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An invited outsider or an enriched insider? Challenging contextual knowledge as a critical friend researcher

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Abstract Researchers conducting studies in communities have long taken an interest in exploring the different merits of positioning themselves as ‘insiders’, ‘outsiders’ or ‘in-betweeners’ in relation to their participants. Yet research exploring the role of the researcher as a ‘critical friend’ —a supportive yet challenging facilitator in self-evaluation processes— has not been fully examined. This chapter speaks to the FUGuE element of *transformation*, which in the present context I define as a process where structures and forms undergo conversion. The chapter provides my account as a FUGuE researcher of exploring the methodological implications of my research with a small group of teachers at a primary school located in the Latrobe Valley in Central Gippsland. The emergent relationship now informs my teaching and research practices. The discussion draws on a recently commenced longitudinal study exploring teachers’ use of strategies and processes aimed at improving literacy practices—a phenomena known as capacity building— through collaboration in a professional learning team, within a context of school improvement. Due to a prior connection with the school, I was invited to become a critical friend and active participant as the school initiated a new professional learning team (PLT) in literacy. Informed by recorded conversations from the PLT meetings, my aim was to conceptualize the role and transformative implications of researching as an invited critical friend within a professional community. This chapter contributes to the methodological discourse of educational research by offering a contextualized analysis of the tensions among the notions of trust, credibility and positionality as a critical friend researcher.

Keywords: *critical friendship, professional learning, insider-outsider, researcher identity, trust, transformation, social cognitive theory*

Introduction

This chapter provides an exploration into my role as a researcher and the methodological implications of my work with a small professional community of teachers at a primary school in Latrobe Valley, which I was invited to join as a critical friend. It is informed by the notion that research within a particular community is influenced by the life experiences, values and

personal biographies of the participants and the researcher, and in particular by researchers' interpretations of their experiences (Banks, 1998; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As such, while positioned among the *regional university researchers and the research-teaching nexus* in this book, this chapter also speaks to Part 1 of the book, by framing the discussion around a FUGuE partnership with a school in Gippsland.

In line with this book's focus on regional transformation, this chapter provides a vignette of practice which aligns with what some scholars in the field of regional development (e.g. Trippl, Sinozic, & Lawton Smith, 2015) refer to as 'the third mission' - a mission beyond teaching and research, whereby universities adopt an 'engaged role' in regional development by integrating with innovation and governance networks through social, cultural and societal activities. As a FUGuE academic collaborating with a local learning community as a critical friend, I see my role as a form of contribution relating to social and civic roles within a community, thereby enacting what Trippl et al. (2015) refer to as the 'engaged university' model. In addition, researching and collaborating with a professional learning community as a critical friend is arguably a modest form of a regional innovation system (Trippl et al. 2015), whereby a university contributes to regional economic development. In this case, the contribution towards economic development relates to the growth of human capital through generating knowledge (Barca, McCann, & Rodríguez-Pose, 2012; Gülümser, Baycan-Levent & Nijkamp, 2010). As a collaborative project, both the school's professional learning community as well as the FUGuE group benefit from the knowledge development.

The notion of this project being part of a regional innovation system, is supported by an examination of the policy debate of place-neutral versus place-based economic development (Barca et al. 2012), which highlights the significance of the complex relationship among factors such as human capital, innovation, institutions and economic geography relating to distance. The place-based approaches, which Barca et al. (2012) are proponents of, assume that the social, cultural and institutional characteristics of a place matter. In addition, place-based approaches attribute significance of place-based knowledge in policy intervention, since it leads to clarity of 'who knows what to do where and when'. Barca et al. (2012, with reference to numerous other scholars) posit that the economic activity of a region increasingly is regarded as being determined by 'the specific institutional arrangements and constructs of any space' (p. 136). Adopting a clear place-based stance, they put forward an interesting link to globalization, arguing that it has made space and place more important since capital, goods, people and ideas travel more easily.

In light of the significance of space and place on regional development, it is important to clarify the spatial context and the particulars which frame the present chapter. Guided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS, 2016) terminology and the Australian Statistical Geography Standards (ASGS) for sections of state structures, 'region' is understood here as

as a geographic area or boundary which can be classified into five categories¹ of remoteness, categorized according to their relative access to services. The particular region the present vignette is located in, is classified by the ABS (2016) as an *Urban Centre* (consisting of between 200 and 10 000 ‘usual residents’), surrounded by a *rural balance area* (with less than 200 ‘usual residents’) in *Inner-Regional Victoria*.

As noted previously in the book and by other FUGuE researchers, beginnings are mysterious (Plowright et al. 2016 with reference to Arendt, 1978). However, the beginnings of the study which underpins the present chapter can be traced back to an informal chat at a community forum (in line with the ‘engaged university’ model, see Tripp et al. 2015) for local principals which was hosted at the university’s Gippsland campus a few years ago. As a new academic in the area and hopeful of developing research collaborations with local schools, I was proactive in following up the initial conversation with a particular principal who appeared to welcome the idea of collaborating. This led to an invitation to attend a *cluster* meeting, a formal partnership between seven local schools who collaborate with the aim of transforming and continuously improving learning for students (Department of Education and Training, 2015). Again, I described my area of research interest and expressed my willingness to work with local schools. While no specific project emerged from the initial meeting with the principals of the local cluster group, they expressed a wish for me to attend the future cluster meetings, which generally occur once per school term. A year or so later, at a cluster meeting prior to the summer break, the principal of Wattleforest Primary (a pseudonym) was particularly excited after having completed a Bastow Institute* course about developing a school culture of high performance. Keen to continue the work and further develop the knowledge the school staff had gained through the course; the principal (who will be referred to as Miriam in this chapter) had been advised by Bastow to seek out a critical friend with insights into educational research. Miriam promptly invited me to collaborate with the teachers as part of Wattleforest Primary’s Literacy Professional Learning Team, which was about to commence its work on creating a high-performance culture with a focus on students’ literacy.

From the onset, it was decided that my role as a critical friend in the project would be to facilitate the team’s professional conversations, for example by asking questions to challenge and scrutinize existing assumptions, or suggesting readings from research literature on literacy. Additionally, I was to provide guidance to the school when analyzing data gathered in the project, particularly in respect to linking the analysis to theoretical frameworks and existing research.

The study is collaborative in nature, framed around exploring teachers’ *capacity building* (Crisp, Swerissen & Duckett, 2000), a term which refers to developing and using

¹ Major Cities of Australia; Inner Regional Australia; Outer Regional Australia; Remote Australia; Very Remote Australia

* The Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership is a branch within the Regional Services Group at the Victorian Department of Education and Training. The institute offers professional development in transformative leadership for Victorian primary, secondary and early childhood education professionals.

strategies and processes aimed at improving literacy practices within a professional learning team in literacy (PLTL). In particular, the study aims to explore any reciprocity between the shared PLTL activities; what individual teachers do to inform and shape their practice to develop a high-performance culture relating to student literacy, and the reasons for their choices; and student perceptions of what high performance in literacy entails for themselves as learners.

In accordance with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, approval to conduct the study was granted by Federation University's Human Research Ethics Committee. In order to accurately capture the discussion in the PLTL meetings, I was granted permission by all participants to audio record the meetings. The participants were assured in writing that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice. Care has been taken to ensure that some teacher pseudonyms are gender neutral to ensure that the participants remain anonymous. Before discussing the emerging findings and exploring the methodological implications of the study, this chapter will present a theoretical framework of researcher positionality.

Insiders, outsiders and 'in-betweeners'

Researchers conducting studies in communities have long taken an interest in exploring the different merits of positioning themselves as 'insiders', 'outsiders' or 'in-betweeners' in relation to their participants. Broadly speaking, the term 'insider' relates to the researcher who shares the unique values, perspectives, behaviours, beliefs, life experience and knowledge as the members of the community they research (Banks, 1998; Brann-Barrett, 2014; Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). By contrast, an 'outsider' does not have these elements in common with the research participants. Researchers with an insider status within the domain they explore have the benefit of a refined understanding of the group's culture, and the ability to interact naturally with the group and its members. Furthermore, they are able to draw on a previously established relational intimacy with the group (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Breen, 2007). However –as Breen (2007) notes– there is a flipside to the inherent advantages that insider researchers enjoy. For example, the level of familiarity between the insider researcher and the participants may lead to erroneous assumptions based on the researcher's prior knowledge and/or experience (Breen, 2007; DeLyser, 2001; Gerrish, 1997; Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). As Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) point out from a qualitative methodological perspective, a researcher's membership in the group or area being studied is a particularly pertinent consideration due to the direct and intimate role the researcher plays in both data collection and analysis.

Some literature suggests that the perceived level of connection with a particular geographic location is a common factor which largely determines whether researchers conceptualize their research identity as insiders or outsiders within the community they study (e.g. DeLyser, 2001; Kerstetter, 2012). The notion of a researcher's connection to particular locales is pertinent to this book with its explicit focus on research in Gippsland. However, at first, I viewed the geographic location of the project as incidental. My focus was on the professional community, not the location of this community. However, the significance of the

project's place-based framing dawned on me as I became more familiar with regional development literature (Barca et al. 2012; Gülümser et al. 2010; Tripp et al. 2015).

In-betweeners

The binary conceptualisation of researchers as insiders or outsiders of the community they research is frequently rejected by qualitative researchers due to being perceived as too rigid and ineffective in capturing the nuanced and fluctuating nature of human relationships. For instance, Breen (2007) describes herself as an 'in-between' researcher on a continuum that ranges from being a 'complete participant/member researcher to researching as a 'complete observer'. As an in-between researcher, studying grief experiences following fatal vehicle crashes in Western Australia, Breen describes how her research was prompted by the sudden loss of her partner's sibling, which resulted in her immersing herself into the research domain. Breen (2007) highlights that as an immersed 'in the middle' researcher, "I was *not* an outsider, I benefitted from the assumption that I was independent, unbiased, and objective, all of which remain important currency within mainstream psychology" (p. 171, my emphasis). Similarly, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) and Brann-Barrett (2014) are proponents of the notion of the 'in-between' space that allows researchers to position themselves within the community they research as *both* insider and outsider rather than insider *or* outsider.

As stated earlier, this chapter highlights the FUGuE notion of transformation as a process in which structures and forms undergo conversion. In the context of the present study, as a FUGuE researcher invited to join the professional learning community at Wattleforest Primary School, the transformative notion of occupying a space as an 'in-between' researcher is helpful by providing a broad, yet nuanced understanding of my researcher position. However, when reflecting about my role as a researcher, I question whether the conceptualization of an insider/outsider continuum is sufficient. In particular, I wonder how an insider/outsider continuum accommodates the transformative elements of building relationships and the conversion from outsider to insider (and vice versa). In addition, I sense that another dimension needs to be included: the influence people exert over their own functioning and the course of events that result from their actions, a concept defined here as *agency* (Bandura, 2006, 2012). In the present context of exploring the methodological considerations connected to researcher identity, the notion of agency in respect to taking the initiative to conduct research, appears to be a pertinent issue. The conceptualizations of an insider/outsider identity as researcher discussed above, seemingly adopt the assumption that the researcher demonstrates agency by initiating a study.

Critical friendship

An alternative perspective when examining agency that drives research, is to conceptualise the community as an active agent who initiates research. To explore this alternative perspective, the notion of critical friendship is helpful. The term 'critical friend' refers to a flexible form of assistance from an external agent who acts as a supportive yet challenging facilitator in school development processes (e.g. Costa & Kallick, 1993; Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005). In relation to researcher positionality, the critical friend is commonly defined in literature as a detached

outsider who offers alternative perspectives to an individual or a group of people with whom they are working (e.g. Swaffield, 2008). The critical friendship is characterised by trust, provocative questioning to enhance reflection and the challenging of assumptions through provision of helpful critique of participants' practice and viewpoints (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Swaffield, 2008). Critical friendship can also be employed as part of collaborative professional inquiry that involves pairing colleagues from the same setting as critical friends for each other. This form of critical friendship presents a blend of insider and outsider stances in which the critical friends are insiders who adopt the role of outsiders to generate fresh perspectives. In contrast to 'in-between' researchers such as Breen (2007) who describes herself as *neither* an insider or outsider, this form of critical friendship aligns with Dwyer and Buckle (2009) and Brann-Barrett (2014) who describe themselves as *both* insiders and outsiders. While this fused insider/outsider approach to critical friendship entails the friend critiquing, challenging and presenting alternative viewpoints to their colleague, the process is frequently observed by a third party, a researcher who observes the process as an outsider (see studies by James, Black, McCormick, Pedder, & Wiliam, 2006; Wright & Adam, 2015).

The two different forms of critical friendship discussed above offer nuance and depth to researchers who seek to examine their researcher identity in relation to the community they engage with. However, these approaches are underpinned by the assumption that the insider is the agent who seeks input from an outsider, a catalyst who facilitates and generates new perspectives that offer new insights for the insider.

Conversely, a small number of studies illustrate a more insider-focused conceptualization of critical friendship, where researchers have adopted the dual role of being a researcher as well as a professional learning partner (Hedges, 2010; Wennergren, 2016). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009, p. 98) describe the notion of a critical friendship model whereby the critical friend with their 'well-developed skills in research as well as expertise in the focus area for research' provides particular support in the *process* of inquiry for school-based teams.

To this end, Hedges (2010) provides a pertinent account of her enactment as a critical friend researcher in the context of a professional learning community of Early Childhood educators in Auckland, New Zealand. Describing how her study was 'responsive to calls to support teacher development through participation, dialogue, and intellectual engagement' (Hedges, 2010, p. 302), the research design provided access for the teacher participants to research-based information and inquiry opportunities as they engaged in evidence-informed inquiry about their practice. In particular, Hedges sought to 'explore the role of the researcher in increasing coherence between research, practice and professional learning' (p. 302). Similarly, in Wennergren's (2016) Swedish study of teachers' collaborative learning, she describes her role as an academic facilitator who "initiated processes of change and provided tools and structures for teacher learning and critical friendship based on research literature" (p. 265). The study explored the evolvment of critical friendships within a professional learning community, with particular regard to factors that characterize different phases of the development process. In the context of the present book on regional collaborative education research, the context of Wennergren's study is particularly noteworthy because it was

conducted as a cooperative partnership between two schools and a regional university, Halmstad, in Sweden.

The various conceptualizations of critical friendship research described above all suggest that the process is transformative in the sense that practice and its framing structures and forms undergo conversion. However, as a FUGuE researcher who was invited to join a professional learning community as a critical friend, I find myself conscious of seeking to transform my membership status within this group from being an invited outsider to becoming accepted as an insider, who can offer alternative views and shared insights.

Critical friendship research from a social cognitive perspective

Through a social cognitive theoretical perspective (Bandura, 1986), this transformative process is to a significant degree shaped by the reciprocal, but fluctuating, relationship between the researcher's interest, motivation, values, experiences, cognition and self-efficacy which all constitute *intrapersonal influences*; the *social influences* the community present and the *behaviours and actions* which frame interaction between the researcher and the participants.

In seeking to establish myself as a trusted critical friend of the setting I was invited to collaborate with, there is a clearly reciprocal dynamic between my behaviour and actions, the community of teachers and intrapersonal dimensions which relate to me. Having worked for many years as a primary school teacher in a number of different school settings, I have insider access to some of the social and cultural capital that is applicable to the setting I work with. This knowledge has shaped my behaviour and language as I have sought to become established in the setting. Before the research formally commenced, I attended the two student-free days at the school at the beginning of the school year. During these days, I participated in planning meetings and collaborated in workshops for staff to familiarize themselves with how to conduct the new running records procedures the school was introducing. Similar to other researchers who have sought to develop a position as insiders in a new setting by volunteering to do 'chores' (see Breen 2007 with references to DeLyser, 2001 and Gerrish, 1997), I found myself volunteering to pack up projector equipment and moving tables back into position after meetings. Consciously letting the teachers know that I used to be a classroom teacher, I asked questions about how to mark pauses in running records, explaining that I was '*a bit rusty, since I haven't done them for a few years*'.

My deliberate attempts to 'blend in' as a fellow (if former) teacher appeared to reciprocate well with the setting. By the end of the second planning day, Chris, one of the teachers, asked if I would be happy for my name to put on the Birthday list in the staffroom, 'since you are going to be around for quite a bit'.

A typology of critical friend researcher identities

The notion of transformation, a process in which structures and forms undergo conversion, is an important concept which underpins the conceptualisation of researcher position in this chapter. In this regard, Banks' (1998) typology of cross-cultural research provides a helpful nuance of insider and outsider research identities, particularly by highlighting the transformative nature of critical friend researchers' membership status in relation to the

communities they study. Banks distinguishes between four types of researchers: 1) *the indigenous-insider*; 2) *the indigenous-outsider*; 3) *the external-insider*; and 4) *the external-outsider*. These are elaborated below.

In Banks' (1998) framework of researcher identity and positionality in relation to a community, the common reference points relate to *values, perspectives, behaviours, beliefs, and knowledge*. However, for the purposes of this study, I have adapted Banks' cross-cultural framework to incorporate features of effective learning communities (Coates, 2017; Woods & Macfarlane, 2017) in which common points of reference relate to shared *vision, values, culture* and *ethos* (see Table 1: Typology of critical friend research within a professional community setting). The term 'vision' refers to common ideals and goals the community aspires to achieve. 'Values' refer to the community's standards of behaviour and beliefs about what is important. 'Culture and Ethos' is understood here as the spirit of the community, the climate which is manifested in its shared customs, rituals, symbols, stories and language (Woods & Macfarlane, 2017).

Table 1: Typology of critical friend research within a professional community setting (adapted from Banks, 1998)

Type of researcher	Transformative element of critical friendship	Description
Embedded Practitioner Researcher (Indigenous-insider [†])	Critical friendship is shared within the community. The critical friendship seeks to transform the existing community structures and processes from the known and accepted to the scrutinised and challenged.	The critical friend may be a reflective practitioner who is known and trusted by colleagues within the setting. The critical friend researcher shares and can speak with authority about the vision, values, culture and ethos of the setting. The critical friend researcher enjoys a high level of trust from participants and has an advanced level of understanding of the context but may struggle to 'step outside the situation', which facilitates theorization.
Expatriate researcher (Indigenous-outsider [†])	Critical friendship is imposed. The community perception of the researcher is transformed from being known and trusted as a community member to becoming detached.	The critical friend researcher was socialised within the professional community but having acquired substantial knowledge, skills and experiences from an outside community, the community perceives that the researcher does not share its vision, values, culture and ethos.
Enriched insider as a critical friend	Critical friendship is proposed (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005) and developed between the community and the critical friend researcher, who has undergone transformation by acquiring knowledge skills and experiences from outside the community. The critical friend presents contrasting and enriched perspectives to develop practice, structures and processes within the community from the known and accepted to the scrutinised and challenged.	The critical friend researcher was socialised within the professional community but having acquired substantial knowledge, skills and experiences from an outside community (e.g. undertaken a higher degree research), the researcher supports the community by presenting enriched, contrasting perspectives to the setting's vision, values, culture and ethos. The critical friend has developed a high level of trust from the participants and has an advanced level of understanding of the context. The critical friend draws on their external knowledge, skills and experiences to 'step outside the situation', and facilitate theorization.
Outsider invited as a critical friend (External-insider [†])	Critical friendship is proposed/invited (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005) and developed between the invited critical friend who assimilates into the community. The critical friend presents contrasting and enriched perspectives to help the community transform practice, structures and processes, shifting perceptions from the known and accepted to the scrutinised and challenged.	The critical friend researcher was socialised within a different community, in which they have acquired substantial knowledge, skills and experiences, which supports the community. The critical friend adopts the setting's vision, values, culture and ethos. Like the enriched insider, the critical friend researcher draws on their external knowledge, skills and experiences to 'step outside the situation', and facilitate theorization.
Detached observer (External-outsider [†])	Critical friendship is imposed (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005). The researcher originates from a different professional community, which the community perceives as foreign. Structures and processes may be transformed as a result.	The researcher was not socialised within the community they research. The researcher is equipped with substantial knowledge, skills and experiences from an outside community and represents contrasting perspectives to the setting's vision, values, culture and ethos.

[†] Term used by Banks (1998)

The Embedded Practitioner Researcher

This first form of a critical friend researcher shares the community's points of reference and is perceived by the community as a legitimate community member who can speak with authority about it. While Banks (1998) uses the term *Indigenous-insider*, the term *Embedded Practitioner Researcher* appears more applicable in a professional community context. 'Embedded' is understood there to refer to the quality of being deeply ingrained or fixed in place. The critical friend researcher may be a long-standing member of staff who has a firm understanding of the vision, values, culture and ethos of the setting. While the embedded practitioner researcher enjoys the advantages of a high level of trust from participants and an advanced level of understanding of the context, the researcher may struggle to 'step outside the situation', which facilitates theorization (Burton & Bartlett, 2005).

The expatriate researcher

By contrast, the expatriate researcher (or *indigenous-outsider* in Banks' terms) was socialised within the community and therefore initially shared its points of reference. However, researchers in this group have experienced high levels of assimilation into an outsider culture and are therefore regarded by the community as outsiders (Banks, 1998). The community perception of the researcher is thus transformed from being known and trusted as a community member to becoming a detached outsider who does not share its vision, values, culture and ethos. Consequently, the underpinning principles of trust may be lacking in the relationship and critical friendship may be perceived as imposed (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005).

From a social cognitive perspective, this presents an intriguing illustration of the fluctuating reciprocity between intrapersonal and social influences. In the context of conducting research as a critical friend at Wattleforest Primary, I am arguably an expatriate researcher, in the sense that years of practicing as a primary school teacher initially socialized me as a member of a teaching community. Yet, having completed a Doctoral degree by research, I have to a high degree become culturally assimilated into what some teachers may perceive as the outsider culture of academia and theories. Given that critical friendship inherently seeks to transform practice by challenging participants' perspectives of its points of commonality—in this case its vision, values, culture and ethos—it is probably helpful for the critical friend to present a degree of attachment and outsider knowledge. This identifies the need to expand the typology to accommodate a form of critical friendship research that accommodates outsider perspectives that are perceived by the community as *enriching*, rather than an *imposing* form of critical friendship.

Enriched insider as a critical friend

The concept of a researcher's identity and an enriched insider who acts as a critical friend presented in this chapter is an addition to Banks' typology (1998). It is a supplement made in the spirit of FUGuE, which from the onset has sought to present 'disruptive transformations' and alternative ways of imagining relational research presences and intentions (Plowright et al. 2016). Furthermore, this conceptualisation of researcher status derives from the research question which prompted FUGuE in the first place: 'How do our individual stories of educational research in a regional university, reimagined and articulated as an assemblage,

shape and inform our sense of purpose, impact and identity as transformative educational researchers?’

The enriched insider as a critical friend is conceptualized as a proposed form of critical friendship (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005) in which research and collaboration develops as part of the emerging relationship between the professional community and the critical friend researcher. The friendship is underpinned by social cognitive factors which relate to the researcher. The notion of the ‘enriched insider’ refers to the researcher having initially been socialized within the professional community but then acquiring substantial knowledge, skills and experiences from an outside community (e.g. by undertaking a higher degree research). Thus, the critical friend is equipped with the ability to present contrasting and enriched perspectives that serve to develop practice, structures and processes within the community from the known and accepted to the scrutinized and challenged. The critical friend has developed a high level of trust from the participants and has an advanced level of understanding of the community’s vision, values, culture and ethos. The critical friend draws on their external knowledge, skills and experiences to ‘step outside the situation’, and facilitate theorization.

Outsider invited as a critical friend

An alternative way to conceptualise critical friendship research, is presented when a professional community invites an outsider to join it as a researcher. In Banks’ (1998) typology, this relates to the notion of a researcher as an *external-insider*, which refers to a researcher who was socialised within another culture but who has adopted the points of reference of the community and who is therefore viewed by the community as an adopted community member.

In the context of a professional community setting, this infers a proposed and developing form of critical friendship between the invited critical friend who assimilates into the community. As the term implies, the critical friend researcher is an outsider, who was socialized within a different community where they have acquired substantial knowledge, skills and experience. In being invited and assimilating to the professional community, the critical friend researcher brings contrasting and enriched perspectives to develop practice, structures and processes within the community from the known and accepted to the scrutinized and challenged. In line with Banks’ idea of the external-insider, the critical friend adopts the setting’s vision, values, culture and ethos. Like the enriched insider, the critical friend researcher draws on their external knowledge, skills and experiences to ‘step outside the situation’, and facilitate theorization.

When reflecting upon my personal role as an invited critical friend of the PLTS at Wattleforest Primary, this conceptualization of critical friendship simultaneously challenges and resonates with my position as a researcher. From the onset, my role has been to facilitate further development of a shared vision, by asking questions and engaging in the community’s professional conversations. Yet, I am invested in this professional community, I share its values, culture and spirit. However, my role –and how I stand to contribute as an external-

insider/invited critical friend—is to present the learning community participants with alternative perspectives that are informed by my academic, ‘outside’ influences.

To this end, a conversation between two teachers, Chris and Jessie from Wattleforest, illustrates how this form of critical friend research manifests itself. Chris and Jessie approached me to discuss a ‘Reading, Teaching and Learning Survey’ which they had asked their colleagues to complete at a PLTL meeting. Their initial intention, as articulated by Jessie at the meeting, was ‘to receive valuable information from teaching staff in regards to their attitudes, confidence and capacity in teaching reading’ (Jessie, PLTL meeting 10 May, 2017) by simply collating the survey answers. From my perspective as a mixed-methods researcher, I suggested that a basic statistical test of the survey responses ($n=10$) may help us identify patterns of association between the survey item responses. While Chris and Jessie appeared to mostly be impressed by the speed at which SPSS can generate frequency data and bar graphs, they were nevertheless intrigued by the fact that the tests indicated that there was a pattern of association between four items: 1) teachers approach to teaching and assessment and reading; 2) the school’s agreed tools for tracking students’ progress in reading; 3) teachers perceived level of confidence in conducting guided reading; and 4) teachers use of research to guide their teaching of reading. As a result of our conversation, and the subsequent expansion of the analysis of the data collected in their survey, a meeting to plan follow on-professional learning activities for the PLTL was scheduled. Furthermore, when the teachers at Wattleforest completed a second survey, some six months after the initial survey, Chris took the initiative to ask if I could ‘use that special software’ to analyze the second set of surveys.

While my questions to the community and suggestions of alternative viewpoints, are part of my role as a critical friend with an external background, the act of questioning is an essential part of the Wattleforest Primary’s ethos (Woods & Macfarlane, 2017). After all, this is a community which prides itself on having a meeting climate in which the members respectfully challenge each other’s thinking, as part of the formal meeting protocols.

The detached observer

The last of the different forms of researcher identity discussed in this chapter, is the detached outsider. As articulated in this book, the commonality of the FUGuE group is that our research is characterised by reciprocity, community engagement, partnership and relationality. Consequently, conducting research as a detached outsider, or an *external-outsider*, as Banks (1998) conceptualises it, is not an easy fit within the FUGuE ethos. Nevertheless, researching as a detached observer encompasses a different form of critical friend research, which is why it has been included in this typology.

The concept of the detached observer refers to research that is conducted within a community setting, but where the researcher was socialized within a different community compared to one researched. Thus, the researcher is equipped with substantial knowledge, skills and experiences from an outside community and represents contrasting perspectives to

the setting's vision, values, culture and ethos. Importantly, the researcher has only a partial understanding of the points of reference within the community they research. A natural consequence is that such researchers often misinterpret the behaviours within the community of study (Banks, 1998).

While critical friends who conduct research as detached observers clearly seek to avoid misinterpreting the behaviour of the people they collaborate with, the notion of a critical friend as an external outsider is not to be discounted. As Swaffield and MacBeath (2005) note, the term critical friend has frequently been used in school improvement and evaluation contexts to describe external agents such as inspectors, advisers, university consultants or school governors. Questioning whether external outsiders such as these are able to effectively support schools, Swaffield and MacBeath (2005, p. 240) make the astute point that "support is in the eye of the beholder" and different forms of critical friends –the invited, proposed or imposed – come with different 'passports', with differing legitimacy, authority and power.

A vignette of ethical and methodological considerations

Reflecting about the questions of support, legitimacy, authority and power raise important ethical as well as methodological considerations for all researchers, but perhaps particularly so for researchers who adopt a research identity as a critical friend. In the context of my study at Wattleforest Primary which informs this chapter, I must acknowledge its origin. I was invited by Miriam the principal to become a critical friend whose knowledge, skills and experiences from academia would present contrasting perspectives which she hoped would add to the professional learning community's vision, values, culture and ethos.

Nevertheless, it is perfectly possible that teachers at Wattleforest Primary perceived the critical friendship as an imposition. In fact, in the early days of my collaboration with the learning community, I was struck by a remark made by one of the teachers. The comment was made at a time before the study formally commenced, when I was participating in team meetings simply for the purpose of becoming familiar with the setting's ethos –the spirit of the community– manifested in its shared customs, rituals, symbols, stories and language (Woods & Macfarlane, 2017). At Wattleforest Primary, the shared customs and rituals in team meetings is to follow a Professional Learning Team (PLT) observational protocol (Education Services Australia, 2014) in which a senior team member joins a small PLT for 20 minutes by quietly observing the team's meeting and writing feedback to the team on a particular focal point which the team has decided on in advance. The protocol aligns with the principles of critical friendship dialogue, which Swaffield (2008) describes as "a very particular form of conversation involving the exchange of ideas and the search for shared meaning and common understanding" (p. 328). In the context of this particular PLT, the shared meaning and common understanding relate to a series of steps:

1. The team develops a focus for observation e.g. focus may relate to PLT protocols such as the discussion of data, professional reading

2. Review of student goals
3. Once the team has agreed upon a focus, it is forwarded to the Miriam or Renee in the Senior Team.
4. The team nominates a team staff member to conduct the observation.
5. The nominated team observer should contact Miriam or Renee for clarification of the focus of observation
6. The duration of each observation will be 20 minutes.
7. At the completion of the observation, the observer along with either Renee or Miriam will discuss the observation in terms of 'what we saw and what we heard' relating to the focus.
8. One or two focus questions will be developed to discuss with each team.
9. The duration of feedback will be 30 minutes and will occur during PLT time.
10. As a result of feedback received, it is expected that each team develop a theory of action. "If..... then..."

(Adapted Professional Learning Team Protocol from Wattleforest Primary, 2017)

The feedback notes are provided to the team after the meeting and serve as a prompt for the next PLT. At this particular meeting, which was conducted early in the term, about four teachers and myself were present and discussing the professional reading for the meeting. When Miriam and Renee from the Senior team joined the group, a sudden but noticeable shift occurred. The teachers' conversation changed from having been animated and at ease to becoming quite stilted. The voice of the person speaking at the time grew tense, and the skin on her neck developed blush marks. There was a noticeable shift in the climate of the meeting, which surprised me at the time. Once the 20 minutes had passed and the observer left the room, and the group collectively exhaled noticeably before returning to their relaxed but vigorous discussion about learning.

I must have looked surprised, or made some comment querying the sudden change, which prompted someone to remark: 'Now we know that you are not part of the powers-to-be'. This comment intrigued me, and intrigues me still. On one hand, I recall interpreting it as a sign that I was perceived by this particular teacher as 'trusted' and 'an insider'. On the other hand, it made me think that this teacher probably had previously thought of me as an outsider who had been imposed into the setting. The latter made me feel uneasy. Importantly, particularly relating to Banks' (1998) argument that researchers positioned as external-outsiders often misinterpret the behaviours within the community of study, the PLT members' reaction at this particular meeting was out of character. Again, as a FUGuE researcher whose

collaboration with the teachers at Wattleforest Primary is ongoing, I am in a stronger position as a researcher to judge the representativeness of this particular incident. Given the many other PLT meetings I have since attended, I feel comfortable in acknowledging that it was an intriguing comment, but it does not warrant questioning the legitimacy and ethical implications of the critical friendship research design that frame the study.

In this context, being trusted as a critical friend researcher and being perceived by the professional community at Wattleforest as capable of providing legitimate suggestions and observations to support the community is essential for two reasons. First, it underpins the design and methodology of the study, and relates directly to the aim and significance. Second, having the trust of the participants enables me as a researcher to collect rich and nuanced perspectives which provide trustworthy data.

Future directions for critical friendship researchers

This chapter has primarily explored the methodological underpinnings and implications of conducting critical friendship research in the hope of articulating a theoretical framework and typology to scholars, practitioners and participants who engage in partnership research. As Banks (1998) argues, research has a significant role in describing the complex characteristics of communities and has the capacity to empower marginalised communities. As a FUGuE researcher, this means conceptualising and presenting positive relationships between the university and its partnership communities in Gippsland. As stated earlier, I see the work of the FUGuE group as a manifestation of the ‘third mission’ of an engaged university, which in addition to conducting teaching and research, contributes to regional economic and societal development (Tripp et al. 2015).

It is hoped that the critical friendship framework presented in this chapter may help underpin future research and help communicate to a wider, global audience how regional universities contribute to regional development. Survey data of educational outputs indicate that only three per cent of Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Educational Outputs came from regional universities (Bobis et al. 2013). This paper seeks to make a case for the importance of communicating research from regional universities, as well as illustrating how place-based research stands to contribute to regional development. This is not a unique view, there is clear recognition among rural researchers that findings from research conducted in community settings need to be communicated to a wide audience, which includes academic and community audiences (Brann-Barrett, 2014; Kerstetter, 2012).

Concluding comments: seeing and being seen

In the spirit of FUGuE, the notion of becoming, seeing and being seen by others (Plowright et al. 2016), the process of reflecting on my researcher identity as a critical friend has transformed how I view myself as a researcher. While my earlier research has been conducted as part of a setting where I have been embedded (Fletcher, 2016, 2017), I have previously conceptualised my research as being a hybrid form of practitioner research, in which the practice of my

colleagues formed the basis of theorisation. When viewed through the typology of critical friend research presented in this chapter, my previous research has been of an ‘enriched insider’ nature, part of the doctoral studies I completed whilst working as a primary school teacher. In line with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), these experiences have shaped me and are now part of the intrapersonal factors that contribute to framing my behaviour as an academic. The premise of this chapter is a reflective query of my own practice: “an invited outsider or an enriched insider”? By adopting a ‘fugual’ perspective (Plowright et al. 2016), in which plural, contrasting voices are included and act in concert to express a recurring theme –in this case the notion of critical friendship – I have come to the realisation that contrary to my initial phrasing, I have developed from an enriched insider to an invited outsider who researches in a place-based FUGuE partnership.

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