Critical Friends Group for English Language Teachers' Professional Development

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Abstract

This article entitled Critical Friends Group (CFG) for English Language Teachers' Professional Development aims to investigate teachers' perceptions towards CFG for English Language Teachers' Professional Development. The data was collected from five English language teachers teaching in a government school by using semi-structured interview. This is a qualitative research method based on narrative inquiry. The participants were selected by using judgemental non- random sampling procedures. The findings showed that teachers perceived CFG as one of the plausible means of their professional development. It helps to foster collaborative and critical learning in them because they are involved in observation, reading and discussion of various burning issues of English language teaching and learning. It also indicated that teachers perceived CFG as the best platform for enhancing the personal, social and professional development. It has enhanced the professionalism on the part of teachers cultivating the sense of mutual trust and understanding between and among the colleagues.

Keywords: Professional Development, Critical Friend Group, Collaboration, Professional Learning Community, Critical Friends.

Introduction

English in Nepal is taught and learnt as a foreign language. It is included in the curriculum from the very beginning to the university level. However, English language teaching in the present context has become more challenging. Nowadays, teacher professional development is regarded as a continuous professional growth, developing both competence and performance skills and the process of becoming effective teacher. "Teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically" (Glathorn, 1995, as cited in Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p.11). Teacher professional development includes formal experiences such as   attending professional meeting, workshop, seminar, mentoring and informal experiences such as reading professional publications, keeping a teaching journal and portfolio, analyzing critical incidents, doing action research being the part of teacher support and critical friends group.

Several educators (such as Larsen-freeman 2000; Nunan 2003 as cited in Vo and Nguyen, 2010 p.205) have called for reformations in EFL teacher education in order to raise the quality of teaching and learning. It is believed that the poor quality of ELT (English Language Teaching) is partly attributable to a lack of sound teacher training and teacher professional development.

In this regard, Dunne and Honts (1998, p.1) state;

> Traditional professional development, characterized by short-term, de-contextualized, direct instruction, has been shown over and over again to be inadequate to the task of helping practitioners make deep and lasting changes in their practice. Over the past several years, school communities have switched their focus to highly reflective learning as a means of supporting teachers and increasing student achievement.

That is why, nowadays, teacher professional development is regarded as a continuous professional growth, developing both competence and performance skills and the process of becoming effective teacher.

Robert (1998, p. 224) suggests that teachers can develop themselves by adopting various strategies like teaching professional collaboration helping others to learn innovation and research course, formal situation, self- study and language learning. Several models of TPD (Teacher Professional Development) like workshops, self-monitoring, and teacher support group, critical friends group, case analysis, action research, keeping a teaching journal etc. have been introduced.

The Critical Friends Group model was designed to build more reflective, collaborative, learning-focused schools through the creation of ongoing learning communities, and it depended on the intentional use of structured conversations or protocols and skilled facilitation to efficiently and effectively support the learning of the group's members (Dune, Naves, & Lewis, 2000). The CFG model (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997) is grounded in the concept of professional community developed by Louis and Kruse (1995).

This is a technique where 'critical friends', as described by Andreu, Canos, de Juana, Manresa, Rienda and Tari (2003) and Bambino (2002), who are colleagues from the same educational institution work to help each other. According to Dunne and Honts (cited in Franzak 2002, p. 260), CFG is "A practitioner-driven study group that reflects the growing trend for site-based professional development in which practitioners behave as managers of their own learning". From abovementioned fact, we can say that CFG is a newly practiced technique of teacher professional development where the teachers having same goal come together for better leaning. In addition, they become accountable for their own learning.

Researchers had already carried out many researches in the field of teacher professional development nationally and internationally. For example, Harrington (2009) carried out a thesis entitled 'Critical Friends Group: Effects on Teacher Practice and Collaboration' submitted to the University of North Carolina Wilmington. The objective of the study was to find out the influence of participation in a Critical Friends Group (CFG) on teacher collaboration and practice. Aktekin, N. C. (2019) investigated the impact of a Critical Friends Group (CFG), an inquiry-based professional development model, on Turkish EFL teachers. Gautam (2010) conducted a research entitled "Perception of teachers on NELTA Activities for Professional Development" with an objective to identify the perception of teachers on NELTA activities for teachers' professional development in Morang district. Oli (2014) carried out the research a research entitled "Practice of Teacher Support Group in Teachers Professional Development". The main objective of the study was to explore the practice of teacher support group in teachers' professional development. In the context of Nepal, there are various forms of professional development organizations like Teacher Support Group (TSG), Nepal English Language Teacher Association (NELTA), and Nepal Applied Linguistics Society (NALS) and so on but still the teachers' perception towards CFG for English language teachers' professional development has not got enough attention to be explored further. Thus, this article tries to find out teachers' perceptions towards critical

friends group for English Language teachers' professional development and attempt to find out the answer of how do teacher perceive critical friend group for English language teacher's professional development?

Review Related Literature

Teacher professional development (TPD) is an important determinant of teacher professionalism. It talks about multiple changes, which demands multi-level experience. It seeks from the teachers to be classroom learners to action researcher about classroom, cultural diplomats within cross-cultural setting of the classroom and so on. It requires from the teacher's side to be reflective professional development is a personal journey to be specific.

Craft (1996, p. 6) says, "Professional development is sometimes use to describe moving teacher forward in knowledge or skills." Professional development or growth means enabling teachers to generate their own ideas about classroom practice. By considering these ideas about TPD it will be fruitful to mention Reimer-Villegas's ideas about TPD, Reimer-Villegas (2003, p.11) says in a broad sense professional development refers to the development of a person in his or her professional role. More specifically, it is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his/her teaching systematically. It includes formal experience such as attending workshops and professional meetings mentoring etc. and informal experience such as reading professional publications, watching TV documentaries related to an academic discipline.

From these definitions, we can say that TPD is that activity which increases the skills, knowledge or understanding of teachers and their effectiveness in school. TPD is related to continuous growth of teaching skills and adoption of new pedagogy techniques to enhance student's quality of education. The complete definition of teacher development, hence, incorporates teacher management, teacher career development and teacher professional development.

Critical Friends Groups focus on the improvement of individual teacher practice as well as shared knowledge among colleagues (Kuh, 2006). A CFG generally consists of eight to ten educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for two hours and are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning (NSRF, 2008). It shows that a CFG is an on-going practice where teachers continually learn about the content they teach as well as the instructional and assessment practices they use with that content. The CFG model was designed to build more reflective, collaborative, learning focused schools through the creation of ongoing learning communities, and it

depended on the intentional use of structured conversations or protocols and skilled facilitation to efficiently and effectively support the learning of the group's members (Dune, Naves, & Lewis, 2000).

The NSRF at the Harmony Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana coordinates this approach, designed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Typically, 8 - 12 educators come together voluntarily at least once a month for about 2 hours. The coach typically may facilitate one of several time- managed protocols for examining sample student work or teacher work (e.g., lesson plans), brought to the group by one of its members. Group members support each other and improve their teaching by giving and receiving feedback, by questioning each other and themselves, by reflecting on their work or their students' work, by addressing dilemmas, by collaborating across disciplines, by confronting assumptions, mindsets, and expectations, but never by blaming students or social conditions. It is important to keep in mind that the term "critical" in this context does not refer to the word criticism but to the word important. Teachers may hesitate at first to present their work to the group. Constructive and positive feedback may help teachers overcome initial concerns about presenting to the group.

Current research concludes that students' academic achievement is greater in schools where teachers report high levels of collective responsibility for student learning (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003).Dufour (2004) states, "the idea of improving schools by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue" (p. 6).The professional learning community is a powerful new way of working together that affects practices within a school, but it requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching and accountability when results are unfavorable (Dufour, 2004).

Defour & Eaker (1998) noted that the lack of tools and strategies to support staff development has resulted in a lack of commitment by the faculty. Teachers are faced with the pressure to raise student achievement, but are often not supported effectively (Zawaslin, 2007).The purpose behind a CFG is to go beyond traditional collaboration experiences and provide teachers with the support they need to improve their teaching abilities.

According to the NSRF (2008), CFGs are designed to create a professional learning community that provides a context to understand our work with students, our relationships with peers, and our thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning. Similarly, it also encourages educators help each other to turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning for improving teaching and learning.

The NSRF (2008) further indicated that CFG participants thought they were more beneficial for the following reasons: (1) It is continual, (2) It is focused on their own teaching and their own students' learning, (3) It takes place in a small group of supportive and trusted colleagues within their own school, and (4) Participants have control over their own professional learning needs.

Research also reveals that teachers who have taken part in CFG generally hold positive opinions of it. They believe that they can affect student outcomes McKenzie and Carr-Reardon 2003). The structure and format of CFG create opportunities for colleagues to challenge their own practice as well as that of their peers (Bambino 2002). In fact, research studies reported by Bambino (2002) indicate that CFGs have been the catalyst for changes in the teaching, learning, culture, and climate of learning communities in a variety of schools.

Furthermore, Bowman and McCormick (2000, p. 256) contend that collaboration among teachers is a valued and often necessary factor for effective schooling because it fosters expert instruction. Evidence they presented indicates that CFG is a feasible vehicle for instituting collaborative efforts. Through the social interaction of discussion, active learning evolves, and each participant interprets, transforms, and internalizes new knowledge as a result of collective thinking. Collaborative discussions allow individual teachers to develop their own perspectives and to model strengths for others. The theoretical foundation for CFG is that teachers belonging to a group learn to collaborate by participating in professional development activities. This participation leads to greater reflection on teaching techniques, which then supports a change in practice aimed at improving student achievement. As a result, student achievement improves (Cushman et al., cited in Franzak 2002, p. 261).

In addition, by sharing instructional strategies and techniques, teachers pool not only their physical but also their intellectual resources. Consequently, CFG has the potential for furthering a teacher's individual professional development, improving the school climate, and, ultimately, enhancing school effectiveness when a model appropriate to school goals is applied (Galbraith and Anstrom 1995). In other words, CFG offers support and guidance to ensure that professional development truly is learning and growing as a professional, while reducing feelings of isolation and strengthening collaboration with colleagues.

Although there is no universal definition of a professional learning community (PLC), it is commonly described as a group of teachers who are sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-

oriented and growth-promoting way (Stoll & Louis, 2007). According to Stoll et al. (2006), a professional learning community is a group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their community to explore their practice that in the end will enhance all pupils' learning (p.5). The most recent definition is that a PLC is a group of professionals working as a cohesive team to address specific learner needs arising from an analysis of data and evidence (Harris, 2014).

Method and Procedures

This research article was based on narrative inquiry research design. Narrative inquiry is the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling. In narrative research designs, researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people's lives and write narratives of individuals experiences (Creswell, 2012). Human are storytelling organisms who, individually or collectively, lead storied lives. This, the study of a narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This article aims to explore the teachers' perception towards CFG for English language Teachers' Professional Development by using judgmental non-random sampling procedure. The participants of this study consisted five teachers of mid-eastern part of Sindhuli district of Nepal teaching English at lower secondary and secondary level of government school. In order to ensure the ethical considerations, the participants are given the pseudo names like T1, T2, T3, T4, and T5 respectively. The researcher used both the primary and secondary sources of data. The research tool was in-depth interview to explore teachers' perceptions about CFG for English language teacher professional development. The interview schedule was semi structured. It means some basic questions were predetermined and other questions were asked on the basis of their response. Based on the objectives of this study, these tools were devised. Recorded data which were later transcribed into written form translated into English and coded as per the objectives of the study have been analyzed thematically.

Teachers' Perceptions on Critical Friends Group for Teachers' Professional Development

While taking in-depth interview and conducting focused group discussion with the members of critical friends group, I came to know that all the participants had perceived CFG as a best platform for their personal, social and professional development because of the following reasons that can be described into various themes below:

CFG as a Network and Form of Professional Community :

Hord (1997) spoke of the workplace as a learning organization. He gave several characteristics of professional learning communities, which include having and practicing supportive and shared leadership, values, vision, and direction; providing a forum for collective learning and the application of that learning; sharing professional practice; and providing supportive conditions for the maintenance of the learning community. Participants during my observation accepted that previously, they didn't have the ideas of forming the professional networking and learning communities for their professional upgrading. But now, after participating in CFG, they have realized the value of professional learning communities and networking for learning and sharing the things that they don't know. Moreover, they are even willing to form the network across their schools for updating themselves with new and innovative teaching learning styles, strategies, methods and techniques. Agreeing with the above mentioned explanation, T5, and T2, said that,

> *"As I became the member of the CFG I came to know the value and worth of professional networking for learning the things that I don't know and sharing the things that I know well."*

> *"If we make a network with the teachers who teach the same subject in the different part of the country, we can get new and successful ways of teaching and can modify the teaching styles and strategies accordingly."*

From the researcher's observation it is found that CFG itself is professional networking within an institution where we could meet regularly face to face and can have better discussion. Not only this, it is an era of information communication and technology providing us vast treasures of knowledge and information. Now what we can do is we can search the new inventions per day and can have discussion continuously. Likewise, by creating the professional face book page teachers can make the discussion virtually with the teachers of others schools and can practice the best things that they are doing. This demonstrates that the members of CFG are ready to form the professional networking within and across their school for upgrading themselves and getting to know each other for learning and sharing the innovative teaching methods, techniques and styles for the better outcomes of an individual students and of an institution.

CFG as a Platform for Collaboration :

CFG had become the ground for working together to obtain the shared goals of an institution by making the all group members equally responsible to perform the

assigned tasks. Smith and McGregor (1992, p.2) have defined "collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together." During the semi-structured interview, almost all the participants agreed that critical friends group is the persons where all the critical friends are committed to work together to meet their shared goals for the blending of perspectives, expertise, resources and shared accountability and responsibility. Adding some points to the above mentioned descriptions, T2 and T4 said that,

> *Collaborative learning is the process of learning in a professional community. It means the collaborative learning is a way of learning in a team together to explore a significant question or create a meaningful project where they work together being individually accountable for their work, and the work of the group as a whole is assessed.*

> *Actually in our context we people don't have the habit of working together for gaining same goal because we prefer to regard ourselves as all in all and don't like to be the part of some group that has caused the negative influences for our professional development.*

From the researcher's observation, what I have learnt from this group is that collaboration is the means through which we could reach the summit of success; we could share, diagnose and solve the various problems that arises in our professional career. This indicates that the active participation in CFG cultivated the habit of sharing, caring and concerning for each other in the areas of difficulties. They realized the significance of working collective being equally participated in the every spheres of life to achieve the common targets

CFG enhances Mutual Trust and Respect :

CFG is one of the most important approaches in teacher professional development for developing mutual understanding and respect to each other. Harrington, C .D. (2009) stated that by participating in a CFG, the members focused on weekly observations and organized meetings with set agendas. The conversations during the CFG meetings were light in nature. Members felt comfortable to discuss personal issues, student difficulties, and stressful situations that affect their instruction. It has developed the feeling of sink and swim together among the teachers. CFG has been able to bring the teachers having diversities into the same table for critical discussion with the help of mutual trust and harmony for collective learning. Caring relationships were supported by open communication and trust (Hord, 1997).Teachers perceive CFG as a best group

where they have learnt the lesson of respecting others ideas, cooperating with others for learning the best practices that other teachers are exercising. In this regard, T2 and T4 said that,

CFG has created the platform for being together and has critical discussion collaboratively by respecting each other. Even the teachers having different attitude, style, personality, thinking level, emotional aptitude, ability, socio-cultural background come in a common ground, show respect and honesty towards each other despite their different caste, religion, socio-economic status.

Generally we people prefer to regard ourselves as all in all and our ideas or practices are the best ones. But the CFG has proved it wrong others' ideas are also very important for our personal, social and professional development. It means it has taught me how to respect others' ideas and practices in order to develop self as a co-operative teacher.

From the researcher's observation it is found that, the present scenario of our country shows that the rate of teachers turn-over is very high because of the professional isolation and lack of mutual understanding and respect between and among the teacher staffs and administration. In such condition if we could the form the group like this, we all can grow personally, socially and professionally by enhancing the feeling of mutual trust and respect towards each- others.

CFG encourages for on and in Reflection :

Reflection is all about reviewing the acts that we do during our life span that might be the past or present. It gives feedback to the reviewer for better improvement. Reflection is a trait necessary for development in the teaching profession (Pollard 2002, Russell 2005) and one way to develop this is through communities of practice or involvement in CFGs. CFG is about revising the discussion of the previous and of that very day. CFG has worked as a mirror for peeping out at ones' strengths and weakness by reviewing the past and by analyzing the present situation. CFG has encouraged the teachers for reflecting on the past activities for better performances in the present by learning the lesson from it and in action reflection to make the teachers critical practitioners by analyzing and handling the present situation. In this regard descriptions, during in-depth interview, T4 and T3 opined that,

CFG has created an environment for learning to reflect and shape the ideas for better improvement. In this group I experienced that the actions should not go blindly but we should reflect back to see or make forth plan. It works as a mirror.

Well, I think, CFG is that group where we could get exposure to exercise our mind for reflecting in our actions such as what is done and why it is done and for what it is done. So reflecting on action and in action is the essential quality that every teacher needs to have for professional growth.

From the researcher's observation it is found that CFG has encouraged teachers to reflect on their practices and in their teaching methods, techniques, styles and strategies. They claimed that they had got the insight about how was the impact of the past methodologies that they had adopted in their teaching and learning and what could they do for further improvement

CFG as a Professional Support for Personal and Social Development :

CFG is itself a critical professional community where one teacher supports for personal and social development of another. The theoretical foundation for CFG is that teachers learn to collaborate by participating in professional development activities, and this participation leads to greater reflection on teaching techniques supporting a change in practice aimed at improving student achievement (Vo & Nguyen, 2010). It is critical collaborative practice where critical discussion takes place for arguing what is right rather than who is right. They said that they have learnt conflict management skill, group and pair work skills, communicating skills and critical thinking skills. Regarding the above mentioned explanations, T1 replied that,

Of course, CFG is the context where I have got green signals for my professional career along with personal and social skills. It has taught me how to work in professional group, how to accept others' views and how to use others ideas for self-development, how to give and take critical comments and feedback, how to respect the sentiments of others for collegial relationship in professional life.

From the researcher's observation, it is found that CFG has been able to tie up all the participants in a single rope despite their variation in terms of caste, religion, sex, ethnicity, level, interest and age, socio-economic status. It is because all the teachers worked together up to forty- five days, they took part in the different discussion, and they get to each other's difficulties and ways to get rid of that for personal, social and professional development. CFG is the only group that has developed the sense of helping and rescuing each

CFG as a Form of De-Privatization of Practice :

The members of CFG opine that they were free to exchange the subject matter that they had learnt. Nothing remains secret there in the group. It has provided them the

chance to practice the theory and to theorize what they have been practicing in their day to day teaching and learning process. Louis and Kruse (1995) define Deprivatization of Practice: "Teachers within professional communities practice their craft openly" (p. 31). "By sharing practice 'in public,' teachers learn new ways to talk about what they do, and the discussions kindle new relationships between the participants" (p.2). Teachers always prefer freedom rather than imposition about they have to do and what they don't have to do. And they want to have their voices and concerns heard by those police makers. In this regard T3 and T5 said that,

> *"CFG is the best group to practicing the theory and to theorize what they have practiced in real life situation by discussing with their colleagues teaching the same subject in different level."*

> *"There is no imposition from anyone as we all contribute for the discussion. All the members are supposed to expose what they have found new regarding certain subject matter. Everything becomes public."*

From the researcher's observation, it is found that teachers shared their practice openly with each other and conduct the discussion for further improvement and if they found any of the practice is best and rest of other will also follow the best practice. Otherwise they will try to modify it and make it the best. The open discussion directs them towards developing a kind of close relationship for learning and sharing.

Conclusion

This article is based on the narrative inquiry research design to explore the teachers' perceptions towards CFG for English language teachers' professional development. In this study, judgmental non-random sampling procedure was used to select the sample like school and teachers. Similarly, in order to collect the data in-depth interview was taken with the group members of CFG. This study revealed that critical friends group has become the best platform for the personal, social and professional development of teachers. CFGs stimulate the development of the professional self (Key, 2006). Moreover, research into CFG work has demonstrated that teachers seem to grow both individually and collectively (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafta 2003; Curry 2008; Nefstead, 2009). The members of CFG have perceived it as a safe place for exchanging their career related problems and difficulties. It has encouraged them to be the part of professional networking and to work together to obtain the shared goal of an institution. It has enhanced the professionalism on the part of teachers cultivating the sense of mutual trust and understanding between and among the colleagues. Snow-Gerono (2005) states

professional learning communities created opportunities for dialogue which made it safe to ask questions and work in a community. She indicates that "good conversations" require "safety, trust, and care" as well as "common ground," "good content," and a sense of being voluntary (p.242). It has also made them responsible and accountable in their profession by giving them the chance of leadership. They have developed the leadership skills. It has also given them an exposure to theorize what they have practised and practised whatever they have theorized in their day to day teaching and learning processes. It has enhanced the critical thinking and reflective skills of teachers on their methods, techniques, styles and strategies that they had used in their teaching and learning facilitation process for better performances of students and of an institutions.

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