (2014), lies in their capacity to offer invaluable feedback and support to school leaders. Villalobos emphasizes that CFs enable leaders to navigate complex challenges, make informed decisions, and ultimately implement meaningful changes to improve learner outcomes. CFs cultivate a sense of shared ownership and accountability among school leaders by facilitating meaningful dialogue and the development of a shared vision for change. Villalobos also highlights the importance of cultivating strong relationships founded on trust, shared values, and purpose, which are essential for CFs to deliver constructive critique and practical support effectively. Additionally, Gurr and Huerta (2013), contribute to this discourse by highlighting the transformative potential of CF relationships in facilitating school improvement efforts. They emphasise the collaborative environment CFs create, grounded in trust and mutual respect, where existing practices can be challenged, and innovative reforms can be supported. Together, these scholars underscore the vital role of CFs in driving school reform initiatives and improving learner outcomes.

2.2.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRITICAL FRIENDS IN SHAPING LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

While the previous section focused on the impact of CFs in driving change within educational systems, it is important to also consider the broader significance of these relationships in shaping leadership practice. In this section, I examine one specific study that highlights the significance of CFs in supporting leadership growth and development and the key lessons that can be drawn from this research.

The study conducted by Fahey (2011), indicates that the participation of school principals in critical friendships can have a positive impact on their leadership practices. The use of protocols, such as consultancy, within the critical friendship fostered a sustained and reflective learning environment among principals, allowing for a deeper understanding of their leadership practices. As a result, principals were better equipped to make informed and effective decisions in their capacity as school leaders. The primary focus of Faheys' (2011), research is the role of CFs in influencing the leadership practices of school principals, highlighting the crucial connection between reflective learning and effective decision-making. The study's findings demonstrate that CFs can significantly impact the leadership practices of school principals, providing them with opportunities to connect their work as members of the group to their general approach to school leadership and decision-making. In addition to Fahey's work, scholars such as Swaffield (2008, 2015), Gurr and Huerta (2013), and Henriksen and Aas (2020), also contribute to the discourse on critical friendships and school leadership. Their research emphasises the transformative potential of CF relationships in enhancing the leadership capabilities of school principals, underscoring the importance of reflective practice and collaborative learning in fostering effective decision-making within educational contexts. Integrating the insights from these scholars enriches the understanding of the role of CFs in shaping leadership practices and promoting continuous improvement in schools.

2.3 DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

Expanding on the discourse regarding the significance of CFs in influencing leadership practice, I now direct attention toward the role of critical friendships within the domain of educational leadership, particularly focusing on DHs.

In various countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, and Kenya the DH is included within the middle management or leadership hierarchy of schools (Shaked & Schechter, 2017). According to the PAM document released by the DBE in South Africa, the

DHs hold the responsibility of facilitating effective departmental functioning, organising extracurricular activities, and engaging in classroom teaching to ensure the proper education of learners. While the document acknowledges that DHs are involved in school management, their primary role is to supervise and support the teaching and learning process, which is considered the core function of educational institutions (Department of Basic Education, 2016). In essence, the PAM document establishes a clear link between the supervisory responsibilities of DHs and their involvement in promoting the academic success of students.

According to Fleming (2014), the DH has additional leadership and management obligations that go beyond their role as a classroom or subject teacher. In essence, the DH has a dual responsibility, where they must not only carry out their teaching duties but also assume additional managerial and leadership responsibilities. As the face of their respective departments, DHs are expected to take on numerous roles and responsibilities. In addition to their core duties, DHs are required to act as mentors for junior and newly appointed staff members, coach cultural or sporting teams, and seek out and provide necessary resources such as textbooks and lab materials to support their team members (Larusdottir & O' Connor, 2017).

Seobi and Wood (2016), emphasise that despite the high expectations placed on DHs, it is essential to acknowledge that they may lack sufficient experience, training, and communication skills, which could hinder their effectiveness in the role. Therefore, it is important to provide adequate support and resources to help DHs develop these skills and overcome any obstacles they may encounter. According to Ghamwari (2010), the absence of appropriate pre- and in-service professional training and preparation for curriculum leadership duties has resulted in DHs lacking the necessary skills to perform subject and general curriculum development activities effectively. Consequently, this may lead to academic departments without direction. Insufficient training and resources, coupled with inadequate support and encouragement for DHs to fulfil their responsibilities, particularly in developing countries such as South Africa, are among the challenges faced by DHs, as noted by Seobi and Wood (2016). DHs are expected to possess a deep understanding of their subject area and to act as curriculum leaders, as stated by Tapala et al. (2021). However, in certain instances, DHs may be responsible for overseeing teachers of multiple subjects, subjects that they may not necessarily specialise in or be an experts in.

In this context, the role of CFs becomes paramount, as they offer invaluable support and guidance to DHs, assisting them in navigating the complexities of their dual responsibilities.

CFs provide a trusted sounding board for DHs to discuss challenges, offer insights, and collaborate on strategies for effective leadership and management within their departments.

2.4 IDENTITY AND CRITICAL FRIENDS

Throughout the previous section, I explored the concept of DHs and the powerful influence that CFs can have on them. However, this raises an important question: how does the relationship between identity and CFs function in the context of teacher education? To address this question, I turn my attention to the theme of identity and CFs.

The concept of identity has been an object of inquiry across multiple disciplines and perspectives throughout history. Notably, George Mead (1934), is considered a pivotal early voice in the discourse on identity, particularly in his work on the notion of the self. Mead (1934), postulated that identity is an aspect of the self that develops and evolves through interactions and experiences within the environment. According to Mead's (1934), understanding, the self is formed within social settings and social engagements and encompasses an individual's beliefs and attitudes.

Similarly, Erik Erikson (1968), contributed to the discourse on identity from a psychological perspective, emphasising the significance of context and social interaction in the formation of one's identity. Erikson (1968), underscored that identity is not a static or fixed construct but rather something that continually transforms throughout an individual's lifetime.

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), noted that there have been several approaches to exploring identity with the goal of ongoing self-reinvention. In the realm of teaching, teacher identity encompasses an individual's self-concept and image, which are shaped by their beliefs, values, and practices. Chua et al. (2018) and Walkington (2005), both emphasise the importance of a teacher's identity in informing their actions within the classroom. The concept of identity, as discussed by Mead and Erikson, is highly relevant to the role of CFs in leadership. CFs are individuals who provide constructive feedback and support to leaders, with the aim of enhancing their growth and development (Gurr & Huerta, 2013; Swaffield, 2004; Villalobos, 2014). In this context, the formation and evolution of a leader's identity are critical to their ability to receive and benefit from such feedback.

2.4.1 MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

Recognising the fluid and multifaceted identities of teachers is a crucial step in empowering them to reimagine, rearrange, and renegotiate their personal and professional identities, thereby enabling them to become stronger agents of change (Pillay & Govinden, 2007). According to these scholars, the recognition of the diverse identities of teachers allows them to engage in critical self-reflection, which in turn can inform their teaching practices and ultimately improve student outcomes. One way in which these multiple identities shape the professional lives of teachers is through their relationships with CFs. CFs are individuals who engage in a collaborative process of reflection and inquiry with teachers, supporting them in their efforts to improve their teaching practices (Schuck & Russell, 2005). The identities of CFs can play a crucial role in the effectiveness of this process. Below I will explore how these multiple identities shape CFs that contribute to the development of DHs.

2.4.2 TEACHER IDENTITY AND CRITICAL FRIENDS

As educators gain more experience, their knowledge and understanding of teaching evolve. This evolution often leads to a deeper reflection on their practice and a greater awareness of their own identity as teachers. As Nancy, a Social science teacher reflects, *"A huge thing about how I'm a better teacher now, compared to when I began, is that I know a lot more now, and the things that I know I use differently in the classroom. So it's like I know more, I know differently, and I'm more reflective about how I know what I know. It makes everything better. I wish I was like this before"* (Olsen, 2010, p.29). This quote highlights the importance of ongoing learning and development for educators and underscores the potential benefits of critical friendships in supporting this growth. The identity of teachers is always changing, as they are in the process of 'becoming' (Naidoo, 2012, p.23). Teachers constantly engage in the process of creating new identities as a result of conversation, collaboration, consistent study, and in-depth reflection on their practice; this is the process of continually finding themselves and what they stand for (Lojdova et al., 2021; Naidoo, 2012). In the following section, the literature examining the influence of personal and professional identities on the effectiveness of CFs in fulfilling their role of providing constructive feedback to their peers for professional development will be presented.

2.4.3 PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL IDENTITIES OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), a teacher's identity is constantly evolving and subject to change due to various factors. Naidoo (2012), further argues that a teacher's professional identity is reflected in their classroom practices, including their decision-making when planning lessons, teaching style, and the types of activities used to engage students. Additionally, a teacher's approach to discipline, participation in school activities, and response to externally mandated educational requirements all reflect their professional identity as an educator. The plausibility of a teacher's professional identity is evident in their roles, social interactions, values, and behaviours that align with the expectations and norms of the teaching profession (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The development of a teacher's professional identity is influenced by various factors, including their self-perception in relation to the recognition they receive from the school and society, as well as their feelings toward their students (Naidoo, 2012). The idea of professional identity is dynamic and constantly evolving, influenced by contextual factors such as the learning opportunities available to teachers, their personal experiences, their level of autonomy, the influence of unions, and other external factors that shape their behaviour and actions both inside and outside the classroom (Naidoo, 2012).

Personal identity is an important concept in understanding the behaviour and performance of leaders in the workplace. Scholars have emphasised the interconnectivity between personal and professional identities (Johnson & Crow, 2017). While professional identity is informed by the roles and responsibilities of leaders in their respective organisations, personal identity refers to the individual's interpretation of their life beyond the workplace (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Govender, 2022). In the teaching profession, personal identity has been described as the teacher's understanding of their personal history, lifestyle, social connections, and belief in their ability to positively impact their students' lives (Bolívar et al., 2014).

Blose (2022), provides an illustrative example of the impact of personal identity on leadership practices. The deputy principal described in the study refused to engage in favouritism in the pursuit of promotions, emphasising the importance of professional conduct in all interactions with the school governing body. This approach was shaped by the deputy principal's personal identity, reflecting a belief in the importance of respecting the roles of governing bodies in school management.

The importance of personal and professional identities in CFs has been discussed by many scholars. Kastberg and Grant (2020), conducted a self-study on their critical friendship and

found that their personal and professional identities influenced the nature of their conversations. They noted that their conversations included personal topics and current realities in their lives, which reflected their personal identities. At the same time, their professional identities as mathematics teachers were also evident in their discussions of peer review of self-study reports in mathematics education journals. By understanding how their identities influenced their role as CFs, Kastberg and Grant were able to build a more effective and supportive relationship.

Swaffield (2005), identified four common factors that contribute to good relationships among CFs, namely trust, values, purpose and personal qualities, communication, and practical action. Trust, in particular, was highlighted as a crucial factor in the CF relationship. The establishment of trust is shaped by the personal and professional identities of the CF. Carlson (2019), and Swaffield (2005), noted that trust involves having confidence in the CFs' ability to do their job and act professionally, as well as having confidence in their judgments and reliability. For example, A CF who has a reputation for being reliable and trustworthy in their professional role is more likely to be trusted by the person or organisation being supported. Moreover, the personal identity of the CF, such as their communication style, attitude, and values, can also influence the development of trust.

Overall, the literature suggests that personal and professional identities play a crucial role in the CF relationship (Kastberg & Grant, 2020; Swaffield, 2005). By understanding how their identities shape their role as CFs, individuals can build more effective and supportive relationships that foster growth and development. It is essential to recognise the influence of personal and professional identities on trust, communication, and other factors that contribute to good relationships among CFs. This recognition can lead to more successful and fulfilling critical friendships.

2.5. THE INFLUENCE OF REFLECTION, NARRATIVE, AND DISCOURSE

The subsequent sections concern the influence of reflection, narrative, and discourse on shaping the personal and professional identities of CFs.

2.5.1 REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE IDENTITY OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

To gain a deeper understanding and develop a strong sense of one's identity, it is essential to engage in the process of self-reflection. Reflection is widely acknowledged as a vital tool for

teachers to become more self-aware and understand how their individual identity fits into a broader social context that involves other people (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Thus, reflection plays a crucial role in shaping one's identity. According to Govender (2022), Reflection is a crucial element for teachers to gain a thorough understanding of their teacher identity, as it allows them to continuously shape and reshape their identity through the process of introspection and self-evaluation.

Kelly et al. (2022), contend that critical friendships involve reflection, which encompasses the analysis of one's experiences, emotions, and thoughts, as well as the questioning of one's assumptions and biases. Through such practices, leaders, such as DHs, can gain an enhanced understanding of their identity, strengths, and areas for growth. For instance, a DH may participate in a critical friendship with other DHs, in which they meet regularly to engage in constructive criticism and feedback to help each other grow as leaders. During one such meeting, the DH might raise a recent challenge they encountered while managing a difficult situation with a teacher in their department. They may express their frustration and share their initial reaction to the situation, which involved a more punitive approach towards the teacher. However, through the process of reflection and feedback from their CFs, the DH gains a new perspective on the situation. The colleagues challenge their assumptions and help them view the situation from different angles. Consequently, the DH recognises that a more empathetic and collaborative approach would be more effective in resolving the issue and building a stronger relationship with the teacher.

This example highlights how CFs offer a supportive space for leaders to engage in self-reflection, challenge their assumptions, and grow both personally and professionally. It demonstrates how the process of reflection and feedback can enable leaders to gain a deeper understanding of their identity and values, as well as develop a stronger sense of self-awareness. By questioning their assumptions and biases, DHs can make more informed decisions and act with greater authenticity and integrity.

Kelly et al. (2022), posit that engaging in reflections with CFs holds significant power. In their study, one participant expressed that their team transformed into a formidable force, effecting significant change in their school and creating opportunities for their students. The participant described a sense of "magic" (Kelly et al., 2022, p.5) that occurred when a team worked towards a shared objective. This highlights the value of reflections in CFs not only in shaping one's identity but also in facilitating positive transformation. Consequently, this finding contributes

substantively to the existing literature, as highlighted by Govender (2022) and Kelly et al. (2022), by providing empirical evidence of the dual impact of reflective practices within CFs shaping identity and fostering substantial positive change.

2.5.2 ROLE OF NARRATIVE AND DISCOURSE IN SHAPING THE IDENTITY OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), teachers possess multiple identities that are shaped by narratives. In a recent study conducted by Kastberg and Grant (2020), CF conversations were found to provide insight into the professional identity of Mathematics Teacher Educators. The authors noted that a “*desire to understand each other*” and “*openness*” were key factors in this transformation (Kasberg & Grant, 2020, p. 4). The results of this study lend support to the idea that a narrative is a powerful tool in shaping identity, as the stories we tell ourselves and others about our experiences can influence our understanding of who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to others. Furthermore, this study suggests that narratives can play an important role in shaping the identities of CFs, as they share personal stories and gain a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to others.

According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), there is a clear connection between narrative and discourse. In the context of identity, discourse refers to the use of language to create and reinforce particular understandings of who individuals are and who they should aspire to be. Alsup's (2006), study demonstrates that discourse can serve as a facilitator of transformation in the personal and professional identities of student teachers. Through engagement in discourse that challenges their pre-existing beliefs and assumptions, student teachers were able to expand their understanding of themselves and their roles as educators. This transformative process involved confronting and reevaluating their identities, leading to the development of a more nuanced and reflective understanding of themselves. Given the transformative potential of discourse in shaping identities, it is plausible that critical friendships can also play a significant role in shaping the identities of school leaders by promoting meaningful and challenging conversations. Similar to Alsup's (2006), findings, such discourse could facilitate transformative experiences, leading to a more complex and informed understanding of oneself as a school leader.

2.6 ROLE OF CRITICAL FRIENDS

CFs can provide a multitude of benefits and serve various functions in the personal and professional development of individuals (Kelly et al., 2022; Macphail, 2021). The development of people can be facilitated through CFs, and this notion will be presented in the subsequent section.

2.6.1 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

Professional learning and development is a critical component of teacher education and a topic of considerable interest in educational research. The use of CFs has emerged as an effective approach to support teachers' professional learning and development, as highlighted in recent studies by (Macphail et al., 2021; Henriksen et al., 2020; and Kelly et al., 2022). Macphail et al. (2021), demonstrate the efficacy of CFs in supporting the professional learning and development of physical education teachers. Through collaborative inquiry and the use of digital technology, CFs established a trusting and productive relationship with teachers, resulting in increased confidence and skill in teaching practices. The authors suggest that the role of CFs is critical in promoting effective teaching practices and ultimately improving learner outcomes.

Similarly, Henriksen et al. (2020), argue that CFs can play a key role in supporting ongoing teacher learning and development in the context of changing educational policies and practices. CFs can offer a fresh perspective on teaching practices, and new insights into effective instructional strategies, and serve as a sounding board for teachers to test out new ideas and approaches in a supportive and non-judgmental environment. CFs can also help teachers identify and overcome challenges and obstacles in their practice, providing encouragement and motivation along the way. According to Kelly et al. (2022), reflecting on experiences with CFs can be a valuable way to explore and deepen understanding of their role in professional development.

Moreover, feedback is a critical component of promoting learner motivation and achievement, as highlighted in Kastberg and Grant's (2020), study. The authors suggest that effective feedback should be timely, specific, and goal-referenced, accompanied by clear expectations and guidance on how to improve. Feedback should also be tailored to individual students' needs and preferences to be most effective. The study underscores the need for teachers to be intentional and strategic in their use of feedback to support student learning and growth.

The literature shows that CFs play a crucial role in supporting the professional learning and development of teachers (Henriksen et al., 2020; Kastberg & Grant, 2020; Kelly et al., 2022; Macphail et al., 2021). By providing ongoing support and feedback, CFs can help foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement among teachers, ensuring that they are better equipped to meet the evolving needs of their students and the changing demands of the education landscape. The insights provided by Macphail et al. (2021), Henriksen et al. (2020), Kelly et al. (2022), and Kastberg and Grant (2020) underscore the importance of CF and effective feedback in promoting effective teaching practices and improving student outcomes.

2.6.2 FACILITATOR OF CHANGE

After having discussed the role of CFs in professional learning development, the focus of this study will now shift towards exploring their role in facilitating change. CFs have emerged as a promising approach to support school leaders and teachers in their efforts to improve learner outcomes. According to Swaffield (2004), the role of CFs as facilitators of change in schools is multi-faceted, and effective CFs use a range of strategies and skills, depending on the context, participants, and phase of the change process at any given point in time. According to Swaffield (2004), and Villalobos (2014), CFs can be a powerful facilitator of change in schools by providing ongoing support and feedback to teachers and helping them to identify and address areas for growth and development. The CF's role is not to provide answers but to ask appropriate questions, gather and present relevant information and evidence, and challenge people to explore different perspectives and formulate effective responses (Carlson, 2009).

The CF acts as a supporter of continued progress, accomplishment, and fulfilment of all the participants in the change process. CFs require particular abilities, such as technical expertise, consulting process skills, interpersonal skills, listening, observing, questioning, managing conflict and team building, respect, empathy, genuineness, confidence, optimism, sensitivity, insight, thoughtfulness, and commitment (Swaffield, 2002). Furthermore, CFs can create a culture of collaboration and collegiality that can contribute to institutional change (Akteken, 2019).

Research studies have found that CFs have positive impacts on professional learning, leading to personal and professional growth, positive attitudes, and changes in thinking and classroom practices (Akteken, 2019; Snow-Gerono, 2005). Moreover, CFs can help educators identify areas for growth and development, provide feedback on instructional practices, and encourage reflection and self-assessment (Auslander & Haardörfer, 2018). Specifically, the study by

Auslander and Haardörfer (2018), found that the CFG helped to facilitate a culture of continuous improvement, with teachers engaging in regular self-reflection and receiving constructive feedback from their peers. Additionally, the study revealed that the CFG helped to promote collaboration and trust among teachers, which further facilitated the implementation of new teaching strategies and the sharing of best practices.

In recent years, CFs have also emerged as a valuable approach to support school leaders in their efforts to improve learner outcomes (Gurr & Huerta, 2013). The study conducted by Gurr and Huerta (2013), sheds light on the versatile nature of CFs in supporting school improvement. The authors found that CFs played a crucial role in helping school leaders identify areas of improvement, develop action plans, and monitor progress toward their goals. Additionally, CFs provided emotional support to school leaders, enabling them to navigate complex and challenging situations with greater confidence and resilience. It can be deduced that CFs play a significant role in facilitating change in schools.

2.6.3 REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

According to Loughran (2010, 2014), reflective practice in teaching involves self-evaluation and self-study of one's pedagogical practices. Through this process, teachers can clarify their understanding of what enhances their teaching and learn new ideas to improve their practices. Self-study requires critical reflection and a willingness to critique, rethink, and reframe existing practices, which can be facilitated through interactions with colleagues (Loughran and Northfield, 1996; Loughran, 2010). These concepts highlight the importance of CF in reflective practice, which has been a longstanding practice in education. Reflection is a key component of improving practice, and a CF can help facilitate this process by asking thought-provoking questions, challenging assumptions, and providing feedback that promotes self-awareness and growth (Kelly et al., 2022; Kuh, 2016; Wright & Adam, 2015). In this way, a CF can serve as a guide for reflective practice, helping individuals or groups to critically examine their assumptions, beliefs, and actions, and to identify areas for improvement.

Reflective practice is a key component of professional growth and improvement for teachers. As noted by Kelly et al. (2022), this process draws on the experiential knowledge of teachers as "knowing persons" (Clandinin, 1993, p.25) whose teaching practices are expressions of personal practical knowledge. Reflexivity and criticality are essential components of purposeful reflection aimed at professional growth and improvement (Ovens & Tinning, 2009). According to Fook (2015), both reflective practice and critical reflection involve ongoing

scrutiny of practice based on identifying the assumptions underlying it. Reflective practice can be a challenging, demanding, and often trying process, as noted by Osterman and Kottkamp (2004). However, it is also seen as a collaborative endeavour that can be particularly successful when undertaken with others. As such, a collaborative reflection is a valuable approach to supporting reflective practice, as it allows for the sharing of experiences and perspectives, and can facilitate the identification of assumptions and the development of new insights and practices (Kelly et al., 2022).

The analysis of the group's reflections in the Kelly et al. (2022), study revealed various themes, including the flow of group interactions toward professional growth, the deep influence of reflective group practice and CF on individual and school change, and the sharing of difficult stories within a trusting knowledge community. The authors use the metaphor of river currents, undercurrents, and riptides to illustrate the different ways in which the group's individual reflections interacted with each other. The findings suggest that reflective practice within a supportive and collaborative group can facilitate professional growth and positive change in individuals and schools. Moreover, the study revealed that the group came together because they shared a common goal of improving student success through the use of portfolios.

Michaelann, an English teacher, added that the group's initial meetings were characterised by a sense of "getting to know each other" (Kelly et al., 2022, p.3) and building trust, which allowed for open and honest dialogue. Sandi, a science teacher, emphasised the importance of active listening and empathetic understanding, which helped to create a supportive and collaborative atmosphere. Finally, Paul, a Mathematics teacher, highlighted the group's willingness to challenge each other's assumptions and beliefs, which he believed was critical for promoting growth and change (Kelly et al., 2022). This story highlights the importance of shared purpose, trust, active listening, empathy, and constructive critique in promoting effective reflective practice and critical friendship. It also underscores the value of diversity in perspectives, experiences, and expertise, which can enrich and deepen the reflective process.

Reflective practice of CFs has been identified as an effective approach for supporting the professional growth of educators. Kuh (2016), argues that CFs can play a valuable role in helping individuals reflect on their practices and make improvements. This involves engaging in honest and constructive feedback, questioning, and evaluation of each other's work. The importance of critical reflection on teaching practices has been highlighted by several scholars, including Loughran (2010, 2014) and Costa and Kallick (1993). Through this process of

engaging with CFs, teachers can learn from one another, share insights, and develop strategies to improve teaching and learning outcomes.

SECTION B – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are rooted in two well-established theories: Transformational Leadership Theory and Transformative Learning Theory. To contextualise these theories, this section provides a historical overview of their origins, tracing their development and evolution over time. Subsequently, each theory is elaborated upon in detail, elucidating the underlying principles and key tenets that comprise their theoretical foundations. In addition, the empirical evidence supporting these theories is critically examined, substantiating their robustness and applicability. Furthermore, the ways in which these theories were employed in this study were discussed, highlighting their relevance and implications.

2.4.1 EMERGENCE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

James MacGregor Burns introduced the concept of transforming leadership in 1978, originally in the context of political leaders, but it is now also used in organisational psychology. Transforming leadership involves a process where leaders and followers work together to enhance morale and motivation, resulting in significant changes within individuals and organisations. Burns (1978), highlighted the differences between management and leadership, he proposed that while management involves dealing with complexity and ensuring organisational stability through planning, organising, and controlling, leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating individuals towards a common vision or goal. Burns (1978), emphasised that transformational leadership is based on the leader's personality, traits, and ability to inspire change through the articulation of an energising vision and the setting of challenging goals. This approach is distinct from transactional leadership, which is based on a give-and-take relationship (Burns 1978). Transforming leadership focuses on altering perceptions and values, as well as changing the expectations and aspirations of employees.

Bass (1985), expanded upon the work of Burns (1978), by delving into the psychological mechanisms that drive transforming and transactional leadership. He used the term "transformational" instead of "transforming," and offered a way to measure and assess this type of leadership, as well as its impact on follower motivation and performance. Bass (1985), explained that a transformational leader has a significant influence on their followers, who

develop feelings of trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect for the leader. This, in turn, motivates followers to work harder and achieve more than originally expected. The key reason behind this success is that a transformational leader provides their followers with an inspiring mission and vision, gives them a sense of identity, and encourages followers to come up with innovative solutions to improve their working environment and achieve success.

2.4.1.2 EXPLORING TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

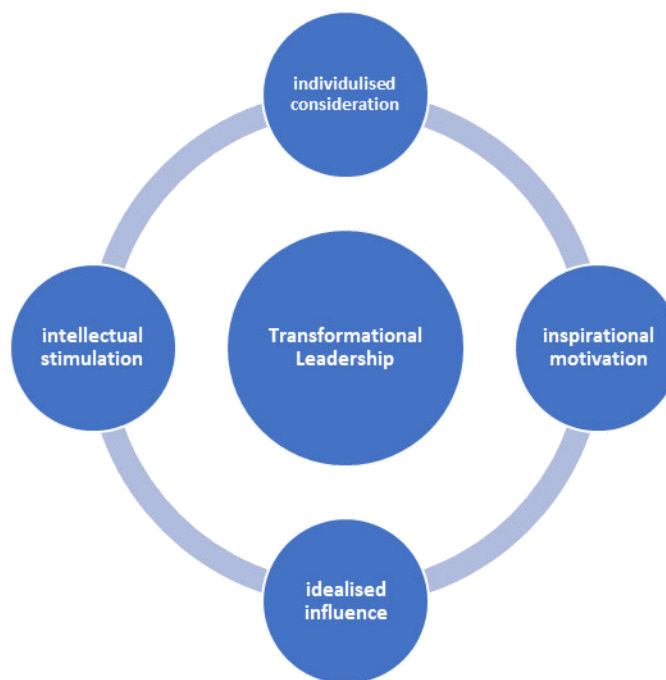


Figure 2.1 Transformational Leadership Theory Model (Bass, 1985)

I employ the Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985), (see Figure 2.1), and in this section, I will provide a detailed understanding of the theory. There are four components of transformational leadership: Individualised Consideration, Intellectual Stimulation, Inspirational Motivation, and Idealised Influence. Bass (1985), explains that a leader who embodies these components can positively influence their followers, leading to increased motivation, creativity, and willingness to work towards a common goal. Below I will explain each of the components.

According to Bass (1985), Individualised Consideration refers to the extent to which a leader pays attention to the unique needs of each follower by providing mentorship or coaching and actively listening to their concerns. The leader should demonstrate empathy and offer support while encouraging open communication and setting challenges for the followers. This also

includes acknowledging and valuing the individual contributions of each follower to the team. The followers are motivated to improve themselves and are driven by their intrinsic desire to achieve their tasks.

According to Bass (1985), Intellectual Stimulation refers to the extent to which a leader questions assumptions, takes calculated risks, and seeks ideas from their followers. Leaders who possess this trait encourage creativity in their followers and foster independent thinking. Such leaders value learning and view unexpected situations as chances to grow. This approach promotes critical thinking among followers, encouraging them to ask questions, analyse complex issues, and innovate new solutions to improve their performance.

The Inspirational Motivation aspect of transformational leadership refers to the extent to which a leader can create and articulate a vision that is appealing and motivational to their followers (Bass, 1985). Such leaders set high standards for their followers, communicate an optimistic outlook about future goals, and provide meaning to the tasks at hand. This sense of purpose and direction inspires and energises the group, as the leader's communication skills make the vision understandable, precise, powerful, and engaging. Consequently, the followers become more invested in their tasks, feel encouraged and optimistic about the future, and develop a greater belief in their own abilities.

The final component of the Transformational Leadership Theory according to Bass (1985), is Idealised Influence which is the quality of being a positive role model that demonstrates high ethical behaviour, inspires pride, and gains respect and trust. Idealised influence is an important component of transformational leadership because it creates a positive organisational culture based on trust, respect, and ethical behaviour. When leaders consistently exhibit these traits, they create a work environment that is more conducive to productivity, collaboration, and innovation.

2.4.1.3 APPLYING TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY IN THIS STUDY

In the context of CFs in leadership, the incorporation of transformational leadership theory provides a valuable framework for analysing the ways in which CFs contribute to the development of DHs in the case study schools. The four components of transformational leadership theory - idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration (Bass, 1985), offer a comprehensive lens through which to examine the dynamics of critical friendships.

The first research question seeks to identify the CFs who contribute to the development of DHs while exploring the personal and professional identities of these individuals. This question aligns with the idealised influence component of transformational leadership theory, which emphasises the importance of the leader serving as a role model for their followers. In this study, the CF serves as a leader for the DH. The CF provides guidance, support, and models positive behaviour to help the DHs develop their leadership skills. By serving as a role model, the CF can inspire the DHs to adopt positive traits and behaviours that will ultimately lead to more effective leadership and improved organisational outcomes. This aligns with the idealised influence component of transformational leadership theory, which emphasises the importance of leaders serving as role models for their followers. By exploring the personal and professional identities of the CFs which is question one of my research questions, I aim to identify the specific ways in which they exhibit leadership behaviours that can positively impact the development of the DHs.

The second research question of this study is focused on the processes that DHs use to cultivate relationships with individuals, which aligns with the inspirational motivation component of transformational leadership theory. In this case, the CF is serving as a leader for the DHs, and by identifying and cultivating relationships with individuals who embody the components of transformational leadership theory, the DHs can be inspired to strive for excellence and further develop their leadership skills. Through identifying and building relationships with these individuals, DHs can learn from their positive behaviours and attitudes, and apply these to their own leadership styles. The CF can also provide guidance and advice on how to cultivate these relationships effectively, and how to use these relationships to enhance their leadership effectiveness. This process aligns with the inspirational motivation component of transformational leadership theory, which emphasises the importance of leaders inspiring their followers to achieve their goals.

The third research question of this study aims to identify the specific areas of school leadership in which CFs contribute to the development of DHs. This question aligns with the intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration components of transformational leadership theory, which emphasise the importance of the leader challenging their followers to think outside the box and paying attention to the unique needs and abilities of each follower. In this case, the CF is the leader who can provide intellectual stimulation to DHs by challenging their thinking, promoting creativity, and fostering a culture of innovation within the department. They can also offer individualised consideration by providing personalised support and

guidance to help DHs address their unique challenges and capitalise on their strengths. Through exploring the specific areas in which CFs contribute to the development of DHs, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of how these individuals can facilitate growth and development in specific areas of school leadership.

2.4.2 EMERGENCE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Mezirow's (1975), transformative learning theory is a widely recognised theory in adult education that originated from a study involving 83 women who returned to college. Initially termed perspective transformation, the theory emphasises the importance of reflection in adult learning. Reflection enables individuals to acknowledge, reevaluate and modify the assumptions and expectations that shape their perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Mezirow, 1975). Over the past thirty years, Mezirow has further developed and refined the theory through his work and publications, resulting in a wealth of literature on the subject.

2.4.2.1 EXPLORING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

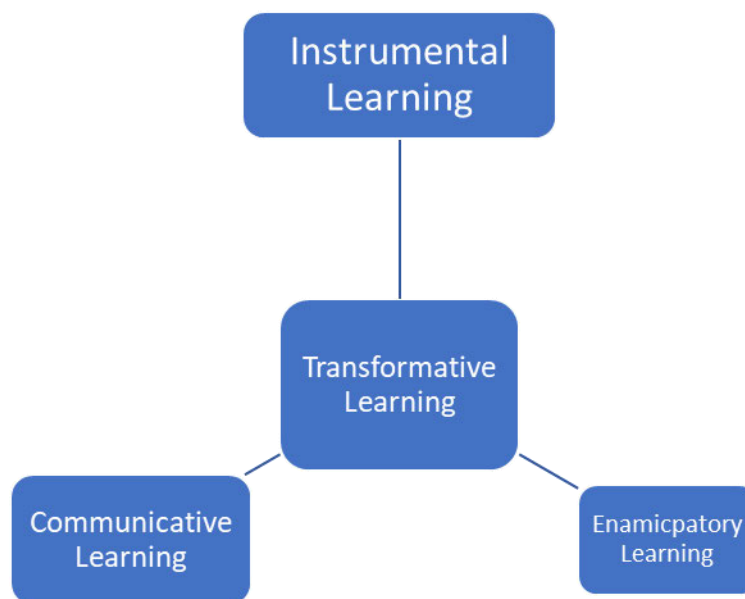


Figure 2.2. Transformative Learning Theory Model (Mezirow, 1978)

This study focuses on the use of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1978), (see Figure 2.2) above in exploring the role of CFs in the leadership development of DHs. Mezirow's theory is grounded in Habermas's (1971), theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, which posits that there are three fundamental human interests - controlling nature, reaching a social agreement, and promoting individual growth - that lead to empirical, communicative, and emancipatory

knowledge. Mezirow's (1978), theory parallels this framework and identifies three distinct types of learning: instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory.

Instrumental learning, according to Mezirow (1978), follows the hypothetico-deductive approach, which involves testing hypotheses through empirical verification by controlling the environment or individuals involved. The aim of instrumental learning is to validate beliefs and ideas through experiments, data collection, and analysis. According to Mezirow (1978), instrumental learning is important because it allows individuals to test their beliefs and assumptions in practical situations, and to refine their understanding of the world. By applying their knowledge and skills in real-life contexts, individuals can learn from their experiences and develop new insights and perspectives. An example of instrumental learning in the context of education could involve a school principal who is implementing a new instructional program, studying its research base, examining data on learner outcomes, and evaluating its potential impact on the school's educational goals.

Mezirow (1978), suggests that communicative learning is centred around comprehending the intended meaning behind others' messages, and involves validating beliefs through attaining consensus within a community. The act of interacting with others and reaching a shared understanding is guided by social and moral principles. In the context of teaching and learning, this means that effective communication with learners and peers, and developing a deep understanding of the learners and their unique needs, is crucial for improving teaching practices and promoting a collaborative and inclusive learning environment.

Emancipatory learning, as proposed by Mezirow (1978, 1991), involves acquiring knowledge through reflective self-analysis, with the goal of overcoming the limitations of self-awareness and societal influences on one's beliefs and actions, leading to self-empowerment. Educators who engage in critical self-examination to explore the reasons behind their instructional choices develop emancipatory knowledge that can help them break free from limiting perspectives and become agents of change. An example of emancipatory learning in the context of teaching could involve a teacher who reflects critically on their approach to discipline in the classroom, questioning the effectiveness of certain disciplinary practices and seeking out alternative strategies that are more empowering for learners.

While critical reflection was initially viewed as the primary approach to transformative learning, recent research has highlighted the significance of additional factors and their interconnectedness. Based on current literature, Taylor (2009), argues that the essential

elements of transformative learning include the promotion of critical reflection, active participation in dialogues, personalised experiences, a comprehensive teaching approach, awareness of context, advocacy for authentic relationships with learners, and learner-focused teaching.

2.4.2.2 APPLYING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY IN THIS STUDY

Mezirow's (1978) theory of transformative learning can provide a useful framework for understanding how CFs can contribute to the development of DHs in this study. According to Mezirow, transformative learning involves a process of change in which an individual's assumptions, beliefs, and values are critically examined and revised through reflection and dialogue.

In the context of this study on CFs in leadership, instrumental learning can be related to the process of using the feedback and support provided by CFs to develop the skills and knowledge needed to be effective leaders. DHs can apply the feedback and support provided by CFs in practical situations, such as when making decisions about curriculum development, staffing, and conflict management. The feedback and support can help DHs to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and the strategies that are most effective in addressing these challenges. Instrumental learning can also be related to the research questions of this study. For example, I can examine how CFs provide practical feedback and support to DHs in specific areas of leadership, such as induction and mentoring, curriculum development, staffing, and conflict management. I can also explore how DHs apply the feedback and support provided by CFs in these areas and how they use this feedback to make changes in their practice.

Communicative learning, which is one of the three components of Mezirow's (1978), theory, involves the exchange of perspectives and ideas through dialogue and reflection. This component can be related to my research questions by highlighting the importance of communication and dialogue between CFs and DHs in the process of development. Through communication and dialogue, CFs can challenge DHs' assumptions, beliefs, and values and provide new perspectives and ideas that can lead to transformative learning.

Emancipatory learning, which is another component of Mezirow's (1978), theory, involves a process of critical reflection on social and political contexts that can lead to social change. This component can be related to this study by highlighting the potential of CFs to empower DHs to effect change in their schools. By providing support and feedback to DHs, CFs can help

them to develop the skills and knowledge needed to lead change in areas such as curriculum development, staffing, and conflict management.

2.5 CONCLUSION

The literature review in this chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of CFs in leadership, covering various important aspects. Through an extensive review of related literature, the concept of CFs in leadership has been examined, along with the exploration of the identity of these CFs. The role of reflection and narrative in shaping one's identity has also been highlighted, along with the significance of CFs in professional development and as facilitators of change. Furthermore, two theories, namely Transformational Leadership Theory and Transformative Learning Theory, have been discussed in depth as the foundations for this study. These theories have helped shed light on the understanding of CFs in leadership. The literature review has underscored the significance of CFs as valuable resources for leaders to enhance their leadership skills, foster self-reflection, and promote transformative learning. A key insight gleaned from the reviewed literature is that leaders who actively cultivate critical friendships and prioritise self-reflection and self-improvement can enhance their effectiveness and authenticity as leaders. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of their own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, leaders are better equipped to identify areas for improvement and actively seek feedback and support from their CFs. These CFs, who provide honest and challenging feedback, play a vital role in the developmental journey of DHs. Their engagement and assistance can foster leadership growth and facilitate the honing of leadership skills. By leveraging the insights and guidance provided by their CF, leaders can make positive changes to their leadership style and practices, ultimately becoming more proficient.

The next chapter discusses the research design and methodology. This chapter is the blueprint for how the study was conducted and how data were collected and analysed. This chapter aims to provide a clear and concise understanding of the research design and methodology used to explore critical friendships in leadership.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EXPLORED RESEARCH TERRAIN

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter encompassed an extensive scholarly exploration of the relevant literature, culminating in a comprehensive literature review. Additionally, the chapter introduced two pivotal theories that served as the theoretical underpinnings for this study.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research design that will be traversed throughout this study. To commence, the research paradigm was elucidated, providing a framework within which the research was conducted. Subsequently, the research approach and methodology employed in this study were expounded upon. Furthermore, the geographical location of the study and the contextual background of the selected case study schools will be presented. The subsequent sections will delve into the process of participant selection and profiling. Moreover, the data generation methods employed, which align with the chosen methodology, will be outlined. Finally, ethical considerations and issues pertaining to the trustworthiness of the study will be thoroughly discussed.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

According to Kumatonga and Muzata (2021), paradigms denote general viewpoints or ideologies and comprise shared beliefs and agreements among scholars on how to approach and resolve research problems. The term paradigm originally pertained to a philosophical mode of thinking, as per the scholarship of Thomas Kuhn (1962), who traced the word's etymology to the Greek term meaning pattern. Kuhn's (1962), conception of the term has since been widely adopted in research to describe a collective set of beliefs and practices within a specific discipline or community. Within the research context, Guba and Lincoln (1994), define a paradigm as a basic set of beliefs or a worldview that informs the direction of research action or investigation. Similarly, qualitative research experts Denzin and Lincoln (2000), describe paradigms as being human-made constructions concerned with fundamental principles or ultimate concepts, which reflect the researcher's starting point for interpreting data and creating meaning. These definitions underscore the significance of paradigms in guiding the research process and shaping the researcher's perspective, signifying that the choice of paradigm has substantial implications for research outcomes.

As a researcher, I have always had an academic interest in exploring human experiences and meanings, which is why I have adopted an interpretive paradigm in this study. As an interpretive researcher, I seek to understand the social actions of people by gathering participants' experiences and perspectives. This approach is particularly relevant for exploring CFs in leadership, which involve a high degree of subjectivity and individual interpretation. By using the interpretive paradigm, I can focus on the experiences and perspectives of DHs that engage in CFs.

Ontologically, the interpretive paradigm acknowledged the existence of multiple subjective realities, which were shaped by the diverse viewpoints and interpretations of participants (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This paradigm recognized that reality was not fixed; rather, it varied based on the individual and social contexts in which it was experienced. As an interpretive researcher, my focus was on comprehending the social actions of DHs alongside their critical friends. I achieved this objective by collecting data through the exploration of the experiences and perspectives shared by these DHs. Therefore, data is collected from individuals who share their unique experiences within a particular social context. According to the epistemological stance of the interpretive paradigm, knowledge is socially constructed, as argued by Alharahsheh and Pius (2020).

The epistemological stance of the interpretive paradigm acknowledges the dynamic and complex nature of social reality and recognises the importance of exploring the diverse and subjective perspectives of individuals in order to gain a deeper understanding of the social world (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). CFs within leadership contexts are notably characterised by a high degree of subjectivity and individual interpretation. In this regard, the interpretive paradigm stands out as a valuable framework for delving into the underlying meanings and patterns embedded within participants' experiences. Bertram and Christiansen (2014), underscore that the interpretive paradigm offers a structured lens through which to comprehend how individuals contextualise their experiences, shaped by their unique social and cultural backgrounds.

This framework holds special significance in the exploration of CFs within leadership dynamics, as it enables a more profound grasp of the interplay between social, and cultural factors. Now, in the context of my role as an interpretive researcher gathering data from DHs, the epistemological assumptions align closely with the intricacies of knowledge construction within these relationships. As an interpretive researcher, I interacted with DHs in a manner that

recognised the multifaceted nature of knowledge. The interpretive paradigm emphasised that knowledge is not solely an objective entity, but rather co-constructed through intricate interactions. Therefore, my engagement with DHs sought to comprehend their perspectives, interpretations, and the contextual nuances that contributed to the co-creation of knowledge. This approach resonates with the interpretive paradigm's ethos of acknowledging and respecting the diverse viewpoints. This framework holds special significance in the exploration of CFs within leadership dynamics, as it enables a more profound grasp of the interplay between social, and cultural factors. Now, in the context of my role as an interpretive researcher gathering data from DHs, the epistemological assumptions align closely with the intricacies of knowledge construction within these relationships. The interpretive paradigm emphasised that knowledge is not solely an objective entity, but rather co-constructed through intricate interactions. Therefore, my engagement with DHs sought to comprehend their perspectives, interpretations, and the contextual nuances that contributed to the co-creation of knowledge. This approach resonates with the interpretive paradigm's ethos of acknowledging and respecting the diverse viewpoints that contribute to the intricate tapestry of knowledge generation.

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

After conducting an extensive review of the literature on CFs in leadership it became evident that a qualitative research approach would be most fitting for my study, given my interpretive perspective. Qualitative research prioritises exploration and understanding of the underlying nature of a phenomenon, rather than simply measuring its frequency or extent as in quantitative research (Busetto et al., 2020). This approach involves gathering and analysing data primarily in the form of words, allowing for a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the subject of inquiry (Busetto et al., 2020). Qualitative research is particularly useful for exploring complex or multifaceted phenomena that are difficult to measure quantitatively. It often involves techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observation (Busetto et al., 2020). The work of Msweli (2011), highlights that qualitative research involves a departure from the objective stance commonly used in other research approaches. To illustrate this, let's consider a quantitative study assessing student performance in a classroom. In a typical objective approach, researchers might gather data on students' scores on tests. These scores are numerical and allow for easy comparison and statistical analysis. In contrast, a qualitative approach would involve a departure from this objectivity. Researchers might conduct open-ended interviews with students, teachers, and parents to explore not only the test scores but

also the underlying factors influencing student performance. Through these interviews, researchers could uncover individual learning styles, personal challenges, teaching methodologies, and even socio-economic factors that contribute to students' academic outcomes. This departure from numerical scores toward narrative insights enriches our understanding of the complexities and nuances of educational achievement. In this type of research, the researcher becomes an active participant in the study and serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.

Anney (2014), asserts that qualitative research is particularly well-suited to the study of people, as it involves an emphasis on exploring their opinions, views, and beliefs. This approach offers a direct alignment with the complex social and cultural phenomena that are often the focus of qualitative inquiry. By exploring the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals, qualitative research provides a unique window into the deeper meanings and contexts that shape their beliefs and behaviors.

This study aimed to understand the role of CFs in the development of DHs in high schools. Given the complexity and subjective nature of this phenomenon, a qualitative research approach was deemed most appropriate. The objective was to gain a deeper understanding of how DHs viewed CFs in assisting in their development. By adopting a participatory approach, qualitative research allowed for a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon being studied, including the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants.

3.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Yazan (2015), the concept of a case study is complex and multifaceted, resulting in varying interpretations and perspectives, which has rendered it a subject of ongoing debate among researchers. For instance, Bertram and Christiansen (2014), emphasise that while the primary objective of case studies is indeed to provide a detailed and comprehensive depiction of a particular situation, the scope extends beyond mere situations. It encompasses a holistic exploration of contextual factors, interactions, and influences that collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. While they are mainly descriptive, case studies can also be used to establish hypotheses that can be tested through empirical research, as noted by many experts in the field. To grasp the essence of a case study, Chong and Graham (2013), propose a "Russian doll" approach, which involves a nested understanding of the subject matter. This means that comprehending a micro-level case necessitates considering and incorporating the meso- and macro-contextual levels in which it is embedded. For this study,

this means that while I examine the specific interactions and support mechanisms within individual critical friendships (micro-level), I must also recognise and incorporate the organisational or departmental structures, cultures, and collaborative practices (meso-level) that impact these relationships. Moreover, taking into account the larger societal and leadership trends, values, and norms (macro-level) is essential for a more complete understanding. For example, when analysing the interactions between DHs in a school setting, the 'Russian doll' approach prompts me to not only understand the interpersonal dynamics between these CFs but also to consider how the school's leadership strategies and educational policies influence these interactions. Beyond that, I need to be mindful of how broader educational philosophies and societal expectations shape the very nature of leadership relationships. While different definitions of case study exist, it is crucial to emphasise that researchers should explicitly specify their unit of analysis, level of analysis, case definition, and boundaries in their case study research, as argued by (Cohen et al. 2018). The context in which case studies take place can be temporal, geographical, organisational, institutional, or other factors that allow for the demarcation of boundaries around the case, as noted by Cohen et al., (2018).

This research studies the case of the development of DHs in high schools, specifically focusing on the role of CFs in school leadership. The focus in the case is to explore the impact of CFs in the development of DHs. The spatial boundaries of this case encompass high schools. The contextual boundaries of these schools are, that both schools are located in townships that share similar demographics and socio-economic status. Temporally, the study allows DHs to draw from their experiences and recollections over the past five years.

3.5 LOCATION OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted in two high schools located in the KwaZulu-Natal area of South Africa. To maintain confidentiality and protect the actual names of the schools, pseudonyms were used. The two schools, referred to as Sunshine Technical High School and Redcrest High School, were selected on their willingness to participate in the study. By conducting the research in these two schools, the study aimed to gain insights into the experiences of DHs who have established CF relationships within school leadership.

3.5.1 CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

The choice to conduct the study in the KwaZulu-Natal area holds significance due to the region's distinct characteristics. This geographical setting offers a unique context to explore the role of CFs in school leadership, as it reflects an educational landscape where diverse factors

influence leadership practices and outcomes. By selecting schools within this region, the study aimed to capture the experiences and perspectives of DHs operating within this specific educational context. Furthermore, conducting the research in the KwaZulu-Natal area also carries practical advantages, as it aligns with my location of residence. This proximity facilitates logistical convenience, enabling efficient data generation, and engagement with participants. Additionally, my familiarity with the local educational system and cultural nuances may enhance the rapport-building process and deepen my understanding of the research context. This section focuses on the discussion of the two case study schools, namely Sunshine Technical High School and Redcrest High School.

3.5.1.1 SUNSHINE TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL

One of the case study schools is Sunshine Technical High School, which is characterised by its focus on technical education. The school has an enrolment of 860 learners with an average class size of 35 learners. The school is located within the Umlazi District and the Karanja Circuit, and offers a comprehensive curriculum with 26 different subjects, catering to learners from grade 8 to grade 12. With such a diverse range of subjects, Sunshine Technical High School provides its students with varied educational opportunities. In terms of the quintile rating, Sunshine Technical High School falls into quintile four. The quintile rating, determined by the DBE, is based on various factors such as the school's infrastructure and the socioeconomic backgrounds of its learners. In this rating scale ranging from one to five, quintile one represents schools with the lowest rating, while quintile five represents schools with the highest rating, this is done mainly for the allocation of financial resources. Quintile one represents the most economically disadvantaged group, while quintile five signifies the least economically disadvantaged. These rankings are determined at a national level based on the poverty levels within the school's surrounding community and specific infrastructural criteria. Each quintile encompasses 20% of all learners nationwide, although the distribution across provinces may not be uniform. Schools falling under quintiles 1, 2, and 3 have been designated as no-fee institutions, while those in quintiles 4 and 5 operate as fee-paying establishments.

Regarding the teaching staff, there are 28 educators employed by the state and an additional nine educators employed by the School Governing Body (SGB). The management staff includes one principal, one Deputy Principal (DP), and four DHs, collectively contributing to the effective leadership and administration of the school.

Sunshine Technical High School demonstrates a strong commitment to establishing a culture of teaching and learning through the implementation of effective educational practices. This commitment is evident in the proactive approach taken to select and replace staff members, ensuring a high-quality teaching workforce. Furthermore, the school places emphasis on the care and maintenance of its physical environment, including buildings and facilities. Collaborative working conditions are fostered, promoting a sense of teamwork among staff members.

3.5.1.2 REDCREST HIGH SCHOOL

Redcrest High School serves as the second case study school within the research on CFs in school leadership. Nestled within the Pinetown District's Mafukuzela Gandhi Circuit, the school caters to 689 students, typically accommodating an average of 35 learners per class. However, its significance extends beyond mere statistics; the socio-economic landscape surrounding this school is starkly challenging. The community it serves grapples with pervasive unemployment and entrenched poverty, exacerbated further by the reverberations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these adversities, the school valiantly upholds an expansive curriculum offering 18 diverse subjects, catering to students spanning grades 8 through 12.

Redcrest High School has been assigned a quintile rating of five by the DBE. Quintile 5 typically refers to the category representing the least economically disadvantaged group within a specific context. In various socio-economic classifications, including educational settings or income distributions, quintile 5 represents the top 20% in terms of wealth, income, or resources. Regarding the teaching staff composition, Redcrest High School employs 24 educators under state employment, supplemented by an additional four educators employed by the SGB. The management structure comprises five DHs, one DP, and one principal, collectively responsible for the effective administration and leadership of the school.

The infrastructure of Redcrest High School presents a significant concern. The buildings and facilities are in dire need of refurbishment, with the roofs having gone without repair or renovation for the past 40 years. This aspect highlights the challenges faced by the school in maintaining a conducive physical environment for teaching and learning. Despite the dilapidating infrastructure, Redcrest High School exhibits a positive culture of teaching and learning. The presence of a cohesive staff reflects a shared commitment to making a difference and fostering educational excellence within the school community.

3.6 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

For this study, the participants were purposefully selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of critical friendships in school leadership. The utilisation of purposive sampling was a deliberate choice to target a specific group of individuals, recognising that they may not be fully representative of the larger population but possess unique insights into CFs in school leadership. This method aligns with the recommendations of Bertram and Christiansen (2015), and Martinez-Mesa et al. (2016), they advocate for the strategic use of purposive sampling to facilitate the selection of participants who can provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon of interest. By targeting specific individuals who possess relevant experiences and perspectives, researchers can enhance the validity and richness of their qualitative findings, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of CFs in school leadership.

Prior to finalising the participant list, a vital pre-screening process was executed to gauge the depth of each potential participant's knowledge and practical experience concerning CFs in the context of school leadership. These preliminary discussions were integral in ensuring that the chosen DHs possessed not only theoretical awareness but also a genuine familiarity with the practical aspects of critical friendships in school leadership. This step was instrumental in identifying DHs who could offer substantive insights and experiences.

The study featured a total of six DHs, with three selected from each of the two high schools. This deliberate inclusion of six participants was intended to capture a diverse array of perspectives and experiences. While it is acknowledged that this sample size may not comprehensively represent the entire population, its selection was motivated by the aspiration to enable a rich exploration of the multifaceted facets of critical friendships within the complex landscape of school leadership.

3.7 PROFILING THE PARTICIPANTS

For ethical considerations, pseudonyms have been used to anonymise the names of the six participants. I selected both novice and experienced DHs to explore how their developmental needs and experiences differ. DHs in different subject areas (e.g., science, humanities mathematics) were chosen to explore if there are discipline-specific factors that impact the development of DHs. Presented below are brief biographies of each participant involved in the study.

Table 1: BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF PARTICIPANTS

DHs NAME	SCHOOL	QUALIFICATION	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	EXPERIENCE AS A DH
Akhona Mkhize	Sunshine Technical High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Junior Secondary Diploma. - Bachelor of Arts. - Bachelor of education - Honours - Masters - Doctor of Philosophy 	39 years.	5 years.
Alexa Smith	Sunshine Technical High School	Diploma in education and BCom. Degree.	34 years	3 years
Siyabonga Gumede	Sunshine Technical High School	Diploma in higher education Chemistry, Physical Science, and Mathematics.	30 years.	1 year and nine months
Rajesh Govender	Redcrest High School	Diploma in Mathematics and Physical Science, BCS and MBA	39 years	12 years

Andiswa Ngiba	Redcrest High School	Honours in educational psychology	20 years	6 months
Ethan Naidoo	Redcrest High School	Diploma in Education	12 years	6 months

3.8 DATA GENERATION METHODS

Semi-structured interviews and Metaphorical Photo-Elicitation (MPE) discussions were used to collect data.

3.8.1 INTERVIEWS

Kvale (1996), defines an interview as a multifaceted dialogue involving multiple individuals engaged in a discussion centred around a subject of mutual relevance and interest. Interviews come in various forms, as categorised by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), such as semi-structured interviews. Additionally, Lincoln and Guba (1985), add structured interviews, while LeCompte and Presissle (1993), mention standardized interviews, in-depth interviews, elite interviews, life history interviews, and focus groups. In this study, I will delve into a detailed exploration of semi-structured interviews and MPE discussions, as they served as the primary data generation tools.

3.8.1.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method to gain a comprehensive understanding of CFs in school leadership. Cohen et al. (2018) define semi-structured interviews as a form of dialogue that involves predetermined topics and questions, where the phrasing and order of questions can be tailored to suit each interviewee's responses. The questions are open-ended and may include prompts and probes to elicit detailed and comprehensive responses. This approach was particularly valuable in this study, as it allowed the DHs to express their thoughts and emotions in their own words, providing a complete picture of their experiences.

As highlighted by DeJoncheere and Vaughn (2019), the main goal of qualitative research interviews is to gain an in-depth understanding of the world from the viewpoint of the research participants, by exploring their lived experiences and interpreting their meanings. Through the

use of open-ended questions and prompts, qualitative interviews enable researchers to uncover valuable insights that may not be accessible through other research methods. This approach allows the participants to express themselves freely and encourages them to share their experiences, emotions, and beliefs on their own terms. The qualitative research interviews prioritised the interpretation of meanings, seeking to understand the significance and implications of the participants' responses. In alignment with DeJoncheere and Vaughn's (2019) assertion, I too believe that this approach not only facilitates a comprehensive exploration of participants' perspectives but also encourages the emergence of insights that might remain obscured when using closed-ended or structured questioning techniques. Therefore, open-ended questions and prompts were employed, allowing the discussion holders (DHs) to provide comprehensive, unscripted responses. Instead of imposing preconceived notions or limiting their answers, the study allowed them to articulate their thoughts and feelings in their own words. This approach unveiled insights that may not have been accessible through closed-ended or structured questions.

3.8.1.2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

In this study, a deliberate choice was made to employ a semi-structured interview schedule, drawing on insights from Bertram and Christiansen (2015), which facilitates rapport-building between participants, identified as DHs, and myself. By initiating interviews with a friendly demeanour, the aim was to create a comfortable atmosphere, fostering trust and encouraging participants to share their experiences openly. This approach, consistent with Bertram and Christiansen's (2015) recommendations for qualitative research methodologies, empowered participants to contribute collaboratively, resulting in a more comprehensive exploration of critical friendships in school leadership. The design of the interview schedule was rooted in a thematic framework derived from an extensive literature review and aligned with the three research questions. This balanced approach, inspired by Bertram and Christiansen's (2015), insights into qualitative research methodologies, combined predefined inquiries with the flexibility to unearth emerging themes. By doing so, it ensured a nuanced understanding of critical friendships in school leadership, capturing both anticipated and unforeseen aspects of the phenomenon.

3.8.1.3 THE PILOTING OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

A pilot semi-structured interview was conducted within the prescribed duration of 50 minutes, aligning with the recommended guidelines outlined by Cohen et al. (2018), for semi-structured

interviews, which ideally range from 45 to 60 minutes. The piloting of the semi-structured interviews took place at a different location from the two schools mentioned in this study and the participant in the pilot interview was a DH. The commencement of the pilot semi-structured interview involved an introduction to the concept of a CF revealing a notable pre-existing familiarity with the participant with this notion. However, despite the initial understanding, further exploration necessitated probing to extract deeper insights, especially regarding the experience in the role of a DH. Notably, the participant had an extensive tenure in the profession and often defaulted to instances where he himself had acted as CF rather than instances where he received guidance from a CF. This prompted redirection during the interview to focus on the experiences of the participant engaging with a CF. An insightful observation emerged during the analysis of the interview structure. It became apparent that certain questions, particularly Question 2.2 and Question 2.3, yielded overlapping responses. While Question 2.2 focused on CF skills, Question 2.3, concerning their characteristics, lacked clarity. This lack of specificity resulted in the participant revisiting aspects related to skills rather than delving into distinct personality traits. Upon reviewing recorded sessions, this misinterpretation was evident. A necessary adjustment identified from this analysis is the refinement of Question 2.3 to ensure clarity and avoid redundancy in responses, enhancing the interview's precision for subsequent sessions.

3.8.2 METAPHORICAL PHOTO-ELICITATION

I used MPE as a secondary data generation method to aid in the interviews. MPE is a research method that involves participants bringing photographs that can be used as metaphors to stimulate discussion and generate data in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018). This method can be used for a variety of research questions, but it is particularly useful when researchers want to understand people's experiences, perspectives, and values in relation to a particular phenomenon or issue (Cohen et al., 2018; Hopkins & Wort, 2020). According to Cohen et al., (2018), MPE is a powerful tool that researchers can use to capture meanings that words alone, whether spoken or written, may not convey and by inviting participants to engage with photographs, researchers can facilitate a collaborative process that empowers participants and fosters rapport and trust between them and the researcher. This approach enables the researcher to gain insight into the participants' perspectives and experiences, providing greater validity to the data and the participants' responses. As Cohen et al. (2018), have highlighted, incorporating photographs into research can offer a powerful means of eliciting rich data and gaining insights into participants' perspectives. To this end, researchers can utilise various techniques such as

presenting photographs to participants and soliciting their feedback, or asking participants to take their photographs and discuss them during an interview.

3.8.2.1 METAPHORICAL PHOTO-ELICITATION SCHEDULE (MPES)

In this study, participants were requested to bring photographs of personal significance to the interview, whether these images related to their actual lives or held metaphorical value to them. Through this approach, I aimed to facilitate a collaborative and empowering process that fostered rapport and trust between the participants and myself. By providing commentary on their chosen images, participants were able to express themselves in a unique and personal way, offering a nuanced understanding of their experiences with critical friendships. An extensive review of the relevant literature aided in the identification of key themes such as trust, collaboration, and defining characteristics of CFs. These themes, coupled with the three research questions, formed the foundation for structuring the MPES.

3.8.2.2 THE PILOTING OF METAPHORICAL PHOTO-ELICITATION

The introduction of the photo I brought to the interview marked the inception of our discussion, setting a comfortable tone for the conversation. This initial visual stimulus seemed to create a natural and relaxed atmosphere that facilitated the ensuing dialogue. Surprisingly, the utilisation of extensive probes during the photo-elicitation discussion was largely unnecessary. The exchange between the participant and myself exhibited a seamless flow, with ideas and thoughts transitioning effortlessly. This ease in communication might be attributed to the participant's active involvement in selecting his own photo to share and discuss. The participant, of his own accord, opted to present a metaphorical image depicting birds in a V formation—a representation of mutual support among the flock and the crucial role of the leader. This creative choice served as a catalyst for stimulating engaging and profound conversations. The metaphor opened avenues for insightful discussions, leading to rich and substantive exchanges of ideas.

3.9 DATA ANALYSIS

Utilising the powerful lens of thematic analysis, this study delved into the generated data to unravel the intricate tapestry of CFs in school. Inspired by the flexibility and efficacy of this approach, the data analysis journey unfolded, guided by the scholarly insights of Braun and Clarke (2006), and Guba and Lincoln (1994). Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely utilised method that allows for the systematic identification and exploration of patterns, themes, and

meanings within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). By adopting this approach, I aimed to uncover and interpret the rich and diverse insights shared by the participants regarding CFs in school leadership.

The data analysis process began with the transcription of each semi-structured interview and MPE discussion, ensuring a comprehensive record of participants' responses. Immersing myself in the data, I meticulously read and re-read the transcripts, allowing the emerging patterns and insights to reveal themselves. Among the discernible patterns were several emerging themes, including the identification of principals, ex-principals, DPs, and ex-deputy principals who form critical friendships with discussion DHs. Additionally, digital platforms emerged as significant tools used to sustain CF networks. Moreover, the analysis highlighted vital components of critical friendships, such as trust, collaboration, and confidentiality. This initial step of familiarisation and immersion served as the foundation for subsequent analysis, facilitating a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Moving into the second phase of thematic analysis, the data was reduced and organised through the process of coding. In this study, coding was executed utilising a colour-based system, labelling the data to identify meaningful units. The process involved not only identifying explicit connections but also recognising potential significance within data that might not exhibit apparent similarities.

During the third phase, I searched for overarching themes by collating the codes and identifying similarities and patterns within the data such as trust, collaboration, and honesty. With a collection of potential themes in hand, the fourth and fifth phases involved reviewing and refining the themes. I carefully examined the coherence and consistency of each theme, ensuring that they accurately captured the essence of the data and aligned with the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I ensured the emerging themes actually did answer the three questions underpinning this study. After verifying the accuracy of the themes in relation to the codes, I proceeded to name and define each theme, providing clear and concise descriptions. During the analysis, I encountered various themes which then led to sub-themes. One of three participants recalled how they needed to do timetabling as one of the duties in their leadership role, and then elaborated on how they CFs came to their aid and assisted in this regard. These narratives led to the emerging theme of academic support and guidance offered by CFs.

Finally, in the sixth phase of the analysis plan, I synthesised the findings into a narrative account, presenting the story that unfolded from the data. This involved weaving together the

identified themes, supporting them with relevant quotes and examples from the participants' interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this comprehensive discussion of the findings, I aimed to provide a rich and meaningful interpretation of the data, shedding light on the complexities and nuances of CFs in school leadership.

3.10 ETHICAL ISSUES

Ethical considerations within this study encompass two fundamental dimensions as outlined by Guillenmin and Gillam (2004), procedural ethics and situational ethics, also known as ethics in practice. These dimensions constitute critical aspects that warrant detailed exploration which follows below.

3.10.1 PROCEDURAL ETHICS

Procedural ethics encompass aspects such as informed consent, confidentiality, privacy rights, avoidance of deception, and ensuring the well-being of participants, preventing any harm. Approval was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, as documented in the appendix section (see Appendix C on page 116). Prior to commencing the research, consent was obtained from the gatekeepers of Education in the KZN Department of Education, approval was granted (see Appendix D on page 117). Written permission was also secured from the principals of the schools involved in the study (see Appendix F on pages 119 and 120), as well as from the individual participants. Through strict adherence to the fundamental ethical principles, this study adhered to the core tenets of the ethical code, encompassing informed consent, the right to privacy, avoidance of harm to participants, objectivity, and honesty. In this study, adherence to procedural ethics was ensured by providing consent forms to participants (see Appendix G on page 121), explicitly informing them about the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities. It was emphasised that participants would not be subjected to any harm, and they were given the freedom to withdraw from the study or refrain from discussing specific aspects of their past experiences if they felt uncomfortable.

3.10.2 SITUATIONAL ETHICS OR ETHICS IN PRACTICE

Ethics in practice, also termed situational ethics, pertains to the nuanced and often unforeseen ethical considerations that emerge during the data generation phase (Guillenmin & Gillam, 2004). These instances demand acute sensitivity and discretion in addressing unforeseen ethical nuances. In the context of this study, it is noteworthy to highlight that no explicit instances

were encountered that necessitated the direct application of situational ethics or ethics in practice.

3.11 ISSUES OF TRUSTWORTHINESS

As a researcher, it is essential to ensure the precision and trustworthiness of a study while avoiding biased views in its presentation. Scholars such as Stahl and King (2020), and Lincoln and Guba (1985), have emphasised the significance of trustworthiness in qualitative research, which encompasses credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings. These aspects contribute to establishing the research's quality and rigor, particularly considering the subjective nature of qualitative research and the researcher's role in interpreting the data. Each of these dimensions of trustworthiness is discussed below.

3.11.1 CREDIBILITY

To ensure credibility in this study, as suggested by Shenton (2004), the experiences of the participants and the contextual information were presented in a believable manner that is verbatim quotes were used. To achieve this, interviews were conducted and recorded using a voice recorder. Subsequently, transcripts of the interviews were generated based on these recordings. Following Shenton's (2004), recommendation, great care was taken to accurately capture the articulations from the tape recordings during the transcription process. In line with the practice of member checking, the finalised transcripts were shared with the participants for verification. This step aimed to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the participants' perspectives and enhance the credibility of the study.

Moreover, to further enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, triangulation was employed by incorporating semi-structured interviews and MPE. This methodological approach allowed for the exploration of participants' perspectives through both verbal and visual means, enriching the data collection process and providing multiple angles from which to analyse the phenomenon under study which is CFs in school leadership.

3.11.2 TRANSFERABILITY

In line with the concept of transferability, as discussed by Bertram and Christiansen (2015), this study aimed to assess the extent to which its findings could be applied or transferred to other situations with similar characteristics. To enhance transferability, the employed strategies such as providing thick descriptions of the CFs in school leadership and their contribution to the development of DHs and offered a detailed account of the experiences during data

generation. These practices were employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research setting, allowing readers to construct a vivid mental image of the contextual factors surrounding the study. By presenting rich and detailed descriptions, the aim was to facilitate the readers' ability to make their own judgments regarding the transferability of the findings to other relevant contexts. This approach was adopted to promote a deeper comprehension of the research and support informed decision-making regarding the applicability of the study's results.

3.11.3 DEPENDABILITY

Lincoln and Guba (1985), propose dependability as an essential aspect of trustworthiness in qualitative research. Dependability, as they describe it, involves ensuring consistency and reliability in the research findings. To achieve this, the study took certain measures to enhance dependability, drawing from the suggestions put forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

There was rigorous documentation of research procedures. Each piece of data generated in the study was carefully tracked and recorded, highlighting the meticulousness with which the research process was conducted. This documentation serves multiple purposes. It not only allows for transparency and accountability but also enables external stakeholders, such as other researchers, to follow, audit, and critique the research process. By making the research procedures accessible, the study sought to establish a solid foundation for the dependability of its findings. Through the diligent tracking and recording of data, these practices aligned with the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985), and contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study.

3.11.4 CONFIRMABILITY

Confirmability, as a component of trustworthiness, encompasses the level of confidence that the findings of a research study are grounded in the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's biases or preconceptions (Moon et al., 2016). In this study, confirmability was pursued to ensure objectivity and transparency.

To achieve confirmability, the research was conducted in an unbiased manner, with the aim of minimising my influence on the findings. I approached the study with an open mind, avoiding personal biases, and allowing the participants' voices to shape the outcomes. By adopting this unbiased stance, I aimed to maintain the confirmability of the findings. Additionally, the research was conducted with transparency as a guiding principle. The entire research process,

from data generation to analysis, was documented in detail, allowing readers to examine and evaluate the study's methodology. Sufficient information was provided about the data generation techniques employed, such as semi-structured interviews and MPE discussions. This transparency will enable readers to assess the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings and determine if they would arrive at similar conclusions.

3.12 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is subject to certain limitations, which should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. The methodological limitations are discussed below.

3.12.1 METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The methodological limitation of this study pertains to its small-scale nature as a case study conducted in two high schools. Although the case study design offers valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions within the selected schools, it is important to recognise that these findings may not fully represent the perspectives of all high schools in South Africa. The limited sample size restricts the generalisability of the findings to a broader population. However, I addressed this limitation by providing detailed and rich descriptions of the case study, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the specific contexts under investigation.

3.13 CONCLUSION

In Chapter Three, the primary focus is on the methodology employed to understand the development of DHs through CFs in school leadership. The chosen methods, semi-structured interviews, and MPE were selected with careful consideration to capture diverse perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit candid and reflective responses from participants, while MPE enriched these narratives by incorporating visual stimuli. The integration of MPE, in particular, was instrumental in prompting deeper discussions, evoking emotions, and uncovering tacit knowledge related to leadership development. Throughout Chapter Three, emphasis is placed on the quality and rigor of the data collection process, with measures taken to address ethical considerations and transparently acknowledge any encountered limitations.

Moving forward to the next chapter is titled "Data Presentation and Analysis: Unveiled Insights." The upcoming chapter will delve into the intricate and interconnected nature of the collected data. The analysis will carefully unveil the underlying patterns, relationships, and themes within the data, much like unveiling a beautifully woven tapestry. The objective is to establish a harmonious connection between the findings from the literature review and the perspectives expressed by the research participants. This chapter aims to align the theoretical foundations established in the literature review with the first-hand experiences and viewpoints shared by the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS: UNVEILED INSIGHTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding Chapter of this study, a comprehensive overview was provided regarding the research design methodology employed for data generation. Additionally, it addressed the study's trustworthiness, delved into ethical considerations, and outlined the study's limitations.

The title of this chapter, 'Data Analysis and Presentation: Unveiled Insights,' has been selected with deliberate consideration to capture the core focus and purpose of this section. In this chapter, I embark on a journey to present and interpret the data that have been generated and presented, with the ultimate goal of revealing the valuable insights concealed within. By using this heading, I wish to convey to the reader the notion that I am not merely presenting raw data but rather unravelling the hidden layers of meaning and significance that lie within. The term 'unveiled' implies a sense of discovery, as if a curtain is lifted on a stage to reveal the carefully prepared performance. This choice is a reflection of the fundamental purpose of Chapter 4 - to provide a clear, comprehensive, and insightful understanding of the data, enabling readers to appreciate the depth and importance of my research findings.

This chapter is dedicated to the presentation of findings and the analysis of the data. It harnesses the insights gleaned from the semi-structured interviews and the thought-provoking discussions prompted by MPE. The study's participants, consisting of six purposively selected DHs from high schools, have generously shared their perspectives. It is imperative to bear in mind the three research questions that underpin this scholarly endeavour because these questions act as an organising framework to present the findings and discussion.

1. Who are the critical friends that contribute to the development of Departmental Heads in the case study schools?
2. How do the Department Heads grow their critical friend networks in the case study schools?
3. What are some of the areas in which critical friends contribute to the development of Departmental Heads in the case study schools?

4.2 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

Within this chapter, I have employed the above-mentioned research questions as an organisational framework to systematically unveil and discuss the research findings. The presentation of the findings is structured around key themes that emerged during systematic thematic analysis. Throughout this presentation, a deliberate effort has been made to preserve the authentic voices of the research participants. To achieve this, verbatim quotations have been meticulously integrated into the narrative.

4.3 THE CRITICAL FRIENDS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

This section of the chapter is devoted to a comprehensive exploration of the first research question, “*What are the personal and professional identities of critical friends that contribute to the development of departmental heads?*” The first research question unveiled two themes. The first theme centres on the distinct role that certain individuals assume as CFs to DHs. The second theme delves into the specific skills and expertise that DHs look for in CFs.

4.3.1 THE CRITICAL FRIENDS THAT ARE INSTRUMENTAL IN SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

Upon analysing the data, the following sub-themes emerged that allude to the professional identities of CFs that contribute to the professional capital of DHs: Peers (other DHs) that contribute to the development of DHs; Principals and ex-principals that contribute to the development of DHs; Teachers that contribute to the development of DHs; and DPs and Former Deputy Principals (FDP) that contribute to the development of DHs.

4.3.1.1 PEERS (OTHER DEPARTMENTAL HEADS) THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

Among the identified CFs are individuals holding similar roles as DHs, albeit from diverse academic departments within the same institution or other educational establishments. Their shared professional context fosters a sense of mutual understanding and peer support, making them valuable sources as indicated (Seobi & Wood, 2016). In schools, a DH is responsible for managing a specific department. The PAM document established by the Minister of Basic Education, as gazetted by the DBE, is mandated by the *Employment of Educators Act of 1998* and its accompanying regulations. These regulations delineate the workloads and job descriptions for various educational roles, including that of a DH (DBE, 1998). The revised

Act, consolidated in February 2016, comprehensively outlines the terms and conditions of educators' employment, as specified in section 4 of the *Employment of Educators Act, 1998*. Specifically, the DH is entrusted with crucial responsibilities, encompassing active participation in classroom teaching, ensuring the department's effective operation, and organising pertinent extra-curricular activities. These efforts are aimed at promoting subjects and facilitating the proper education of learners (DBE, 2016).

In assuming the position of a DH, Akhona Mkize encountered notable challenges attributed to the novelty of her role, characterised by unfamiliar responsibilities and aspects. In an attempt to navigate this uncharted territory, she sought guidance and support from another DH within her school who possessed an intimate understanding of the institution's operational intricacies. She said :

“When I first landed at my current school, there was a department head, who was very helpful and instrumental in helping me get organised as a department head. This role was really quite new for me because it encompassed a few aspects that I was not familiar with as a level one teacher” .

Having a similar view to Akhona Mkize, Ethan Naidoo, echoed:

“... my critical friend and also my role model within the school in terms of professionalism will be another departmental head at the school...”

Ethan Smith's recognition of Mr. Shabalala as a CF and role model within the school underscores the significance of critical friendships in the realm of school leadership, exemplifying the profound impact that such relationships can have on leaders' development and effectiveness.

A similar view was shared by Alexa Smith, who said:

“...an acting department head at another school. He is very knowledgeable and very skillful and I have picked up the skills of timetabling.”

Alexa Smith's shared experience underscores the versatility of critical friendships with other DHs. By learning from an acting DH at another school, she demonstrates how exchanging knowledge and skills can transcend institutional boundaries, ultimately enhancing pedagogical and administrative proficiencies.

Building on her discussion about the CFs that contribute to her development, Alexa Smith said:

“... I was also very lucky that I moved into a school that had a very effective and efficient acting department head. She assisted me with all the duties that went with the department and I eventually just fitted in and allowed my department to run as smoothly as possible...”

Andiswa Ngiba echoed a similar sentiment during her metaphorical photo-elicitation discussion (see Figure 4.1.).



Figure 4.1. – Metaphorical photo-elicitation, 2 birds sitting side by side on a branch.

Andiswa Ngiba shared her perspective:

“...There were times when I was overwhelmed initially as a departmental head and I would look to a critical friend, somebody who has been in a similar position for a long time and they assured me that at one time in their life they were sitting on that end of the branch and, here I am today and I started off just like you. Give yourself time, you will be a pro at this exactly as it's depicted in this picture”

The narratives shared by Akhona Mkize, Ethan Naidoo, and Alexa Smith, coupled with the metaphorical photo shared by Andiswa Ngiba, collectively illustrate the pivotal role of critical friendships among DHs in fostering professional development, skill acquisition, and emotional support. These first-hand accounts align with the findings of Tapala et al's. (2021) study, which sheds light on the collaborative and supportive networks within educational institutions, with a specific emphasis on DHs. This research underscores the significance of collaboration, liaison, and teamwork among DHs and other educational stakeholders. When this is related to the theme of DHs receiving support from their CFs, who are also fellow DHs, it becomes evident that DHs can derive substantial benefits from cultivating these critical friendships. In this context, CFs serve as exemplars, embodying the principles of transformational leadership, notably 'idealized influence,' as elucidated by Bass (1985). They inspire DHs to adopt positive attributes and practices, which, in turn, enhances their leadership capabilities and, consequently, leads to more effective leadership and leadership development.

The interviews with participants revealed an additional significant theme, shedding light on the instrumental role played by both current and former principals in the growth and development of DHs. The ensuing section will explore this aspect in greater detail.

4.3.1.2 PRINCIPALS AND EX-PRINCIPALS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

School principals serve as educational leaders responsible for a wide range of tasks in managing teaching and learning. One fundamental aspect of their role, as described by Hallinger (2005), is instructional leadership, which involves establishing clear goals centred on student learning.

Rajesh Govender, reflecting on the challenges inherent in the role of DHs, emphasised that support and mentorship are often scarce due to the demanding nature of the profession. He acknowledged the invaluable contributions of certain ex-principals to his professional development. He said:

“...I know there are many ex-principals that took the leadership role in trying to make sure that we understand the content and became masters of the content. One of the people who really helped me with Maths content was Mr Singh an ex-principal . . . so he was one of the people that helped me in the mathematics development . . .”

He also spoke about his leadership development and how another ex-principal contributed to that:

“... in terms of leadership and learning skills, I think no one taught me more than our first principal of the school Mr. Jackson. He knew how to lead a school; he led by example, did what was right, and took a stance irrespective of what other people thought about what you taking a stance as long as your conscience is clear and you do it for the good of the school and the community. He was able to deviate from the norm and take a stand... So I think he was instrumental in developing me in terms of being not the conventional conformance but rather being like the person that would be innovative creative and do something...”

The experiences of DHs like Rajesh Govender serve as a compelling testament to the critical role experienced ex-principals play in fostering a supportive and growth-oriented environment for DHs. A similar view was echoed by Siyabonga Gumede, who listed two people who

contributed to his development; one of those people being his current principal. His appreciation of the contribution made by his current principal, particularly in terms of managerial composure and effective discipline management, highlights the importance of continuous growth and development that one may acquire through critical friendships.



Figure 4.2. Metaphorical photo-elicitation, A plant receives essential elements such as fertilizer, water, sunshine, and air.

Siyabonga Gumede shared a picture for his photo-elicitation discussion (see Figure 4.2). He said:

“... in my current environment, my critical friends have been that sort of roots, they have been that sunshine, they've been that water. So whenever I'm down, they are there to pick me up, whenever I'm sad they're there to encourage me, and when I've had a tough day, I go to my principal at the end of the day and he's there to give me support so that I can come back the next day and perform my duty as a manager much better...”

Siyabonga Gumede's portrayal of his CFs as the vital elements essential for his professional growth underscores the significance of critical friendships. This perspective aligns with the findings of comprehensive studies conducted by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008), further supported by the research of Blase and Blasé (2001), and Mwhiki et al. (2019). These studies highlight the substantial influence of principals on the professional development of educators. They stress that a principal's active support and involvement in the professional growth of their staff significantly enhance teaching and leadership skills. It's worth noting that this support extends beyond classroom teachers to encompass all members of the educational community, including DHs. DHs, as essential educational leaders within the institution, also contribute significantly to the school's overall success, and their professional development is equally imperative as that of classroom teachers. Within the context of this research, the application of Mezirow's theory (1978), to CFs in leadership is particularly pertinent. The instrumental learning aspect of transformative learning aligns with how DHs can utilise the feedback and

support provided by principals and ex-principals who are CFs to cultivate the skills and knowledge necessary for effective leadership.

Unveiling an additional significant theme, the instrumental role of teachers in the growth and development of DHs comes to light. The following section will explore this aspect.

4.3.1.3 TEACHERS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

A teacher, as outlined in the literature (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Beishuizen et al., 2001; Nicoll and Harrison, 2013; Ruzgar, 2021) is an individual who combines personal attributes such as compassion, enthusiasm, and empathy with professional expertise in education. They create a positive learning environment, possess in-depth subject knowledge, and are committed to continual self-improvement, ultimately fostering their students' educational growth.

Rajesh Govender mentions the teachers who are his CFs who contribute to his development now that he is a DH. He said:

“... I had brilliant teachers when I became the departmental head, a brilliant teacher in each sector, they were like role models in terms of how they conducted their content knowledge, how they conducted themselves with children, how they disciplined children...”

In his journey, Rajesh Govender emphasises the transformative influence of teachers. He continues to draw inspiration from skilled teachers who serve as role models, guiding his growth in content knowledge and effective classroom management.

Andiswa Ngiba expressed a similar perspective when she articulated:

“... I'm very blessed because the teachers in this department are all team players... We will come and we will sit down at a meeting and that is where we will ask, what is the way forward. Each person will come and say what can I do? and how can I make things better? The teachers act as critical friends to me by supporting me in my role as an HoD”

Andiswa Ngiba's perspective highlights the unity and cooperative ethos of her department's teachers. They come together to confront challenges and devise strategies during meetings, fostering an environment of continuous improvement.

Rajesh Govender and Andiswa Ngiba both emphasise the profound impact of teachers on their professional journeys. They stress the importance of learning from both positive and negative examples, underlining the transformative influence of educators within their departments. This assertion aligns with existing literature, as demonstrated by a study conducted by Kastberg and Grant in (2020). In their study, Signe, a mathematics teacher, assumed the role of a CF to Melva, with the primary aim of enhancing Melva's practice as a mathematics teacher. This dynamic illustrates the pivotal role of critical friendships in professional development. Applying the Transformational Leadership Theory, as introduced by Bass (1985), offers a comprehensive framework for scrutinising how CFs contribute to the development of educational leaders such as DHs like Rajesh Govender and Andiswa Ngiba. Transformational Leadership Theory encompasses four crucial components, with the first one being "idealised influence." In the context of educational leadership, this component is exemplified by how teachers and CFs serve as role models for their colleagues. Within this framework, CFs provide guidance, support, and exemplify positive behavior, effectively aiding educational leaders in honing their skills. As role models, CFs inspire these leaders to adopt constructive traits and behaviors, ultimately leading to more effective leadership and improved outcomes.

The interviews conducted with participants brought to light another notable theme, the instrumental contribution of DPs and FDPs in the development of DHs. The subsequent section will delve deeper into this key aspect.

4.3.1.4 DEPUTY PRINCIPALS AND FORMER DEPUTY PRINCIPALS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In the context of the development of DHs, it is important to recognise the pivotal role played by DPs and FDPs. According to the PAM document, Employment of Educators Act, (*Act 76 of 1998*), a DP is an indispensable educational administrator tasked with actively supporting the school principal in effectively managing the school and fostering the educational advancement of learners. DPs are entrusted with a range of responsibilities, serving as educational leaders who closely collaborate with the principal to ensure the seamless operation of the school.

During a metaphorical photo-elicitation discussion (see Figure 4.2), Siyabonga Gumede expressed that his CFs, namely his DP and Principal, play a pivotal role in elevating his leadership abilities. He said:

“... so my critical friends who are my deputy principal and principal are vital components that transform me as a leader into a higher quality of leadership, so they enrich just like the fertilizers enrich the soil they provide nourishment, my critical friends also provide the same kind of things for me as a leader so that I can flourish in my position as a department head.”

A similar opinion was expressed by Ethan Naidoo, he highlighted the significant role played by Mr. M, his former DP:

“Mr. M, our ex-deputy principal, was very instrumental as well when I first came into school which was close to 20 years ago, we came over two weeks apart and we formed a very good bond and friendship, especially against the discipline of learners and how to carry himself out, how to work with learners, how to work with the colleagues as well...”

During our photo-elicitation discussion, he further elaborated and enriched his perspective, (see Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3.- Metaphorical photo-elicitation, A handshake.

Ethan Naidoo emphasised:

“A handshake is a gesture of open communication. I feel very comfortable talking to my Ex-principal and ex-deputy principal who are still my critical friends. I feel free to share my thoughts and experiences with them and I know that they will be there to listen, offer advice, and also tell me when I am wrong.”

Ethan Naidoo then described a specific instance where he encountered a challenging situation with a teacher in his department who had transferred from another school. Feeling frustrated and unsure of how to proceed, he sought the guidance of his CF, Mr. M, the FDP. Together, they discussed the issue and decided to meet the next day.

Ethan Naidoo said:

“... I had this difficult situation with a teacher in my department, she transferred from another school, and for some reason, she did not want to change some of her approaches and always didn't have her files in order; She was actually a very difficult person to deal with, I then called Mr. M, an ex-deputy principal, who is my critical friend, we agreed to meet the next day because this situation was starting to weigh heavy on me. Also we must be careful how we manage and treat our subordinates because there are unions in place to protect their interests and I certainly did not want to be mixed up in that kind of a thing. My critical friend helped me in this situation by providing a valuable viewpoint that I did not even consider...”

Ethan Naidoo's candid testimony exemplifies the transformative impact of critical friendships in school leadership.

The insights provided by Siyabonga Gumede and Ethan Naidoo underscore the instrumental role of DPs and FDPs in the development of DHs. They emphasise that DPs not only assist in the day-to-day management of schools but also serve as CFs who enrich the leadership experience and contribute significantly to the development of DHs. These observations are in line with a self-study conducted by Luthuli (2020), which emphasises the crucial role of DPs in providing support and mentorship to teachers, particularly those who are new to the profession or facing various challenges. Luthuli's (2020), research reveals that, as a DP and mentor, it was his responsibility to offer daily support to novice teachers in the school. This support extended beyond addressing classroom-related stressors; it also encompassed providing guidance on personal matters. The concept of DPs acting as CFs and mentors to novice teachers in Luthuli's (2020) study, parallels their role in assisting DHs within a school environment. DPs can function as supportive guides, offering valuable advice, and mentorship to DHs, especially in times of challenging situations or when new teachers join their department.

This linkage between the role of DPs in supporting novice teachers and DHs aligns with one of the key theories addressed in this study: Bass's (1985), concept of 'Individualised Consideration.' This theory is profoundly relevant to the responsibilities of DPs in nurturing DHs and educators in schools. It underscores the significance of leadership that focuses on attending to the distinctive needs of team members, providing mentorship, actively listening to

their concerns, demonstrating empathy, offering support, fostering open communication, and acknowledging the individual contributions of DHs and teachers.

A notable theme identified through the thematic analysis of the data is the pivotal role played by the skills and expertise of a CF in fostering the development of a DH. Further elaboration on this theme follows.

4.4 THE SKILLS AND EXPERTISE OF A CRITICAL FRIEND

After analysing the data, the study identified two sub-themes that speak to who the CFs are in terms of skills and expertise. These sub-themes are academic support and guidance and the capacity to teach the art of human relations.

4.4.1 ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE OFFERED BY CRITICAL FRIENDS

While this section primarily discusses the skills and expertise needed to complement the role of a DH, it can also indirectly reveal who a CF is by describing the skills and qualities that a person must possess to be effective in the role of a CF. Two participants in the study highlighted the invaluable role of their CFs in enhancing their capabilities through specific skills. Notably, they underlined how the skills of their CFs, such as expertise in course selection, and timetabling, significantly contributed to their academic support and guidance.

Alexa Smith shared her experience of joining a school offering a wide array of 26 different subjects:

“...I want to say a big thank you to my critical friend, who is also an acting department head at another school... I came into a school that offers 26 different learning areas. Now that is really unique, that is a lot, 26 learning areas, so it was quite a daunting experience for me to fit in. I was fortunate that the acting department head had provided me with all the necessary information to show me how courses are structured, and how I should go about introducing course selection to the children. So my critical friend actually helped me to ensure that the best learners chose the appropriate courses for success in the future.”

Siyabonga Gumede shared a similar experience to that of Alexia Smith, when he admitted:

“...I personally am not very computer literate so my critical friend, my deputy principal assisted me tremendously with regards to that, in fact, it actually decreases my workload...”

The practical experiences and narratives of the participants in this study align with Block's (1999) research. Specifically, two participants accentuated the invaluable role played by their CFs in enhancing their capabilities through the application of specific skills. Notably, they underscored how their CFs' expertise, ranging from adept course selection and timetabling significantly contributed to their academic support and guidance. This practical application of technical expertise mirrors Block's (1999), assertion regarding the importance of this skill set in professional roles. For instance, Alexa Smith's account highlighted her reliance on her CF when confronted with the intricate task of creating timetables and organising course selections for Grade 9 students upon joining a new school. Her CF's guidance played a pivotal role in imparting the requisite skills for success. Alexa Smith's experience serves as a compelling illustration of the concept of consulting skills and the specific competencies that a role may demand, as elucidated by Block (1999). Moreover, the application of Mezirow's (1978), theory of transformative learning becomes evident in this context. Specifically, communicative learning, one of the three pivotal components of Mezirow's theory, underscores the vital role of dialogue and communication in the process of fostering transformative learning experiences. Through open and constructive communication and dialogue, CFs have the opportunity to challenge DH's assumptions, beliefs, and values. This exchange introduces fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, ultimately leading to transformative learning. In this study, it is evident that through dialogue, participants were able to harness the skills of their CFs and enhance their proficiency in completing tasks that initially posed challenges, such as timetabling and course selection.

Proficiency in human relations stands out as a significant theme concerning the skills and expertise exhibited by CFs, ultimately influencing the development of DHs. The subsequent section of this study delves into a detailed exploration of this theme, providing valuable insights.

4.4.2 THE SKILL OF HUMAN RELATIONS

Another notable skill that CFs bring to the table is their capacity to teach the art of human relations. This skill has been highlighted by two participants in their interviews, underscoring its pivotal role in personal and professional development. One of these participants, Rajesh Govender, candidly shared his experience. As someone whose natural inclinations leaned toward mathematics and logic, he initially found it challenging to navigate the intricate world of human relations. The subtleties of interpersonal dynamics and effective communication were

not innate to him. However, Rajesh Govender's journey took a significant turn when he engaged with a CF. Through this mentorship, he began to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for dealing with people in a more adept and empathetic manner. Rajesh Govender confessed:

"... I think mainly for me, I was not the person that really excelled in human relations, I came from a numbers background and everything for me was like in black and white, and then I saw shades of grey in between... I think in terms of my human relations I learned a lot about how to tolerate people, and how to deal with the frustration of dealing with people that they haven't got the same intellect. It's a skill you can't expect everyone to behave the way you want them to..."

Ethan Naidoo echoed similar sentiments regarding the invaluable skill of human relations imparted by his CF. He shared his experience with Mrs. Shozi, who not only held the role of a DH but also served as his CF.

"Mrs. Shozi, another DH, and my critical friend, has the skill of human relations, she just has a way of treating and interacting with people."

The accounts of Rajesh Govender and Ethan Naidoo vividly illustrate the transformative role that CFs play in the development of human relations skills. These narratives underscore the value of CFs not only in imparting subject-specific knowledge but also in nurturing the softer, yet equally vital skills of empathy, effective communication, and interpersonal adaptability.

The insights and experiences shared by the participants in this study are substantiated by relevant literature. Swaffield (2002), emphasises the importance of specific skills and qualities that are integral to the role of a CF. These qualities encompass essential attributes such as observation, attentive listening, effective questioning, respect for diverse perspectives, empathy, adept conflict management, and the ability to foster teamwork. These qualities resonate with the practical observations and accounts offered by this study's participants, underscoring the relevance of these attributes in the context of CF interactions.

Furthermore, Block (1999), enhances our understanding of the significance of skills and competencies in professional roles, including that of CFs. Block's (1999), study delineates three crucial skill sets: technical expertise relevant to the subject matter at hand, consulting skills

that encompass essential processes like negotiation, project scoping, and eventual disengagement, as well as interpersonal skills.

The subsequent section of this study will focus on the generated data pertaining to the second research question, which centres on the exploration of cultivating and sustaining CF networks.

4.5 THE CULTIVATING AND SUSTAINING OF CRITICAL FRIEND NETWORKS

This section of the chapter is dedicated to conducting an in-depth examination of the second research question: "How do the Department Heads grow their CF networks in the case study schools?" This question delves into the strategies, methods, and steps employed by DHs in the case study schools to establish and maintain their CF networks. The following two themes emerged: The building and maintaining of CF's network and the strategies for cultivating trust and promoting active listening and empathy.

4.5.1 THE GROWING AND MAINTAINING OF CRITICAL FRIENDS NETWORK

An analysis of the generated data has revealed the following two sub-themes: meetings as networking hubs and digital platforms in sustaining CF networks.

4.5.1.1 MEETINGS AND CASUAL INTERACTIONS AS NETWORKING HUBS TO SUSTAIN CRITICAL FRIEND RELATIONSHIPS

This theme centres on the pivotal role of meetings as networking hubs, serving as spaces for meaningful interactions between DHs and CFs. Whether held after school hours or occasionally during school, these meetings provide a platform where DHs and CFs come together to exchange ideas, engage in collaborative learning, and challenge assumptions. Two participants in this study alluded to meetings being a method for them to maintain their connections to their CFs.

Rajesh Govender said:

“ Most of my collaboration is done like maybe after school hours, in meetings and we incorporate it into a social on occasions...”

The insights derived from the data emphasise the crucial role of meetings not only as platforms for professional exchange in general but also as pivotal moments of interaction between DHs and CFs.

Another participant, Andiswa Ngiba, highlighted a distinctive aspect of her engagement with CFs that includes casual interactions with CFs. Andiswa Ngiba admitted:

“So firstly, because most of my critical friends are in my school structure... it makes it easier because I interact with them on a daily basis. I sometimes am able to sit down and have a chat and cup of tea with them in the morning before the briefing. ...”

In essence, Andiswa Ngiba’s experiences highlight that the dynamic nature of CF networks encompasses both structured meetings and everyday interactions

Ethan Naidoo echoed similar sentiments about engagements in meetings, he said:

“... sometimes we have meetings like on a Monday we have management meetings and my two critical friends are in management, We share our ideas we work with each other, and look for the best way forward by first listening, we speak freely but always with respect...”

Ethan Naidoo’s description of these collaborative interactions underscores the significance of a conducive meeting environment. It's a space where ideas are freely exchanged, and the process is grounded in listening and respect.

In a study conducted by Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. (2017), the broader implications of workplace meetings were revealed. These gatherings, beyond achieving specific objectives, play a pivotal role in sense-making, leadership influence, relationship-building, team dynamics, conflict resolution, and the formation of employee attitudes. Meetings therefore, function as multifaceted hubs of influence within the workplace, shaping the very fabric of organisational culture and interactions. Furthermore, a study by Blake and Gibson (2021), highlighted the utilisation of meetings as a hub for cultivating CF networks, specifically for professional development. To facilitate the growth of participants, teacher-educators aimed to create an environment conducive to the open exchange of ideas and suggestions, while avoiding personal conflict.

Mezirow's (1978), theory of transformative learning posits that effective leaders have the capacity to inspire and motivate their followers to achieve exceptional outcomes through the creation of a compelling vision, provision of intellectual stimulation, offering individualised support, and serving as role models. In the context of this study, it is important to note that CFs function as leaders for the DHs. The study conducted by Blake and Gibson (2017), further

highlights the alignment of Transformational Leadership Theory with the concept of meetings serving as central hubs for cultivating CF networks. Transformational leaders within these CF networks facilitate an atmosphere of open exchange and intellectual stimulation, which resonates with the goal of fostering an environment where ideas can be shared and challenged without hesitation. This underscores the significant influence of transformational leadership principles in shaping the dynamics of meetings and interactions, ultimately promoting professional growth and positive change within the organisation.

The succeeding section of this study directs its focus toward the sub-theme of digital platforms as integral means for sustaining CF networks.

4.5.1.2 DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN SUSTAINING CRITICAL FRIEND NETWORKS

The COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease of 2019) pandemic ushered in a new era for CF networks, prompting DHs to adapt to the shifting landscape of professional relationships. In response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, which included remote work arrangements, lockdowns, and limited physical interactions, DHs were compelled to recalibrate their approaches. The post-COVID-19 period brought about a paradigm shift, preparing them for a novel way of conducting their professional lives. A significant outcome of this adaptation was the enduring presence of online technology structures that were initially introduced during the pandemic. The digital platforms that facilitated remote work and collaboration persisted beyond the acute crisis, reshaping the networking landscape for DHs. One participant in this study, Akhona Mkhize, noted that pre-COVID, maintaining relationships with CFs posed challenges. The demands of a busy professional life often made it difficult to meet frequently, limiting the nurturing of these critical friendships. However, Akhona Mkhize observed that post-COVID-19, the dynamics of CF networks evolved positively. This transformation can be attributed to the widespread availability of online platforms that have revolutionised how DHs connect with their CFs. Akhona Mkhize said:

“... so pre-COVID we had to make time and have meetings... But, post-COVID is more convenient because during COVID we had to meet mostly through social media and so on and so now we just continue with the practice of dealing with each other or meeting each other over social media and video calls and all of those online platforms...”

Alexa Smith shared a perspective that aligned closely with Akhona Mkhize’s observations. She emphasised how the global pandemic had brought about a significant transformation in the

educational landscape and, by extension, in the nature of critical friendships. She expressed her sentiment as follows:

“ ... when COVID came around, it actually changed the entire scenario when it came to teaching and learning. So the activities that took place during COVID time, post-COVID, in terms of technology it just became the go-to place so technology created that platform...”

These observations collectively signify the evolution of CF networks in the post-COVID-19 era, where digital platforms have become essential tools for fostering and maintaining relationships. This evolution of CF networks is in line with the observations made in the literature by Yaseen and Joshi (2021), and Mhlanga et al. (2022), they note that the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technology in education and professional development, enriching the knowledge and teaching skills of educators. The same technological shifts that have positively impacted education and professional development have also facilitated the maintenance of critical friendships among DHs. In essence, the post-COVID era has ushered in a new era of connectivity and collaboration.

The discussion about the evolving landscape of CF networks in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid adoption of digital technology in education resonates strongly with the theoretical framework of this study. Mezirow's (1978), theory of transformative learning provides a compelling lens through which to understand these developments, emphasising two key components: Communicative Learning and Emancipatory Learning. Communicative Learning: As the research framework suggests, effective development and transformation often hinge on exchanging perspectives and ideas through dialogue and reflection. This principle is significantly amplified in the context of the pandemic-induced digital revolution. The adoption of digital technology has enriched educators' knowledge and teaching skills, but it also extends to the very essence of Communicative Learning. Educators and leaders now leverage digital platforms to facilitate communication and dialogue among peers, CFs, and DHs. These platforms have become essential tools for challenging assumptions, sharing innovative ideas, and providing support. Emancipatory Learning: The second component of the theoretical framework, is closely reflected in the discussion. In the post-COVID-19 era, the role of CFs in empowering DHs to drive change in educational institutions is more crucial than ever. Digital technology is not merely a tool for enriching knowledge and skills; it also serves as a catalyst for social and educational change. DHs are now better equipped to critically reflect on the

shifting social and political contexts, thanks to technological advancements. They can harness digital platforms to address critical issues in curriculum development, staffing, and conflict management, contributing to the broader goal of transformative learning. Digital tools have become the medium through which critical friendships thrive.

The ensuing section of this study unfolds the theme of strategic approaches employed in cultivating trust, practicing active listening, and fostering empathy within critical friendships.

4.5.2 STRATEGIES USED TO BUILD TRUST, ACTIVE LISTENING AND EMPATHY IN CRITICAL FRIENDSHIPS

In the context of understanding how DHs develop their CF networks, I delve into the fundamental elements that shape the establishment and growth of these critical friendships. The analysis of the data has unveiled three key sub-themes: Confidentiality, Listening Skills, and honesty, which are foundational to the formation and maintenance of CF networks.

4.5.2.1 CONFIDENTIALITY IN CRITICAL FRIENDSHIPS

The concept of confidentiality plays a pivotal role in critical friendships. It underscores the imperative need to maintain a discreet and trusted space where certain vulnerabilities or limitations of DHs are safeguarded from public disclosure. In the complex landscape of educational leadership, DHs may grapple with shortcomings and areas of knowledge that require refinement. The essence of a CF's assistance is found in the sanctity of these confidences, creating a secure environment for growth and improvement. This sub-theme underscores the importance of discretion and trust within the CF network, allowing DHs to seek and receive assistance in an environment free from the pressures of external judgment. This contributes to the sustaining and growing of CF networks.

Among the participants in this study, the concept of confidentiality was mentioned by three DHs, each emphasising its significance in building and maintaining trust within the CF network. For instance, Rajesh Govender noted that confidentiality is rooted in years of trust-building, stating,

“ ... I think confidentially actually comes from years of trust. I think it's the way we also deal with matters...”

Alexa Smith echoed these sentiments, underlining the importance of maintaining confidentiality to uphold trust:

“... it's so important that confidential information remains confidential in order to maintain their trust...”

Ethan Naidoo, too, highlighted the contemporary need for confidentiality in the age of information proliferation. Ethan Naidoo opined:

“... we live in an age where everything goes about like wildfire so you have to keep certain things confidential and build loyalty with your critical friends, that is a very important aspect of being a critical friend...”

These insights from participants underscore the shared commitment to upholding confidentiality as a fundamental principle in nurturing the trust and reliability essential to the dynamics of Critical Friendships. This commitment involves a conscientious effort to treat shared information with the utmost discretion, emphasising the importance of confidentiality as a means to nurture the trust and reliability essential to the dynamics of critical friendships. This commitment, rooted in the recognition of confidentiality as a cornerstone, fosters an environment where individuals feel confident in sharing their challenges, successes, and vulnerabilities. Ultimately, it is through this dedication to confidentiality that the bonds of trust within the Critical Friend network are fortified, paving the way for effective collaboration and mutual support.

The generated data revealed another sub-theme pertaining to the cultivating and sustaining of critical CF networks. This sub-theme delves specifically into the cultivation of trust through proficient listening in critical friendships. This sub-theme is explored in greater detail below.

4.5.2.2 CULTIVATING TRUST THROUGH PROFICIENT LISTENING IN CRITICAL FRIENDSHIPS

Listening, an indispensable skill, stands as a foundational pillar within the construct of critical friendships. It is a skill that demands equal presence from both individuals involved in this unique dynamic, in the context of this study the two individuals are the DHs and the CFs. In the context of critical friendships, proficient listening goes beyond the act of simply hearing words; it encompasses a deeper level of engagement. It involves actively understanding, empathising, and responding to the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of the other party. This active and empathetic listening forms the bedrock upon which trust is built. Within the dynamics of CF networks, where collaborative support and shared insights are paramount, the practice of proficient listening becomes instrumental in fostering enduring connections. The cultivation of

trust through such active and empathetic listening, therefore, becomes a linchpin in the sustained vitality and resilience of CF networks over time.

As one of the participants, Alexa Smith aptly stated:

“... I am open to suggestions and advice and when people realise that you're a good listener you win their trust...”

Her insightful observation underscores the profound relationship between active listening and trust within Critical Friendships. Alexa Smith further emphasises the importance of open communication, stating:

“So I would think one of the best ways to build trust with your critical friends is to be able to have open communication, open to suggestions open to advice...”

Her words highlight the notion that trust is intricately tied to the freedom of expression and the openness to receive feedback and guidance.

Andiswa Ngiba another participant expressed a similar view:

“... you've got to listen you have to be a good listener you have to listen to each other. It is not always easy to receive criticism but this is part of the critical friendship...”

Andiswa Ngiba's perspective serves to reinforce the notion that proficiency in listening is a key attribute in nurturing trust within the framework of Critical Friendships. This insight further accentuates the intrinsic link between trust and effective listening in critical Friendships.

Support for the views expressed by the participants of this study can be found in a study conducted by Villalobos (2014), which focused on similar themes and revealed a strong alignment with the perspectives shared by the participants in this study. In Villalobos' (2014), study, the participants also underscored the paramount importance of effective communication skills, with a notable emphasis on the act of listening as a key component. A principal, one of the participants in Villalobos' (2014) study, highlighted the ability to listen as an essential attribute within the context of their experiences. Additionally, in the exploration of cultivating trust through proficient listening within the context of CF networks, a study conducted by Henriksen and Aas (2020), provided further corroborative evidence. Henriksen and Aas's (2020) research, underscored the role of dialogue meetings as a practical tool for fostering a learning organisation, placing emphasis on the significance of active listening and open

communication. The positive feedback from principals in this study resonates with the findings, reinforcing the idea that proficient listening, exemplified through dialogue meetings, contributes significantly to participants feeling seen, heard, and valued within the CF network.

The analysis of the generated data has unveiled yet another noteworthy sub-theme, shedding light on the strategies employed for cultivating trust and fostering active listening and empathy within the realm of critical friendships. This emerging theme, centres around the concept of honesty as a pivotal element in building trust within critical friendships. The subsequent section will delve into a comprehensive exploration of this theme.

4.5.2.3 HONESTY IN BUILDING TRUST

While trust is often an implicit component of Critical Friendships, it's essential to recognise the value of honesty in shaping and sustaining these relationships. Rajesh Govender offered a unique and thought-provoking perspective on the role of honesty in the context of CFs. Although this viewpoint was expressed by a single participant, its significance cannot be understated. Rajesh Govender emphatically stated:

“I think trust comes from a lot of stuff and firstly it comes from being honest. If you're not honest about what you're doing and why you're doing it and keep on hiding then, nobody's going to trust you because soon you're going to get exposed for your dishonesty...”

While it may be surprising that this perspective was not widely echoed by other participants, it serves as a reminder that the dynamics of critical friendships can be nuanced and multifaceted. Rajesh Govender's viewpoint highlights the importance of honesty in creating an environment where CFs can engage in candid and constructive discussions. His view was further supported in his metaphorical photo-elicitation discussion, he elaborates on these concepts of trust and honesty. Rajesh Govender said:

“... I chose people that I trust. And that trust was based on a long-standing relationship with honesty and integrity. I saw value in them, I saw people as people of merit who were helpful, that were friendly, and so on. So when I chose people that were actually my critical friends they were people that I knew and trusted ...”

Rajesh Govender's words reflect the profound connection between trust, honesty, and the selection of CFs. His emphasis on trust being rooted in long-standing relationships, honesty,

and integrity underscores their role as the cornerstones of these invaluable relationships. Rajesh Govender's perspective aligns with established literature, as articulated by Costa and Kallick (1993), who assert that dialogues between CFs inherently involve criticism, demanding honesty for constructive engagement. This sentiment is reinforced by a study conducted by Alan et al. (2021), wherein they posit that a CF is expected to embody the virtue of honesty. Through honesty, a CF gains the authority to actively participate in constructive criticism, openly express ideas, and engage in challenging dialogues. This view aligns with the notion that honesty ensures accurate interpretations of experiences and situations, thereby cultivating a reliable and authentic exchange in critical friendships (Alan et al., 2021).

4.6 THE AREAS IN WHICH CRITICAL FRIENDS CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In this section, I delve into research question three of the study. “What are some of the areas in which critical friends contribute to the development of Departmental Heads in the case study schools? (This question seeks to describe the areas of school leadership where the assistance of CFs is sought.) Data analysis has revealed the following themes: school improvement, instructional leadership: subject-specific advancement, mentoring of new teachers, the role of CFs in supporting DHs with learner discipline, and technological empowerment through critical friendships.

4.6.1 SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

One of the critical areas of school leadership that CFs actively contribute to the growth of DHs is by engaging in school improvement initiatives. According to Kalman (2020), school improvement is characterised as a distinct approach to educational change, it involves a systematic process to bring about positive changes in various aspects of the educational environment. In essence, school improvement, when facilitated by CFs, acts as a catalyst for both the enhancement of the school itself and the development of DHs.

One of the participants, Akhona Mkhize emphasised the invaluable support provided by her CFs in addressing school improvement challenges. Akhona Mkhize expressed:

“ You'll find that there are a lot of schools in our position, and we need some kind of support so the critical friends come in here and they are invaluable because it is here that we discuss what we should do to improve our schools.

Perhaps we develop strategies of how to manage children who do not want to study, or how to mentor teachers who are lacking skills ...”

She then furthered her discussion on this while sharing an evocative picture during her photo-elicitation interview (see Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4.- Metaphorical photo-elicitation, A lighthouse.

Akhona Mkhize explained the metaphorical representation of her photo. She said:

“ ... there is a lighthouse with two very large beams right at the top, with the three people on boats on the sea with telescopes in their hands. So the people represent the critical friends who are there to search out for you and assist you with the problem that perhaps you may be experiencing or with the knowledge that you would need to navigate your role as a department head successfully...”

Akhona Mkhize further elaborated on her discussion about how her CFs assist and support her in her role as a DH. She succinctly conveyed her sentiments:

“ Sometimes the position of leadership can be like a rough sea because there are problems upon problems, and the critical friends are there to help you out of those situations but they're not only there for problems, they're also to give you reassurance that everything is going to be okay. They succeeded and navigated these waters quite successfully. There's always somebody there to assist you, you're not alone in this.”

This insightful perspective from Akhona Mkhize underscores the multifaceted nature of the support network surrounding her. Her CFs serve as problem-solvers, offering practical solutions during challenging times. Simultaneously, they provide emotional support and reassurance, reminding her that she is not isolated in her leadership journey.

In addition to Akhona Mkhize's insights, this study uncovered another valuable perspective from a participant, Alexa Smith. She shared her experience of how her CFs have been instrumental in addressing unique challenges faced by her school, which had been classified as a T75 school due to underperformance in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) exams. Alexa Smith shared:

"... my school was classified as a T75 school, which simply means we are not performing to the best of our ability, that is we not getting 75% and above for the NSC exams. Now for me, this is a unique situation, it's something new however my critical friends from other T-75 underperforming schools have been sharing strategies on how to overcome all our challenges when it comes to T75..."

Alexa Smith's account highlights the adaptability and problem-solving capabilities of CFs. In her context, CFs play a vital role in knowledge sharing and collaborative problem-solving to overcome the specific challenges associated with underperformance in T75 schools.

She added to her discussion by saying:

"As a level one, you are more teaching orientated, your job is to go there and teach but when you take on the role as a department head you are now becoming a leader, you have to possess leadership qualities. You have to take on the role as a manager and my critical friends have now empowered me to such an extent I am more efficient, more effective as a departmental head..."

Both Akhona Mkhize and Alexa Smith's narratives highlight the diverse roles that CFs play. They serve not only as problem solvers but also as sources of emotional support. This dual role extends their impact to the broader goal of enhancing school improvement.

The perspectives articulated in this study find substantial support in the existing literature. Swaffield (2005) underscores the potential of head teachers benefiting from external support in the form of CFs as a means to contribute significantly to school improvement. Additionally, Gurr and Huerta's study (2013), further accentuates the influential role of CFs in the context of school improvement, positing that, when endorsed by government policy in England, CFs could become an integral and powerful approach to enhancing educational practices. These findings align seamlessly with Mezirow's (1978), theory of communicative learning. The theory's emphasis on understanding the intended meaning and validating beliefs through

consensus resonates in the collaborative dialogues facilitated by CFs. As DHs engage in purposeful conversations, they echo Mezirow's call to interact with others, endeavoring to achieve a shared understanding guided by social and moral principles.

The examination of the generated data has uncovered another salient theme regarding the manifold ways in which CFs significantly contribute to the development of DHs. This emergent theme, namely instructional leadership: subject-specific advancement, will be expounded upon in the subsequent section of this dissertation.

4.6.2 INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: SUBJECT- SPECIFIC ADVANCEMENT

One of the significant challenges DHs face in their roles is the oversight of various subjects, even those in which they may not possess expert knowledge. This necessitates the need for assistance from their CFs. This aspect of CF support is well illustrated by Rajesh Govender.

Rajesh Govender provided an insightful account of his reliance on CF support, stating:

“ They provided an overview and support in terms of the subject that I'm not a master at. I'm very good at like mathematics and so on, I have a little bit of physics background and a little bit of Science background. But with subjects like Life Science, that is where I require the support of my critical friend...”

Rajesh Govender's openness about seeking CF assistance in subjects outside his primary domain underscores the importance of collaborative knowledge-sharing.

Rajesh Govender's reliance on CFs extends beyond curriculum oversight. He elaborated further on the extent of their support:

“ ...I think it's like associated subjects from the ones that I do control in the school, like for example I will still go and seek advice on like maybe physical science...”

This reveals the interdisciplinary nature of DH roles and the collaborative approach taken to address subject-specific challenges. Furthermore, Rajesh Govender's account underscores the practical implications of CF assistance in his role. He said:

“... when it comes to moderation of papers and scripts and so on, we tend to partner them off together so that somebody that's moderating has an in-depth knowledge...”

Rajesh Govender's emphasis on the moderation of papers exemplifies the role of CFs in maintaining quality standards and subject-specific integrity. Rajesh Govender's reliance on his CF network extends to his classroom observations. He stated:

"If I'm going to a class to do a classroom visit and I want to do a report and I've got some books that I read before I go, I also check on the topic and ask my critical friend about the topic so that I have enough background knowledge on the topic..."

Rajesh Govender's experiences offer a multifaceted view of the collaboration between DHs and CFs in the context of subject-specific advancement. CF support not only enhances the DH's ability to oversee diverse subjects but also contributes to their development.

The necessity for DHs to oversee various subjects, even those falling outside their realm of expertise, presents a recurrent challenge. Acknowledging this need for subject-specific support, CFs play a pivotal role in offering assistance. The experiences shared by Akhona Mkhize, echo the sentiments expressed by Rajesh Govender, shedding further light on the role of CFs in addressing subject-specific challenges. Akhona Mkhize, primarily an English teacher, manages subjects including Afrikaans, Dramatic Arts, and isiZulu. She candidly recognizes that she is not an expert in subjects such as Drama, isiZulu, and Afrikaans. In her own words:

"... For example, the language department that I oversee has Drama, English, Zulu, and Afrikaans, so Drama, Zulu, and Afrikaans I am not an expert. So the critical friends assist here..." Akhona Mkhize's openness to seeking assistance from CFs in subjects beyond her expertise emphasises the extent to which her CF contributes to her development. Akhona Mkhize's reliance on CF support extends to areas such as curriculum management, evaluation, and quality assurance. Her experiences complement those of Rajesh Govender, illustrating that DHs, regardless of their core areas of expertise, often find themselves navigating various subjects, all of which demand a tailored approach to subject-specific advancement.

These findings resonate with existing literature. Noor and Shafee's study (2020), reinforces that the primary goal of teachers engaging in action research is self-improvement in educational and pedagogical practices within a specific context. The study emphasises the necessity for teachers to adopt a critical perspective, systematically interrogating and validating their own practices. Furthermore, it underscores the role of CFs in enhancing teaching practices.

Similarly, Kastberg and Grant's study (2020), discusses how mathematics teachers, through engagement in critical friendships, transformed their professional identities and improved their practices. These studies collectively affirm the integral role of CFs in the continuous development and refinement of educators' professional practices.

Within the thematic analysis of the generated data, a significant theme has surfaced: the collaborative approach to mentoring new teachers through the involvement of CFs. The subsequent section will delve deeper into this theme, specifically focusing on the role of CFs in the mentoring of new teachers.

4.6.3 MENTORING OF NEW TEACHERS

In the context of mentoring new teachers, the DBE often assigns teachers to schools, even though they may lack the necessary experience and expertise. As a result, these new teachers require significant mentoring and guidance, which is typically expected to come from their DHs. However, effective mentoring is not a skill possessed by everyone; it requires a specific set of skills and knowledge. In cases where a DH lacks the expertise or skills to mentor new teachers effectively, they may turn to their CF for support and guidance on how to mentor and guide these new teachers who are entering the teaching profession. This unique perspective, presented by Akhona Mkhize:

“... if I should require some assistance this group of HoD's can give me that kind of assistance, one of those areas that I may require assistance is with the mentoring of new teachers that come in. Teachers who don't have the skills and expertise to manage in a school. Now remember the department is giving us teachers that have never been in a school, some of them were in community colleges and so on and they have no idea what the requirements are and this is the common trend now. This is the way the department is placing our new teachers and so we all like to find new strategies to help these teachers to manage in school...”

While this perspective was unique, as it was articulated by a single participant, its significance cannot be understated. It provides valuable insights into the pivotal role that CFs play in the development of DHs.

Akhona Mkhize's perspective in this study aligns with findings in the literature, which indicates a notable attrition rate among newly appointed teachers within the initial five years (Newberry

& Allsop, 2017; Henry et al., 2011). Kutsyuruba (2020) highlights the positive outcomes associated with high-quality teacher induction and mentoring programs. The study also underscores the pivotal role of school leaders in mentoring and guiding teachers, emphasising the active involvement of school administrators in shaping a supportive structure for the induction process (Long et al., 2012). In the context of school leaders, such as DHs, who are tasked with providing guidance to new teachers, it becomes essential for them to possess effective mentoring skills. CFs play a crucial role in this scenario by offering advice and support to DHs. This assistance enables DHs to, in turn, effectively mentor the new teachers assigned to their departments, contributing to the overall success of teacher induction initiatives within the educational institution.

The analysis of the generated data has illuminated a pivotal role played by CFs in contributing to the development of DHs, particularly in the domain of learner discipline. This theme is of paramount significance, as it elucidates the specific ways in which CFs offer valuable support to DHs in navigating and effectively managing issues related to the discipline of learners. The subsequent section of the study will provide a detailed and nuanced exploration of this theme, shedding light on how CFs contribute to enhancing the skills, strategies, and decision-making capabilities of department heads in the realm of learner discipline.

4.6.4 THE ROLE OF CRITICAL FRIENDS IN SUPPORTING DEPARTMENTAL HEADS WITH LEARNER DISCIPLINE

DHs recognise the importance of maintaining discipline and a conducive learning environment within their schools. Seeking expertise from their CFs, DHs aim to develop strategies, share best practices, and gain insights into effective discipline management approaches. This is particularly crucial in schools facing unique challenges related to student behavior and social issues. Alexa Smith elucidated the challenging situations she encounters as a DH, Alexa Smith further expounded:

“ We sometimes are placed in a very challenging situation because of the number of fights that take place, which is sometimes totally out of our control, The discipline of our learners is a cause for concern. Fortunately, our critical friends are there to assist...”

Alexa Smith, in her role as a DH, has encountered the demanding task of managing school discipline, exacerbated by an increasing number of fights. In these trying situations, she relies on her CFs for guidance and support. Alexa Smith described the significance of this

collaboration during her metaphorical photo-elicitation discussion, using a metaphorical image of two people building a bridge. (See Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.5.- Metaphorical photo-elicitation, Two people working together to complete a bridge.

Alexa Smith explained the metaphorical representation of this picture:

“ The individuals working together on the bridge exemplify the cooperative relationship between myself and my critical friend. Our joint efforts show how the combination of our strengths can lead to progress and growth. My critical friend's role is not just in physically building the bridge but also in guiding my journey across it. My critical friends offer me guidance, support, and sometimes a helping hand to ensure that I safely navigate the challenges of my growth... ”

Alexa Smith further explained how this image symbolically represented the assistance she received from her CF in addressing discipline matters, particularly the challenges related to school violence. She emphasised the collaborative effort and support required to facilitate her professional development:

“ The act of constructing the bridge emphasises the effort and collaboration required to facilitate my growth. This critical friend assisted in building the bridge symbolising how they helped me overcome obstacles and challenges. One of the major challenges that we experience is the violence at our school and my critical friends have come to my aid whenever support is required. ”

Siyabonga Gumede shared a similar perspective, noting that he initially sought assistance from his CFs in managing discipline matters at his school. He stated:

“ So, as I mentioned, initially it was discipline matters at the school. Being new to the school, I had to learn how to deal with learners and parents at this school because every school is unique... ”

Akhona Mkhize's perspective closely aligns with that of Alexa Smith and Siyabonga Gumede, as she also actively sought assistance from her CFs to address discipline issues in her school. She emphasised that the discipline concerns were not unique to her school but were escalating in other schools as well. Akhona Mkhize asserted:

“ Practically for the discipline issues, because that seems to be escalating in the school but it's also escalating in other schools as well. Some of the other schools where my critical friends are, have worse issues, such as knife-wielding and gun-wielding, children who are just violent because they come from violent backgrounds. And so that that kind of violence seems to be creeping into the school and we discuss how to handle those issues and look for more structures to put in place. So when we discuss these things we talk about what they have put in place not to prevent these kinds of issues from emerging ... ”

Akhona Mkhize's account underscores the value of collaborative problem-solving and knowledge-sharing among DHs and their CFs, not only to address immediate concerns but also to proactively develop strategies and structures that contribute to a safer and more conducive learning environment.

In a comprehensive study conducted by Narain (2015), it is illuminated that schools globally have encountered a surge in challenges related to learner discipline in recent times. Narain (2015), underscores that a myriad of factors contribute to the complexity of these discipline problems. Furthermore, the study emphasises the pivotal role that school leaders, such as DHs, must undertake in the maintenance of discipline. However, this commitment to discipline management can be particularly demanding for DHs who are newly appointed to educational institutions, navigating the uncharted territories of unique school dynamics and varied learner behaviours. In such scenarios, DHs often find themselves in need of guidance and support. It is within this context that DHs turn to their CFs, relying on them as invaluable sources of expertise and counsel. This aligns seamlessly with one of the foundational theories of this study, the transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985), specifically the dimension of intellectual stimulation. In this case, the CF assumes the role of a transformative leader, providing crucial support and guidance to the DH, particularly in matters related to learner discipline. This collaborative dynamic reflects the essence of transformational leadership theory in fostering intellectual growth and effective decision-making within the educational leadership context.

The analysis of the generated data has unveiled a significant theme regarding the ways in which CFs contribute to the development of DHs, with a particular emphasis on technology. This emerging theme underscores the pivotal role that CFs play in fostering technological empowerment. The subsequent section of the study will delve into the intricate details of how these collaborative partnerships empower DHs with the necessary technological insights, skills, and strategies.

4.6.5 TECHNOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CRITICAL FRIENDSHIPS

Technology is an essential facet of education in the contemporary era, and DHs recognise the pivotal role it plays in shaping teaching and learning. The DHs are primarily seeking guidance on how to best leverage technology in their educational leadership roles. These DHs rely on their CFs for advice, strategies, and insights to effectively integrate technology into their administrative and pedagogical responsibilities.

This perspective finds resonance among two participants in the study. Siyabonga Gumede, for instance, recalled a specific instance where he received guidance regarding the use of computers for timetabling. He further underscored the enduring value of the computer skills he acquired with the support of his CF, emphasising that these skills continue to benefit him significantly, even in his role as a senior marker for Technical Science. He admitted:

“ in terms of computer skills, my deputy principal helped me tremendously, and it also helped me in my professional development as a chief marker and national examiner because typing is a big thing for me and my deputy principal assisted me there. And also in terms of allocations, in terms of allocating periods to teachers, it's something that I am not very clued in and the deputy principal helped me. In terms of timetabling, as a level one, I never got involved with timetabling, but as a manager, I knew I had to get involved. And these gentlemen have assisted me tremendously with regard to that... ”

Siyabonga Gumede's experience serves as a tangible illustration of how the collaboration between DHs and their CFs in the realm of technology enhances their ability to fulfil their leadership roles effectively. A similar perspective was shared by Akhona Smith, she admits that technology is not her strong point and through collaboration with her CF, she is getting better at it. She said:

“... in terms of technology, remember we are the dinosaurs of the system and so there are the newer critical friends the younger critical friends, They are very innovative, they are like light years ahead of us in terms of technology...”

During her MPE discussion (see Figure 4.5), Akhona Mkhize shares her perspectives on the assistance she received from her CF during the COVID-19 pandemic. She stated:

“ And even with COVID, we had numerous problems that we had to overcome, and the critical friends like other teachers who were in better schools were giving us resources and things that we would have been lost without...”

Akhona Mkhize’s perspective reinforces the notion that collaboration between DHs and their CFs in the domain of technology significantly enhances their capacity to excel in the role of a DH. The perspectives expressed by the participants in this study regarding the importance of technology align with existing literature. Notably, a study conducted by Lindqvist and Pettersson (2018), sheds light on the imperative for school leaders to possess technological competence. As Lindqvist and Pettersson (2018), elucidate, modern educational environments are increasingly reliant on technology for instructional, administrative, and organisational purposes. School leaders, including DHs, find themselves at the epicentre of this technological shift, necessitating an understanding of technological trends and their effective integration into the educational landscape.

4.7 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to analyse and present the data. This was achieved through thematic analysis of the data, enriched by in-depth discussions derived from the data generated through semi-structured interviews and MPE discussions. Each critical research question was systematically addressed through the synthesis of relevant themes, substantiated by verbatim quotes from participants. And thereafter I made my deductions and inferences known, paving the way for an analytical discussion grounded in existing literature and theoretical frameworks. My key learning for research question one was the pivotal role of CFs in shaping the professional development of DHs. The identified CFs encompassed a spectrum of key stakeholders. This collective cadre of CFs emerged as significant contributors, their impact deriving from a combination of specific skills and expertise. My key learning for research question two was that trust, active listening, and empathy act as fundamental components in sustaining and growing critical friendships. My key learning for research question three was DHs, in their quest to elevate organisational capabilities and effectiveness, actively seek

specialised expertise and guidance. Specifically, this pursuit manifests in targeted areas such as learner discipline, technology integration, and the mentorship of new teachers.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, serves as a culmination of the research efforts. It will provide a comprehensive overview of the research findings, present the key conclusions that have emerged from the study, and offer insightful recommendations for further consideration.

CHAPTER FIVE

ECHOES OF INQUIRY AND TRAILS OF WISDOM: CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter title, 'Echoes of Inquiry and Trails of Wisdom: Conclusions and Contributions of the Study,' has been purposefully chosen to signify the profound journey undertaken in this research endeavour. Within this study, I embarked on a metaphorical exploration akin to navigating through an expansive forest. Each chapter within this research embodies a distinct part of this forest, with Chapter Five serving as a pivotal clearing at its heart. The notion of "Echoes of Inquiry" encapsulates the resonating effects of every question posed, methodology applied, and generated data amassed throughout this study. These reverberations intricately echo the core findings of this study, permeating through the metaphorical forest, and imprinting their significance within the academic terrain. Contrarily, "Trails of Wisdom" symbolises the conclusions and recommendations derived from this study. Analogous to paths etched through a forest, these conclusions guide future researchers, steering them toward valuable insights and providing navigation through the complexities inherent in the findings. Chapter Five epitomises the convergence point where the echoes of inquiry resound, and the pathways of wisdom emerge. It stands as the epicentre, directing and guiding others through the expansive forest of knowledge nurtured by the contributions of this research.

In this concluding chapter, I offer a brief recapitulation of each preceding chapter, providing a concise overview to reorient the reader with the journey taken throughout this study. I then draw on my findings as a foundation and I articulate perspicacious conclusions that directly address the research questions. Building upon these insights, I propose pragmatic recommendations, drawing from the findings uncovered. Subsequently, I engage in a reflection on conducting this study, acknowledging challenges faced, unexpected insights gained, and personal learnings attained during this scholarly pursuit.

5.2 A SYNOPSIS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of **Chapter One** was to lay a comprehensive groundwork by introducing the research topic. I achieved this purpose by meticulously crafting and presenting a detailed background on CFs in school leadership providing contextual depth to the subsequent study. The focal point was the elucidation of the research problem, establishing its significance within

the field of education leadership and management. In this chapter, a trilogy of justifications—comprising theoretical, professional, and personal, was methodically outlined, accentuating the necessity and relevance of this research endeavour. Subsequently, the chapter unveiled the tripartite structure of the study through three discerning research questions, each poised to delve into distinct aspects of the identified problem, which are: What are the personal and professional identities of critical friends that contribute to the development of departmental heads in the case study schools? How do the Department Heads grow their critical friend networks in the case study schools? What are some of the areas in which critical friends contribute to the development of Departmental Heads in the case study schools? An integral aspect of this introductory chapter involved providing clear and precise definitions of the key terms and concepts central to the study, ensuring a solid conceptual foundation for the ensuing inquiry.

The purpose of **Chapter Two** was to offer a comprehensive understanding of the extensive literature and pertinent theories associated with CFs in school leadership. I achieved the purpose of this chapter through meticulous analysis and presentation of existing literature, synthesising scholarly works, studies, and relevant sources. Some of the emerging key debates are the debate around CFs and identity centres on the complex interplay between personal and professional identities within these relationships, as highlighted by scholars such as Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), Naidoo (2012), and Kastberg and Grant (2020). It encompasses discussions regarding the extent of personal involvement in professional interactions, and debating the boundaries of personal disclosure within CF relationships. Moreover, it examines how personal and professional identities influence trust, communication, and the establishment of effective CF relationships, as highlighted by Swaffield (2005) and Carlson (2019). Another key debate is that CFs can be viewed as a promising approach for school leaders to bring about change, in the form of school improvement, learner achievement, and professional development (Swaffield, 2004; Villalobos, 2014). This evolving discourse underscores the pivotal role of CFs in reshaping educational landscapes, driving impactful change through the synergy of personal-professional dynamics, and the pursuit of comprehensive school improvement. Delving into this wealth of knowledge, I sought to provide a panoramic view of CFs in school leadership identifying trends, gaps, and the evolution of CFs in school leadership. Furthermore, this chapter introduced and dissected the two theories that underpin and direct this research, which are Transformational leadership theory and Transformative learning theory. These theories were

carefully selected to form a robust foundation for the study, validating the chosen approach and methodology. The utilisation of these two theories was instrumental in offering a profound insight into the dynamics and nuances of CFs in school leadership when analysing the data.

Chapter Three was preciously crafted to serve the purpose of outlining and explicating the specific methodologies, procedures, and techniques strategically utilised to address the research questions presented in earlier chapters. The purpose of this chapter was attained through a structured sequence of methodological decisions. The chapter commenced by unequivocally elucidating the adoption of the interpretive paradigm, robustly justifying its choice to underpin this study's philosophical foundation. A rationale was provided for the selection of the two research sites, further enriched by detailed biographies illuminating the diverse backgrounds and contextual nuances of the purposively selected participants. Subsequently, the chapter accounted for the designed research methodology, which is a case study transparently detailing the deployment of semi-structured interviews and metaphorical photo-elicitation methods in data generation. Issues of trustworthiness and ethics are also included in this chapter.

The purpose of **Chapter Four** was to methodically present research findings after the analysis of the generated data, using thematic analysis. I achieved the purpose of this chapter through a diligent approach entailing the presentation, analysis, and profound discussions centred around the amassed data. To execute this, the three research questions were strategically employed as the organising framework, guiding the systematic arrangement of the research findings. Each research question served as a pivotal axis, steering the identification of prominent themes within the generated data, subsequently leading to the emergence of nuanced sub-themes. The thorough exploration of these themes and sub-themes served as a comprehensive means to unravel the complexities inherent in the data, allowing for deep and structured analysis.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

The conclusions that are made below were drawn from the three research questions mentioned in Chapter One.

5.3.1 INSIGHTS OBTAINED FROM THIS CASE STUDY CONCERNING THE CRITICAL FRIENDS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

The CFs of DHs exhibit a multifaceted range of professional identities, encompassing roles such as other DHs, principals, DPs, and teachers. This profound revelation underscores the expansive and diverse network of support and collaboration inherent within educational leadership. The inclusion of such diverse stakeholders as CFs serves to amplify the breadth and depth of influence, enriching the quality of guidance and mentorship available to DHs. This diverse spectrum of CFs not only widens the scope of influence but also enhances the depth of perspectives and expertise accessible to professional development within leadership roles. The encompassing of multiple professional identities within critical friendships underscores the significance of inclusive networks in nurturing the comprehensive professional growth of DHs. Drawing from Bass's (1985), Transformational Leadership Theory, which advocates for stimulating intellectual exchanges and idea-sharing among followers, the discovery of critical friendships spanning various educational roles and hierarchies resonates profoundly. In this context, the CF assumes the role of the leader, fostering an environment conducive to stimulating intellectual discourse and fostering innovative thinking within educational leadership.

Intriguingly, the engagement of retired principals and deputy principals as CFs to DHs constitutes a noteworthy aspect of this study. Contrary to the assumption that retirees might distance themselves from the educational profession, it has emerged that these experienced individuals actively participate in fostering the growth and development of DHs. The participants in the research have attested to the invaluable assistance and guidance received through the establishment of critical friendships with retired personnel. Moreover, the study illuminates the dedication of current principals and deputy principals toward the professional development of their DHs. The role of a principal and Deputy Principal (DP) is very busy and filled with various activities in a day (Bottery, 2016; Oumer, 2014). While the demanding nature of the principal and DP roles might suggest a limited capacity for contributions to the growth of DHs, the findings contradict such assumptions. Participants in the study have articulated instances where current principals invest significant time and effort in the professional development of their respective DHs.

5.3.2 INSIGHTS OBTAINED FROM THIS CASE STUDY CONCERNING THE CULTIVATING AND SUSTAINING OF CRITICAL FRIEND NETWORKS

The findings of this study indicate that CF networks thrive significantly through the utilisation of digital platforms. The introduction of these platforms, particularly during the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic, has not only cultivated but also sustained these networks. Participants in the study have articulated a palpable transformation within the educational landscape, notably marked by a widespread transition towards digital platforms due to imperative social distancing protocols enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift represents a notable evolution that has remarkably supported DHs in sustaining their CF networks. The convenience of digital platforms has eradicated logistical barriers, such as the need for physical travel to meetings and the challenge of aligning schedules for in-person gatherings. Consequently, it has streamlined communication and bolstered consistent interaction among individuals within these networks.

The findings of the study further identify pivotal elements imperative for the cultivating and sustaining of CF networks. Among these elements, participants underscored the indispensability of listening skills, confidentiality, and honesty within such relationships. Trust emerges as a cornerstone in critical friendships, intricately intertwined with the practice of active listening. Participants emphasised that trust within critical friendships is nurtured through attentive listening, an essential attribute particularly significant in the context of critique exchange. The willingness to accept and engage with the critique offered by a CF hinges upon adept and engaged listening, thus underscoring the profound importance of active listening. Integral to the establishment and sustenance of trust is the value placed on honesty. Participants expressed a clear inclination towards aligning with CFs characterised by professional honesty and personal authenticity. This aspect emerged as foundational, signifying that transparent and truthful interactions form the bedrock of enduring critical friendships. Moreover, confidentiality emerged as another pivotal element vital for cultivating and maintaining CF networks. Participants attested to the significance of confidentiality, acknowledging their own vulnerabilities and professional challenges. They emphasised the need for a secure environment within these relationships, where personal shortcomings or moments of weakness remain shielded from external exposure. Thus, confidentiality stands as a linchpin, preserving the integrity and sanctity of CF networks.

5.3.3 INSIGHTS OBTAINED FROM THIS CASE STUDY CONCERNING THE AREAS IN WHICH CRITICAL FRIENDS CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

The study findings reveal significant areas where DHs rely on CFs for essential assistance and support in their professional roles. These areas encompass school improvement, instructional leadership (specifically subject-specific advancement), mentoring of new teachers, learner discipline, and technology.

Participants in the study highlighted the pivotal role CFs play in supporting school improvement initiatives, particularly in low-performing schools as observed in both research schools. DHs expressed engaging with CFs to strategize and implement approaches aimed at elevating their schools from the low-performance zone. CFs were regarded as catalysts in this process, offering invaluable guidance and contributing substantially to the school's improvement. Furthermore, DHs oversee various subjects, often lacking specialised knowledge in certain areas (as expressed by participants in this study). In these instances, they turn to their CFs for expertise and advice, particularly in instructional leadership focused on subject-specific advancements. CFs provide valuable insights and strategies that aid DHs in effectively managing diverse subject matters within their departments. Mentoring new teachers emerges as another crucial area where DHs seek the assistance of CFs. While DHs are expected to mentor new teachers within their departments, not all possess the necessary skills or expertise for effective mentoring. Therefore, CFs serve as vital resources, offering guidance and support to DHs in honing their mentoring capabilities. Additionally, learner discipline poses a significant concern in both research schools. The challenges faced in managing learner discipline in the contemporary educational landscape demand unique solutions. DHs, often encountering situations where conventional methods may not suffice, turn to CFs for innovative approaches and strategies to effectively address disciplinary issues. Lastly, the integration of technology stands as a domain where DHs require the support of CFs. Given the rapidly evolving technological landscape, DHs seek guidance and assistance from CFs to navigate and harness the potential of technology in enhancing educational practices within their departments. Transformational leadership, as posited by Bass (1985), provides a valuable framework for comprehending how mentorship and support from CFs, who serve as role models, are instrumental in nurturing positive leadership growth. This, in essence, underscores the paramount importance of critical friendships in the realm of educational leadership.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings reveal five recommendations elucidated below.

5.4.1 RECOMMENDATION ONE

Building upon the findings for the first research question this recommendation underscores the significance of recognising retired principals and DPs as invaluable CFs in educational leadership. Encouraging DHs and other educational leaders to actively engage with retired professionals presents an opportunity to leverage their wealth of experience and knowledge. By tapping into the reservoir of insights offered by these seasoned individuals, critical friendships for DHs can be enriched, fostering their continuous professional development.

5.4.2 RECOMMENDATION TWO

Building upon the findings of the second research question it is recommended that there is continued integration and training in utilising digital platforms for CF networks. Schools are encouraged to provide ongoing support and training sessions to familiarise DHs with various digital tools. This would ensure that DHs are equipped with the necessary skills to maximise the potential of digital platforms for sustaining CF networks effectively.

5.4.3 RECOMMENDATION THREE

Based on the key findings arising from the exploration of the second research question it is recommended to prioritise cultivating trust, active listening, honesty, and confidentiality within CF relationships during professional development sessions or workshops. Schools are encouraged to include training sessions specifically focusing on these elements. Promoting and nurturing these foundational aspects could fortify CF networks and enhance their longevity and effectiveness.

5.4.4 RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Based on the insights derived from the third research question, it is also recommended that there is the establishment of specialised CF networks. These CF networks could focus on specific areas such as school improvement, instructional leadership, mentoring of new teachers, learner discipline, and technology integration. Tailoring CF support to these specific areas would provide targeted assistance, fostering expertise and collaboration in key areas of concern for DHs.

5.4.5 RECOMMENDATION FIVE

An additional recommendation arising from the findings of the third research question is the proactive formation of CF networks by DHs. DHs are encouraged to establish these networks to address and supplement areas where they might have shortcomings or gaps in expertise. CFs, equipped with specialised skills and experience, offer valuable support that DHs may require to enhance their effectiveness in their leadership roles. By actively forming and nurturing CF networks, DHs can access diverse perspectives and expertise crucial for their professional development and efficacy in school leadership.

5.5 MY REFLECTIONS ON CONDUCTING THE STUDY

Embarking on this self-reflexive phase of my study, I aimed to encapsulate the profound essence of my research journey through a metaphorical portrayal (see Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1. – A breaking dawn

At the genesis of this scholarly endeavour, the pathway lay obscured by uncertainties, akin to the brooding presence of dark clouds depicted in the image. These clouds serve as a visual testament to the myriad unknowns and challenges that characterised the expedition of my academic pursuit. Throughout this scholarly endeavour, one challenge loomed larger and more unforeseen than others—an insurmountable challenge: my health. A sudden period of illness led to weeks of unforeseen hospitalisation, veering my studies off-course and plunging me into a fog of uncertainty. Navigating through this unanticipated detour amidst academic demands proved arduous, fostering moments of despair as I grappled to maintain academic momentum amidst health setbacks. During these moments of adversity, the support and guidance of my supervisor, Prof. Inba Naicker, emerged as a beacon of hope. Prof Inba Naicker not only

provided unwavering support but also encouraged me to prioritise my health. The dialogue below (see Figure 5.2) between my professor and myself.

Prof Inba: *Dear Luvashni. Your silence is worrying me...Are you all good?*

Luvashni: *Good morning Prof. Unfortunately, I was sick again last week and will have to be admitted again next week for a few days, for a procedure. Before I go to the hospital next week, I will finalise my photo-elicitation schedule and pilot the study. Once I am out of the hospital, I will analyse the data and send you feedback. I know I am falling behind and I am worried too.*

Prof Inba: *Sorry to hear you are still ill. Please attend to what you need to do medically. Medical issues are more important. Take care.*

Luvashni: *Thank you, Prof.*

Figure 5.2. – Dialogue with supervisor

The dialogue above encapsulates the profound impact of Prof. Inba Naicker's mentorship on my journey as a researcher. The exchange not only reflects the compassionate understanding of my health challenges but also underscores the pivotal role played by supervisors in guiding students through the intricate terrain of scholarly pursuits (Peltonen et al., 2017). During a period of illness, Prof Inba Naicker exhibited unwavering support, prioritising my well-being over academic demands and encouraging me to focus on necessary medical procedures. Beyond navigating health challenges, Prof. Inba Naicker's mentorship extended to fostering critical thinking and scholarly growth. Encouraging a reflexive approach, Prof. Inba Naicker challenged me to constantly evaluate the 'what' and 'why' of my research endeavour. Admittedly, at times, this felt like a constant 'academic argument' however, this guidance instilled a habit of self-critique rather than naval gazing, leading to a newfound sense of scrutiny and refinement of not only my academic pursuits but also my everyday life.

The visual metaphor (see Figure 5.1), portraying the emergence of the sun from the dark sky, serves as a powerful representation analogous to the emergence of insights within this study. It symbolises the genesis of new knowledge and the revelation of fresh perspectives. Much like the sun rising from darkness heralds a new day, this study emerges from exploration, ushering in novel insights and transformative revelations. Central to these revelations is the network of CFs fostering the development of DHs, encompassing peers, principals, former principals, DPs, FDPs, and teachers. DHs actively seek their assistance for academic support and guidance.

Regular meetings serve as networking hubs nurturing these critical friendships, with digital platforms sustaining these connections over time. Trust, a foundational element, is cultivated through adept listening. These critical friendships actively contribute to DH growth by engaging in initiatives aimed at school improvement, as illuminated by this study. This symbolism encapsulates the essence of scholarly pursuit—a transition from obscurity to enlightenment, from ambiguity to clarity. The research achieves clarity by delineating the mechanisms through which critical friendships facilitate academic support, guidance, and mutual learning. Delving into the dynamics of CFs in school leadership, this study profoundly enlightens the transformative role of these relationships. It underscores how these CFs serve as invaluable resources for the professional development of DHs, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and reflective practice. The radiant sun, symbolizing illumination, mirrors the transformative journey undertaken, shedding light on unexplored knowledge realms, and offering enlightenment amidst uncertainty.

5.6 CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter commenced with a comprehensive overview, providing synopses of the preceding chapters to offer a holistic perspective on the study's trajectory. Then the presentation of conclusions is undertaken from the study's findings. Additionally, this chapter incorporates a section dedicated to recommendations drawn from the study's outcomes. Subsequently, I engage in a reflective analysis, delving into the academic journey undertaken throughout this study. This chapter has revealed to me firstly how I have grown as a researcher. Furthermore, this chapter has revealed the impact of critical friends on the development of departmental heads.

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Appendix A

DATA GENERATION PLAN – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

I Will be using on-to-one semi-structured interviews as my main data generation method.

Semi-structured interview

Ice-breaker (5 minutes)

I will go through my study's goals and objectives with the participants. I will explain to the participants what semi-structured interviews are.

I will begin by explaining and defining the term critical friends as per the literature.

Questions for semi-structured interviews (60 minutes)

1. Biographic details

1.1. Age

1.2. Gender

1.3. Educational qualifications.

1.4. Positions held.

1.5 Work experience in education.

2. Section 2: The critical friends that contribute to the development of Departmental Heads.

2.1. Within the context of your role as a Departmental Head, which individuals or colleagues have played a significant and instrumental role in supporting your professional development? Could you please describe the specific roles fulfilled by these individuals, whether they are senior teachers, English coordinators, sports coaches, etc, and additionally, if they serve in any other role? How do these various roles contribute to your critical friendship?

2.2. Considering who your critical friends are, in what ways do their skills and expertise align with or complement your role as a Departmental Head? Furthermore, could you provide specific instances where you and your critical friend share common values or goals?

2.3 What are the key characteristics or qualities that you look for in a critical friend? Please describe the attributes of your critical friend. How do these qualities contribute to your development? What are your views on collaborating with colleagues? How has collaboration helped or hindered your professional growth as a Departmental Head?

3. Section 3: The cultivating and sustaining of critical friend networks.

3.1. How do you go about building and maintaining connections with colleagues who provide valuable feedback and support? Could you describe the specific steps or actions you take to initiate and cultivate relationships with potential critical friends? Are there any formal or informal processes in place within the school that support the establishment of critical friend networks for Departmental Heads?

3.2. Can you share the strategies you have used to build trust, and promote active listening, and empathy in your relationship with your supportive colleague? How do you ensure confidentiality and create a safe space for open and honest discussions? What communication strategies do you employ to ensure open and transparent dialogue with your supportive colleague? What steps does your friend take to understand your feelings, experiences, and viewpoints?

3.3. Can you provide examples of how feedback and suggestions are shared in a supportive and growth-oriented manner, and how this contributes to your professional development? What steps do you take to create a safe and non-threatening environment for receiving feedback from your colleague? How are suggestions and recommendations presented?

4. Section 4: The mechanisms and areas in which critical friends contribute to the development of Departmental Heads.

4.1. In what ways do your supportive colleagues contribute to your professional development? How do your colleagues share their knowledge and expertise with you? Do they provide guidance, resources, or mentorship? How does this contribute to your professional growth? What communication channels or platforms do you use to connect with your critical friends?

4.2. In what areas do you typically seek the expertise or involvement of your critical friends? Are there specific projects, initiatives, or decision-making processes where their input is valued? How do you approach your critical friends for assistance? Is it through formal channels, informal discussions, or scheduled meetings?

4.3. Please provide any examples of how involvement with critical friends has led to improved outcomes or innovative solutions. Have you observed any long-term changes or improvements in your work as a result of their involvement? If yes, please describe these improvements. Are there any challenges or limitations associated with eliciting assistance from critical friends or engaging departmental heads?

5. Section 5: General

Before we conclude is there anything you would like to add to on critical friends in leadership?

Thank you very much for the time that you have spent talking to me and the information that you have shared with me.

Appendix B

METAPHORICAL PHOTO-ELICITATION DISCUSSION SCHEDULE

As an additional method of data generation, this study incorporates metaphorical photo-elicitation within the framework of participant-driven semi-structured interviews. Metaphorical photo-elicitation is a research method that involves participants bringing photographs that can be used as metaphors to stimulate discussion and generate data in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018). This method can be used for a variety of research questions, but it is particularly useful when researchers want to understand people's experiences, perspectives, and values in relation to a particular phenomenon or issue (Cohen et al., 2018; Hopkins & Wort, 2020). By integrating metaphorical photo-elicitation into the interviews, the study aims to enhance the depth and richness of the collected data, providing a multi-dimensional perspective that encompasses both verbal and visual expressions.

Ice-breaker (5 minutes)

I will share a picture with the participants symbolising a metaphorical representation of my understanding of the role of critical friends. By presenting my own picture and discussing its significance, I will create a shared space for exploration and dialogue, encouraging participants to feel more comfortable and open in sharing their own perspectives and experiences.

Metaphorical photo-elicitation interview questions (60 minutes)

1. Can you explain what is literally happening in this photo? What are the main objects or subjects captured in the photo? Are there any notable actions or interactions happening in the photo? What are some possible relationships or connections between the people or elements in the photo?
2. How does the metaphorical representation conveyed by this picture illustrate your relationship with your critical friend? How does the picture symbolically represent the dynamics and characteristics of your relationship with your critical friend? What specific elements or symbols in the picture resonate with the nature of your connection with your critical friend?
3. Please discuss why you chose to share this picture today. What motivated you to select and share this specific picture today?

What specific moments or interactions with your critical friend come to mind when you look at this photo?

4. How does this photo metaphorically represent the collaborative and supportive nature of your relationship with your critical friend? Do you notice any shared resources or joint efforts depicted in the photo that exemplifies the collaborative aspect of your relationship? How does the overall atmosphere or mood portrayed in the photo reflect the collaborative and supportive dynamics between you and your critical friend?

5. Reflecting on this photo, how does it metaphorically represent the supportive and challenging aspects of your relationship with your critical friend? In what ways does it capture the balance between encouragement and constructive critique?

6. Reflecting on your journey with your critical friend, how does this photo capture the essence of trust within your relationship with your critical friend? Can you describe any instances or memories associated with trust-building experiences with your critical friend that are reflected in the photo?

7. What would you like other people to know about critical friends?

Thank you very much for the time that you have spent talking to me and the information that you have shared with me.

Appendix C

ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



02 May 2023

Luvashni Moodley (220101163)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear L Moodley,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00005443/2023

Project title: Critical friends in school leadership: A case study of the development of departmental heads in high schools.

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 23 March 2023 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 02 May 2024.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix D

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

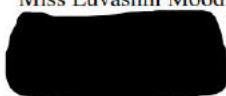
Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 392 1051

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Mrs B.T. Ntuli

Ref.:2/4/8/7408

Miss Luvashni Moodley



Dear Miss Moodley

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"CRITICAL FRIENDS IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPARTMENTAL HEADS IN HIGH SCHOOLS."**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from **02 March 2023 to 31st December 2025**.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.



Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 02nd March 2023

Appendix E

LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT SCHOOLS

20 February 2023

Dear Principal

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Luvashni Moodley, and I am a Masters student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am writing to seek permission to conduct research at your school for my study titled, "Critical Friends in School Leadership: A Case Study of the Development of Departmental Heads in High Schools."

The purpose of my research is to explore and analyse the role of critical friends in the professional development of departmental heads within high school settings. I am particularly interested in understanding the strategies, challenges, and successes experienced by these educational leaders as they engage in collaborative learning and professional growth. I assure you that all information collected during this research will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes. Additionally, I am committed to complying with all school policies and schedules to ensure minimal disruption to the regular activities of the school.

Your cooperation in granting permission for this research will be immensely appreciated. Should you require any further information or clarification about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at luvashni@gmail.com. Thank you for considering my request. I look forward to your favourable response.

Sincerely

Luvashni Moodley

Appendix F

RESPONSES FROM SCHOOL PRINCIPALS TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT SCHOOLS

Dear Luvashni Moodley

Re: Permission for conducting research in my school

I Mr [REDACTED] principal of [REDACTED]

hereby grant permission for the study titled 'Critical friends in school leadership: A case study of the development of departmental heads in high schools', on the condition that it will not disturb our teaching and learning programme. I fully understand the nature of your study as you explained to me and understand the contents of your letter. I agree to my school's participation in the study. Your assurance of confidentiality and anonymity is acknowledged and appreciated.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you well and success in your studies.

Yours in education

Signature: [REDACTED]

(Principal)

**RESPONSES FROM SCHOOL PRINCIPALS TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT
SCHOOLS**

Dear Luvashni Moodley

Re: Permission for conducting research in my school

I Mr [REDACTED] principal of [REDACTED]

hereby grant permission for the study titled ‘Critical friends in school leadership: A case study of the development of departmental heads in high schools’, on the condition that it will not disturb our teaching and learning programme. I fully understand the nature of your study as you explained to me and understand the contents of your letter. I agree to my school’s participation in the study. Your assurance of confidentiality and anonymity is acknowledged and appreciated.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you well and success in your studies.

Yours in education

Signature: [REDACTED]

(Principal)

Appendix G

INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Informed Consent

Dear: Departmental Head

My name is Luvashni Moodley from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education. I am a Masters Student in the discipline, Education Leadership Management and Policy.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study titled, Critical friends in school leadership: A case study of the development of departmental heads in high schools. The aims of my study are threefold. Firstly, it is to identify who are the critical friends that contribute to the development of Departmental Heads. Secondly, I want to ascertain how the Departmental Heads grow their critical friend networks. Lastly, it is to describe the areas of leadership that assistance is sought from critical friends. The study is expected to enroll six departmental heads in total, from two high schools with three departmental heads in each school. It will involve the following procedures, semi- structured interviews, and photo elicitation. The duration of your participation, if you choose to enroll and remain in the study, is expected to be a month long.

The study will not involve any risks or discomfort since it will only be focused on your experiences in critical friendships as a departmental head. The study will provide no direct benefits to participants. However, aspiring departmental heads, novice departmental heads, and experienced departmental heads will gain great insight into critical friendships in school leadership.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00005443/2023).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher; L. Moodley, at luvashni@gmail.com or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office,

Westville Campus Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban 4000 KwaZulu-Natal,

SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

It is important that I highlight that, participation in this research is voluntary, and should you feel the need to withdraw from the study at any point, you are welcome to do so. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation as the participant, you will not incur any penalty and there will be no repercussions. There are no costs involved in this study so you will not be expected to pay any money and you will not receive any money for your participation.

Your personal details will not be disclosed for any reason you will be given a pseudonym that will be used in place of your name and place of work. The data generated during this research will be stored in a password protected file and will be deleted in due course.

Confidentiality Clause:

The confidentiality clause may be subject to exceptions or restrictions in situations where there is a legal obligation to report violations of the laws of the country.

CONSENT BY THE PARTICIPANT

DECLARATION

I _____ have been informed about the study titled, Critical friends in school leadership: A case study of the development of departmental heads in high schools by Luvashni Moodley.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at luvashni@gmail.com or _____

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office,

Westville Campus Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban 4000 KwaZulu-Natal,

SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable.

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio record my interview

YES / NO

Use of my photographs for research purposes

YES / NO

Signature of participant

Date

.....

.....

Signature of witness

Date

.....

.....

Signature of translator

Date

(Where applicable)

.....

.....

Appendix H

TURN-IT-IN REPORT

12/28/23, 10:56 AM

Turnitin Originality Report

 **Turnitin Originality Report**

Ms by Luvashni Moodley
From Thesis Dissertation (MEd and PhD Thesis)

Processed on 28-Dec-2023 10:11 AM
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Word Count: 35752

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- 5 1% match (Internet from 12-Jul-2023)
<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5674&context=doctoral>
- 6 1% match (Internet from 12-May-2023)

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1/11

Appendix I

LANGUAGE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

25 Maple Crescent
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KLOOF
3610

Phone 031 – 7075912
0823757722
Fax 031 - 7110458
E-mail:
dr1govender@telkomsa.net
sathsgovender4@gmail.com

Dr Saths Govender

4 JANUARY 2024

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

LANGUAGE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

This serves to inform that I have read the final version of the dissertation titled:

**Critical friends in school leadership: A case study of
the development of departmental heads in high
school by Luvashni Moodley, student number: 220101163.**

To the best of my knowledge, all the proposed amendments have been effected and the work is free of spelling and grammatical errors. I am of the view that the quality of language used meets generally accepted academic standards.

Yours faithfully



DR S. GOVENDER

B Paed. (Arts), B.A. (Hons), B Ed.
Cambridge Certificate for English Medium Teachers
MPA, D. Admin.(2003)