

Critical friendship in international education reform: a journey to educational cultural convergence

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The goal of the study is to share the development and maintenance of a Critical Friendship. Critical Friendship is a model of educator-educator relationship that offers an informal forum for low-risk, open-ended, and non-analytic collegiate interactions in professional-personal development. In this self-study, using exploratory research methods, the authors investigate a CF action process in a higher education teacher context based on anecdotal evidence, reflection on practice, peer observation and action research. Following on the work of Towndrow, and Curry, the authors develop a pathway to CF and compare this small-scale study to similar results achieved in a broad-based CF program initiated in Latvia. This CF developed at a teacher education college in the change-rich GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) education reform, 2009-2011. This study demonstrates that CF establishes shared practice into a cohesive learning focus for productive action, and leads to a renewed pro-personal teacher identity. Results indicate that CF processes stimulate approaches to learning, and lead tutors to different ways of framing situations. The authors demonstrate the importance of CF in the development of new concepts, such as “educational cultural convergence”. This participatory, mutually-informing, CF is scaffolded by processes: peer observation, conduct, action research, and reflection. The authors conclude by outlining the benefits and potentiality of CF.

Keywords: critical friendship; continuing professional development; teacher education; pro-personal identity; educational cultural convergence

Background

Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) opened to students in 2008 a 'professional' college in the University of Bahrain (UoB), focused on improving teacher professional practice. In contrast, the UoB's College of Education, which BTC replaced, was an 'academic' college: it emphasized theoretical learning over practice. BTC was planned as a key part of a major, Kingdom-wide education reform initiative, part of the 'Bahrain 2030' strategic vision for economic reform, established under the patronage of the Crown Prince of Bahrain, to secure for Bahrain a viable, sustainable post-oil economy (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2011).

The start-up of BTC involved extensive international consultancy with the National Institute of Education, Singapore (NIE). BTC, committed to diversifying approaches to teacher education in Bahrain state-sector education, emphasized constructivist, collaborative, and discovery-based learning, reflective practice, engagement in student-centred learning and continuous assessment.

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This contrasted with a more “traditional” approach to education in the Gulf region, which has emphasized tutor-centred, passive learning, and assessment primarily accomplished through summative methods.

This CF grew out of professional interactions at the BTC, in particular during study for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PCAP) offered at BTC by York St. John University, UK (YSJ). A Masters-level program for higher education practitioners, PCAP is accredited through the UK Higher Education Authority (HEA) and referenced to the UK Professional Standards Framework (HEA, 2011; YSJ, 2011). As PCAP had been completed with a high success rate at the UoB during the three previous years, PCAP was deemed to be an appropriate qualification for BTC faculty to ensure baseline quality assurance for faculty from diverse backgrounds.

Critical friendship

CF champions the co-construction of knowledge through collegial inquiry, conversation, and collaborative reflection within a climate of mutual vulnerability and risk-taking, trust and support (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1991; Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1991). Costa and Kallick (1993) describe a critical friend as a trusted colleague who asks provocative questions, examines data and experience ‘through another lens’, and offers a friendship-based critique of a person’s practice.

CF’s take a view of their teaching practice where they mutually, critically appraise their development and provide supportive feedback for improvement. CF facilitates the bridging of two sometimes contradictory professional imperatives: the need to foster the tensions associated with learning, and; the need for friendly, empathic professional relationships. “It is only when you change the lens through which you view student learning – or your own practice - that you discover whether a new focus is better or worse. But, if you never change the lens, you limit your vision” (Costa & Kallick: 49).

Following the publication of Donald Schön’s, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), Reflective Practice (RP) has become an established method by which educators refocus the ‘lens’ of what is done in the context of practice. Prescribed solutions of technical rationality can only at best be approximate solutions to the challenges faced by educators in real encounters. RP enables “autonomous, self-renewing, and self-directed professionals” to go beyond “executing the curriculum designs conceived by others” so that they are able to “solve complex education problems, make wise decisions, reflect in and on action, and collaborate with colleagues” (Valli, 1992: xiii-xiv).

“Intuitive practice” takes reflection further: “reflection on practice may lead to better understanding, but not necessarily to better practice” (Eraut, 2000: 260). Thus, an “intuitive practitioner” is one who is “able to stay with the complexity of the situation and adapt their lessons to the contributions of their students”. Such teachers subordinate “their teaching to their pupils’ learning” (261). In this way, the “intuitive practitioner” can be viewed as one who has *internalised* the RP process to such a degree that rather than being expressed through external media such as portfolios and journals, RP has become an internal, automatic process. Intuitive practitioners display “fluency, flexibility, coping with complexity, and being holistic and self-aware” (260). In the highly dynamic, innovative, change-rich, trans-cultural start-up context of CPD at BTC, the attributes encouraged by RP and IP could be invaluable.

Nevertheless, both RP and IP are viewed as *individualised* processes. If RP is to facilitate the ability to “collaborate with colleagues”, and IP is to enable a dynamic, inter-active relationship between tutor and learners, there is a need to go beyond internal, individualised processes. Peter John (2000:

103) stresses the value of an “open-ended, liberal, loose, non-analytic” environment to encourage people to share their experience of intuition in a “free, uncritical atmosphere”. Eraut suggests concentrating on “awareness-raising of intuitive processes ... through peer-group comparisons and student-initiated training”, enabling the blending of “implicit” and “more explicit” forms of knowledge in teacher training (2000: 264).

Given this background and in the context of PCAP, both RP and IP worked more effectively at the level of collegiate interactions, rather than as an internal process of the individual practitioner. Once enrolled in PCAP, we were placed in two different study groups that were to operate throughout the course of study. Each group, comprised of four or five participants, was intended as a forum in which participants could give and receive feedback related to PCAP. For a number of reasons, these groups never met: heavy teaching and service duties; issues connected to real or perceived status; or, the degree of diversity in approaches to pedagogy and in expectations of PCAP. We two tutors began to meet out of necessity to talk through reflections, and in the process of sharing regularly, started to combine efforts in Action Research and to consult about mutual peer observations. As we were both tutors for Bahraini teachers’ in-service CPD modules, we were well-situated to collaborate.

We soon realized that our shared interactions supplanted the PCAP study groups and that our friendship under such circumstances would be of immense value, and worth documenting. Searching the literature, we encountered Critical Friendship, initially through the writings of Curry (2008) on Critical Friendship Groups. CF differs from collegiate forms of intuitive practice by “friendship”. Swaffield (2004: 6) argues there is a dynamic relationship between the two elements of the critical friendship relationship:

... critical friendship is not simply a balancing of the roles of critic and friend through emphasizing either pressure or support, but rather a richness resulting from providing both...Paradoxically, as “friendship” increases, involving the establishment and deepening of trust, so it becomes possible to increase “criticism”.

Eraut (2000: 263) notices an “unexplored tension” between the “free uncritical” aspect of intuitive practice, and the need for a more academically rigorous approach that enables practitioners to “give intuition status by discussing it in a more academic fashion . . . to integrate evidence gained from both intuitive and rational processes”. This blend of CF, however, with its emphasis on *friendship*, allowed us initially to be “uncritical” in the sense outlined by Eraut and then deepen the critical dimension to levels required for academic rigour as the friendship became more established.

We made a decision early on to follow Lima (2001) and conceptualize the relationship as potentially reciprocal and to stress an ethic of care and interdependence in teaching. “Critical”, in terms of our CF, has a positive connotation such as “key” or “necessary”. This freedom to put any educational topic or practice “on the table” was refreshing as it seemed as if higher education practitioners at BTC often talked around or avoided difficult issues rather than directly confront them. Right from our initial meetings, we considered mutual feedback in a number of different ways. “Warm” feedback consists of supportive, appreciative statements; “cool” feedback is more distanced and provokes thinking about the practice or raises questions; and, “hard” feedback is intended to challenge or raise concerns. Our process utilized time limits of meetings, with a maximum length of 20 minutes, to make the best use of the available time we had and to help reduce interruptions. Often, we would meet off-campus in a relaxed atmosphere for extended periods of writing or editing.

Competency and Problem-based Critical Friendship

The literature of critical friendship, limited as it is, falls into two categories: a competency model, and, a problem-based approach. In practice, both are complementary.

Hill (2002) introduces a competency model for framing CF, focusing on the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes. Several categories of competency are conceived as learnable and do-able in CF. The knowledge the CF requires is knowledge about a critical framework and how assumptions underpin an educator's justification for certain practices. CF skills focus on reflective responding, scholarly reframing, documentation and data collection, scholarly reading, articulating inquiry, and encouraging publication. A CF's attitude may be linked to beliefs about one's potential for critical friendship, and the value of shared reflection as a professional skill.

Hill's model outlines aspects of a successful CF. However, as Zeera (2001: 58) points out, "critical social science views methodology as inherently political, as inescapably tied to issues of power and legitimacy". Thus, values enter into the practice of CF within the methodological framework of qualitative research. The competency model appears to offer a deficit perspective; this may be problematic if this model is adopted without sufficient attention to the 'political' aspects of the practical context.

The problem-based approach addresses these problems: interactions come across as an equal dialogue among ready listeners, rather than as a struggle among contending interests. For example, Curry (2008) describes a "Critical Friends Group" (CFG) that helps teachers involved with schools to work collaboratively, developing a shared mission, offering strong support, and nurturing a learning community. Curry finds that although there is development through the group, there are limitations to creating professional community through topic-based study: teachers have differing opinions of how critical friends should be, and, conversely, how friendly critics should be. Problems arise when teachers limit themselves to safe feedback, resisting criticism, productive feedback, or action. She suggests that hierarchical relationships can make CFG's hard to put into practice. However, teachers with strong emotional support within the group gain confidence to expose and explore vulnerabilities (770).

Towndrow (2007) documents a study in which a teacher and he, as researcher, worked together to support and encourage each other to achieve outcomes that neither partner could have achieved working alone. This study lays the groundwork for productive teacher professional interventions, comprised of systematic, structured attempts to generate desired change in teaching and learning, and enabling the transfer of a teacher's knowledge from one context to another:

Grounded in the diverse literatures of organizational change, school leadership, action research, and reflective practice, critical friendship has been adopted by educators as a form of support for colleagues who wish or need to make improvements in what they do. (Towndrow: 4).

Towndrow models a pro-typical CF exchange framework as a cyclical process wherein the participants describe a practice, or ask for feedback with clarification sought from one or both sides, and the interpretations, questions or critiques offered, result in shared reflection.

In our CF, we were able to make connections focussed primarily on learners' needs. After a year working closely together, our CF became more creative, synergistic, and operationalized in a problem-based approach. The cumulative effect led us away from deficient practice; over time, our attention shifted from 'what we weren't doing' to a situational, relational and context-specific focus, that was far more positive and empathetic. This was not the case in our previous experience when an outside "expert" focusses attention on the practitioner. In our discussions, particularly

concerning the delivery of in-service teachers' professional development modules, there was a dynamic tension between existing and emerging practice that provoked our thinking, and within this context to reframe learners' needs.

Methodology

Self-study is characterized by an examination of the role of the self in the research project and the space between self and the practice engaged in: "it is through written reflection and teacher conversations that we negotiate the tensions between ourselves and our respective identities" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001: 15).

While self-study research has "used various qualitative methodologies and has focused on a wide range of substantive issues" (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001: 305), the emphasis self-study places on reflection means it is highly compatible with exploratory research to enrich qualitative data gathering. Our hope was that by examining our own reflections and interactions during this period, we would understand the complexities of a developing CF and provide an overview and pathway to other educators as an option for professional development. In addition to documenting and reflecting for PCAP, we decided to employ narrative inquiry methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) such as journaling, writing reflections, and examining our correspondence. For the duration of PCAP (seven months), we reflected in our respective journals with narrative accounts to review the impact of CF (Diboll, 2010b; McKeown, 2010b). Our goal was to document the "how" of our CF as completely as possible and to extend existing CF studies in a more practical way, appreciating that other researchers may want to extend in further detail the processes we have outlined.

Context

According to Curry (2008: 735-6), CF's differ from other approaches to CPD: the latter often involve brought-in, outside experts offering generic, context-poor expertise, while CF's allow "insiders to construct their own learning through a cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action", which is context-specific to the practitioners' place of practice. This has the advantages of having "[a] direct link to institutional practice", "[creating] a low-stakes forum in which to explore politically charged reform topics", encouraging "constructive controversy" and "curtailed teacher isolation" (769).

BTC's evolving start-up context demanded an urgent move from packaged external expertise (a "quick fix" found in GCC-region education reform). The utility of such expertise is constrained unless it can be reconstructed to suit the local socio-cultural-political context. This reconstruction can be accomplished by contextually aware practitioners 'on the ground'. Based on our experience, there is no 'off the peg' shortcut to contextualization, and as our CF developed, we became increasingly aware of the power of CF as a tool to facilitate contextualization.

Rich in formalized situations, BTC had many traditionally-styled committees adhering to a procedural format, and perceived to be "high-stakes" gatherings in which it would be inadvisable to openly discuss topics deemed "controversial". Accordingly, some issues often remained undisclosed. CF, however, provided a highly effective way to discuss them. The complexity of these interactions is further determined by a complex way to discuss them. The complexity of these interactions is further determined by an array of cross-cultural interactions that brought together North American, European, GCC, non-Gulf Arab, South Asian, African, and Far Eastern cultural assumptions and perspectives. This cross-cultural aspect of BTC's professional interactions potentially was a great strength, if accompanied by cross-cultural awareness. While participants tried to fill this gap, unsuccessfully, we became increasingly aware of the potential of CF to facilitate inclusive communication, cooperation and constructive collaboration across cultures. This developing awareness led to our research and development of "educational cultural convergence"

(ECCO), (McKeown & Diboll, 2011b).

We found that CF provides a "low risk" forum for creative, experimental, and "low-risk" interactions around perceived "high-risk" topics connected to differences in organizational and national or ethnic culture in the developing context of professional practice at BTC. Of key importance to CF is its "low-stakes" status, the fact that it is experiment-tolerant, honours diversity, and shares professional commitment, and concentrates on education reform (Curry, 2008: 769). Issues sprang from a concern about teaching practice, particularly in evening sessions where we both taught the same course. We met informally at least five times weekly, often during the working day, in a phone call, or after a lesson, to debrief the progress of a class or to "open up" for reflection what had happened at a meeting, and, always, to re-focus our efforts on practical classroom aspects. More formally, we'd meet bi-weekly to reformulate ideas for Action Research, or to provide critique for developing PCAP reflections. As the word limit was very tight for PCAP submissions, we worked together to compress our journal entries down to their essential aspects. In this atmosphere, surfacing previously-held assumptions and beliefs changed previously held approaches to the implementation of reform strategies.

CF Process Components 1 – Reflection

We want to be clear that PCAP provided the structure and content upon which we based the four following process components for the "how" of a CF. Successful completion of PCAP includes a reflective journal covering the six areas of the Higher Education Academy:

design and planning of programs of study; supporting student learning; assessment and feedback to learners; developing effective learning environments; integration of scholarship, research and professional activities; and, evaluation of practice and continuing professional development (HEA, 2011).

Additionally, a 5000-word piece of action research based on classroom practice was required. These requirements were supplemented by term class sessions and associated group presentations.

Reflection is an integral part of PCAP and an initial stage of binding ideas together with a colleague in substantially more significant ways. Classroom interactions, interpretations of texts, conferences with Teaching Candidates and colleagues, are all opportunities to model reflection. Further as Birmingham suggests, rather than the ineffectual PCAP groups CF created a safe space of freedom, security, time and space to take risks and ask important questions, and reflect (2004: 320). As indicated, reflection is fundamentally individual and private, but it thrives more productively in a supportive environment. Explicitly bound to the particulars of situations and embedded within a community, it resists being reduced to a concrete measure of certainty (Birmingham, 315). Through our association, we came to acknowledge that reflection is best not carried out alone.

CF provides suggestions for further reflection. An additional benefit is that the quality of reflection is deepened, avoiding clichés, particularly cultural clichés, and superficial responses, particularly in scholarly writing. Concerns about programming for in-service Bahraini teachers dovetailed with teaching practicum development, including BTC context, cross-cultural communication, and decision-making. We discovered in the process that we could find ways to improve a situation or adapt to it.

Realizing that the 'technical rationality' paradigm is still largely unquestioned, we were able to empathize with the difficulties that Bahraini students faced in reflecting. We question if the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic situation at BTC added to the need to talk through ideas more thoroughly.

Certainly, the situation at BTC precipitated moving to the development of “educational cultural convergence” (Kurt & McKeown, 2011).

CF Process Component 2 - Peer Observation

Following PCAP requirements, we completed two formal peer observations (PO) intended to provide feedback based on key aspects of practice: we were to focus on strengths, aim for aspects of improvement, and offer constructive suggestions and strategies when asked. Often in hierarchical contexts, practitioners ‘over prepare’, so that observations become over-formalized, and offer an unrealistic and unrepresentative view of actual practice. However, observation quickly became a regular mutual professional development feature to the point where we could participate in each other’s lessons on an impromptu basis. Of particular mutual interest were strategies used for students to work together cooperatively in student-centred activities, in Arabic, using pairs and groupings, with discussion time allotted in Arabic.

In the beginning of the peer observation process, we invited each other to visit our respective classes to observe and provide feedback on specific aspects of practice. We became very comfortable coming and going from our classes and developed a highly dynamic and creative working relationship that transcended peer observation and encompassed co-teaching, developing tools for students and tutor feedback, quality assurance and course development.

In the modules, ‘The Classroom Learning Environment’ and ‘Collaborative and Cooperative Learning’, we worked together on implementing teaching and learning strategies in a bilingual, environment, and achieving what Giles (1979) refers to as linguistic convergence, and optimal, or cultural convergence, in an Arabic context. Such was the level of collegiality and trust that we felt confident and able to observe, co-teach, and provide feedback on a session with little or no notice. This enabled us to mutually reinforce and enhance our practice by sharing, using specific support, defining context, and by providing feedback involving theoretical insights to inform practice, that is the “underpinning knowledge” of practice. Observations opened our eyes to the support that is available for professional development, informally, incidentally and easily.

CF Process Component 3 - Action Research

Given that we were both working full-tilt in a start-up organization, we acknowledged that a challenge to completing the required PCAP Action Research was time restrictions resulting from teaching and administrative responsibilities. Accordingly, we found it necessary to integrate scholarship and research as closely as possible into teaching-learning activities, so that CPD sessions resembled what Schön has described as a “Reflective Practicum” (1987: 305), where the practitioner becomes “a researcher in the practice context” (1983: 68), and which provides a basis on which research activities can be factored into day-to-day classroom activities to the greater benefit of both participants and practitioner.

Apart from being more time-efficient, this approach has a number of advantages: it broke down the artificial barrier between theory and practice, the “practical” and the “academic”; it located the research in context (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007: 3); it ensured that the research fed directly into practice (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003: 124), and, it gave voice to students and participants, reducing the risk of them becoming mere “research objects” of the “expert”.

Research-in-action allowed integration of activities such as demographic data gathering, course evaluation, participant and facilitator satisfaction surveys, into practice collaboration for a number of activities. By working together, we found commonalities and connections in areas of linguistic convergence, motivation, and attitudes to the use of English language, throughout a wide range of

teachers and teacher candidates. Data collected from online survey e-tools were mutually informing and beneficial. We found that many of the activities supported research *and* practice. Our research on “educational cultural convergence” grew organically out of this AR (see Diboll, 2010a).

CF Process Component 4 - Conduct

To create trust, deepen mutual respect and avoid potentially awkward misunderstandings that had arisen in the PCAP groupings, we found it reasonable to establish a few ground rules to maintain reasonable shared expectations:

- focus on the principle not the personality
- confidentiality must be respected (confidences shared need to be discussed on their merit)
- learner needs are the top priority
- be as specific as possible when giving feedback
- frame questions without a pre-conceived outcome
- avoid blaming students or social conditions
- listening is as important as sharing
- adhere to scheduled times for meeting
- prepare for each CF session.

This process might be easily adapted to different circumstances and tailored to different individuals. It wasn't our conduct alone that was the focus, but the value that we attached to it. Our shared quality assurance activities provided direct, contextualized, specific and immediate feedback. Our conduct was a model for our students who were impressed that their teachers were “learning” together and that they were able to articulate and share that learning. CF's determine their professional learning needs and this is satisfying both personally and professionally. We experienced a de-privatization of practice.

Discussion

It ought to be acknowledged that of the 47 BTC faculty members who potentially were eligible to participate in the PCAP sessions beginning September 2009, only 17 of that total voluntarily chose to enrol in the programme, with all course costs absorbed by the UoB. Of the 17 candidates who began PCAP studies in the fall of 2009 only 4 completed the requirements for the certificate. To accommodate participant needs the final deadline was extended twice, finally into August 2010. Given this surprising conclusion, it's worth remembering that in the GCC, it's common for practice in higher education to become individualized and competitive. In our experience, whilst community service involved many hours spent on committees, there were not corresponding structures in place whereby colleagues could share and discuss experiences in a more collegial manner. PCAP was the offered option as an impetus in this direction. The results speak for themselves.

We believe that extending and developing CF groups, with procedures for regular peer observation, could be a way forward to increased collegiality and to build shared practice. We now both feel more confident to focus on creating spaces for low-risk discussion with other colleagues. Our experience with CF in the context of faculty CPD as a part of GCC region education reform in large part confirms the conclusions given in a recent study by Iveta Silova and others which describes CPD of teacher educators in an emerging economy at a time of cultural, political and social transformation. The context further involved extensive multi-stakeholder liaison with governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and international consultants, aimed at achieving “rapid changes in schools” (Silova, et. al.: 2011, 352-353).

The pace of education reform in Latvia in 1991-2011 was intensive. The authors report that "... while the need to overhaul the pre-service teacher education system was obvious, the actual changes did not come easy, "implementing meaningful reform would take years and a lot of dedication" (354). Their observation that "... given the Soviet legacy of educational centralisation, many higher education institutions were not ready to actively engage in reform processes" (354) parallels the Bahrain experience with the difference that the entrenched, centralising ideology in Bahrain was post-colonial Arab nationalism, rather than Soviet-style Communism. An important difference, however, was that whereas Latvia was able to benefit from sustained, coherent and well-funded reform input from transnational agencies in the form of the EU and the Soros Foundation (353-358), the reform initiatives in Bahrain involved external consultants contracted to existing governmental structures.

However, it was found that amid this change, teacher educators valued an informal support network, the Latvian Association for Cooperation in Education (LAPSA), supported by Teachers' College, Columbia University (2011: 355-356). Participants reported that LAPSA was "very strong" like an "extended family" and enabled meetings that had "relaxed conversation" which enabled participants to achieve a level of mutual support and trust which facilitated "balance between formal and non-formal" with "friendship and formality", much like "critical friendship". So successful was LAPSA that versions of it were later rolled out in two other former Soviet republics, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan (356).

We concur with Silova on the centrality to education reform of "the creation of a collaborative culture of professional development" (365), and their endorsement of "critical friends" who are comfortable with "supporting and challenging" each other on their professional journeys, facilitating critical and reflective thinking (2005, quoted in Silova et al, 2011: 365).

Conclusions and Implications

By consciously examining CF through exploratory research and self-study, and by reflectively engaging in collaborative teaching, we have provided a pathway for other educators who are interested in developing a CF. As a direct result we enhanced our skills as instructors and colleagues, and renewed our commitment to working with other teacher educators. By reflecting on both this project and our teacher education practice generally, we developed deeper understanding of our research findings in fields beyond CF, identified possibilities for action research in teacher education, and examined closely our beliefs and practices as teacher educators. By incorporating journaling and other forms of reflection into our research methodologies and data collection, we experienced greater understanding of ourselves as practitioners and of ways to practicalize theory.

While CF can never replace more traditional structures in education management, it can provide a parallel forum in which ideas and practices can be discussed and negotiated in a more creative, dynamic, and experimental manner than is possible with more traditional structures. This is especially important in intensive, change-rich educational situations where the pace, scale, and scope of change can often overwhelm educators.

The Latvian experience highlights the limitations of our small-scale investigation. Nonetheless, our experience with the positive benefits of CF are strikingly similar to those in the LAPSA experience. This indicates the *unfulfilled potential* of CF in Bahrain and potentially in other change-rich environments. In response to this challenge, we developed an approach to trans-cultural education reform, "Educational Cultural Convergence" designed to be effective in classrooms. We achieved positive results in three areas in the Bahrain context: trans-cultural interactions between Bahraini CPD participants and a diverse, international team of tutors; workshop interactions across genders, and; encouraging positive interactions between Bahraini CPD participants from different ethno-

confessional backgrounds.

It is our belief that critical friendship -- creative, experimental, and low-risk -- offers a way forward to facilitate mutual respect and understanding, and to implement reform in education. A large-scale, internationally supported CF project like LAPSA in Latvia would have the capacity to provide the necessary environment in which educators are empowered to become agents for constructive change and we strongly recommend that consultants engaged in educational reform projects give due attention to the transformative power of Critical Friendship.

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