Teacher Inquiry Defined

Teaching involves a search for meaning in the world. Teaching is a life project, a calling, a vocation that is an organizing center of all other activities. Teaching is past and future as well as present, it is background as well as foreground, it is depth as well as surface. Teaching is pain and humor, joy and anger, dreariness and epiphany. Teaching is world building, it is architecture and design, it is purpose and moral enterprise. Teaching is a way of being in the world that breaks through the boundaries of the traditional job and in the process redefines all life and teaching itself.

—William Ayers

Whether you are a beginning or veteran teacher, an administrator, or a teacher educator, when you think of teaching, learning to teach, and continuing one’s growth as a teacher, you cannot help but be struck by the enormous complexities, paradoxes, and tensions that exist in the simple act of teaching itself, captured so eloquently in the quote from William Ayers. With all of these complexities, paradoxes, and tensions, a teacher’s work shapes the daily life of his or her classroom. In addition to responding to the needs of the children within the classroom, a teacher is expected to implement endless changes advocated by those outside the four walls of the classroom—administrators, politicians, and researchers. While teachers have gained insights into their educational practice from these three groups, teachers’ voices have typically been absent from larger discussions about educational change and reform. Historically, teachers have not had access to tools that could have brought their knowledge to the table and raised their voices to a high-enough level to be heard in
these larger conversations. Teacher inquiry is a vehicle that can be used by
teachers to untangle some of the complexities that occur in the profession,
raise teachers’ voices in discussions of educational reform, and ultimately
transform assumptions about the teaching profession itself. Transforming
the profession is really the capstone of the teacher inquiry experience.
Let’s begin our journey into the what, why, and how of teacher inquiry
with an overview of the evolution of the teacher inquiry movement and
a simple definition of this very complex, rewarding, transformative, pro-
vocative, and productive process.

WHAT IS TEACHER INQUIRY?

Understanding the history of teacher inquiry will help you recognize
how today, as a current or future educator, you find yourself investigat-
ing a new paradigm of learning that can lead to educational renewal and
reform. This history lesson begins by looking closely at three educational
research traditions: process-product research, qualitative or interpretive
research, and teacher inquiry (see Table 1.1).

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Two paradigms have dominated educational research on schooling, teaching, and learning over the past two decades. In the first paradigm, the underlying conception of “process-product research” (Shulman, 1986) portrays teaching as a primarily linear activity and depicts teachers as technicians. The teacher’s role is to implement the research findings of “outside” experts, almost exclusively university researchers, who are considered alien to the everyday happenings in classrooms. In this transmissive mode teachers are not expected to be problem posers or problem solvers. Rather, teachers negotiate dilemmas framed by outside experts and are asked to implement with fidelity a curriculum designed by those outside of the classroom. Based on this paradigm, many teachers have learned that it is sometimes best not to problematize their classroom experiences and first-hand observations because to do so may mean an admittance of failure to implement curriculum as directed. In fact, the transmissive culture of many schools has demonstrated that teachers can suffer punitive repercussions from highlighting areas that teachers themselves identify as problematic. The consequences of pointing out problems have often resulted in traditional top-down “retraining” or remediation. In the transmissive view, our educational community does not encourage solution-seeking behavior on the part of classroom teachers.

In the second paradigm—educational research drawn from qualitative or interpretative studies—teaching is portrayed as a highly complex, context-specific, interactive activity. In addition, this qualitative or interpretative paradigm captures differences across classrooms, schools, and communities that are critically important. Chris Clark (1995) identifies the complexity inherent in a teacher’s job and the importance of understanding and acknowledging contextual differences as follows: “Description becomes prescription, often with less and less regard for the contextual matters that make the description meaningful in the first place” (p. 20).

Although qualitative or interpretive work attends to issues of context, most of these studies emerging from this research paradigm are conducted by university researchers and are intended for academic audiences. Such school-university research provides valuable insights into the connections between theory and practice but, like the process-product research, the qualitative or interpretive approach limits teachers’ roles in the research process. In fact, the knowledge about teaching and learning generated through university study of theory and practice is still defined and generated by “outsiders” to the school and classroom. While both the process-product and qualitative research paradigms have generated valuable insights into the teaching and learning process, they have not included the voices of the people closest to the children—classroom teachers.

Hence, a third research tradition emerges highlighting the role classroom teachers play as knowledge generators. This tradition is often referred to as “teacher research,” “teacher inquiry,” “classroom research,” “action research” or “practitioner inquiry.” In general, the teacher inquiry
movement focuses on the concerns of teachers (not outside researchers) and engages teachers in the design, data collection, and interpretation of data around a question. Termed “action research” by Carr and Kemmis (1986), this approach to educational research has many benefits: (1) Theories and knowledge are generated from research grounded in the realities of educational practice, (2) teachers become collaborators in educational research by investigating their own problems, and (3) teachers play a part in the research process, which makes them more likely to facilitate change based on the knowledge they create.

Elliot (1988) describes action research as a continual set of spirals consisting of reflection and action. Each spiral involves (1) clarifying and diagnosing a practical situation that needs to be improved or a practical problem that needs to be resolved; (2) formulating action strategies to improve the situation or resolve the problem; (3) implementing the action strategies and evaluating their effectiveness; and (4) clarifying the situation, resulting in new definitions of problems or areas for improvement, and so on, to the next spiral of reflection and action.

Note that in our description of this third research tradition we have used a number of terms synonymously—teacher research, action research, classroom research, practitioner inquiry, and teacher inquiry. While these phrases have been used interchangeably, they do have somewhat different emphases and histories. Action research, for instance, usually refers to research that is intended to bring about change of some kind, usually with a social justice focus, whereas teacher research quite often has the goal only of examining a teacher’s classroom practice in order to improve it, or to better understand what works. For the purposes of this text and to streamline our discussion of research traditions, we have grouped all of these related processes together to represent teachers’ systematic study of their own practice. Yet, we utilize the terms “inquiry” most often as, in our own coaching of teachers’ systematic study of their own practice, we became discouraged by the baggage that the word “research” in the term “action research” carried with it when the concept was first introduced to teachers. The images that the word “research” conjures up come mostly from the process-product paradigm and include a “controlled setting,” “an experiment with control and treatment groups,” “an objective scientist removed from the subjects of study so as not to contaminate findings,” “long hours in the library,” and “crunching numbers.” Teachers, in general, weren’t overly enthused by these images, and it took a good deal of time for us to deconstruct these images and help teachers see that those images were antithetical to what teacher/action research was all about. So, over time, we began replacing the terms “action research” and “teacher research” with one simple word that carried much less baggage with it—“inquiry”—and we will continue our tradition of most often using the word “inquiry” both in this section on research traditions, as well as throughout the remainder of this text.
Now that we have explored three educational research traditions, acknowledged the limitations of the first two traditions, and introduced teacher inquiry, our brief history lesson might suggest that teacher inquiry is just another educational fad. However, although the terms “teacher research,” “action research,” and “teacher inquiry” are comparatively new, the underlying conceptions of teaching as inquiry and the role of teachers as inquirers are not. Early in the 20th century, John Dewey (1933) called for teachers to engage in “reflective action” that would transition them into inquiry-oriented classroom practitioners. Similarly, noted teacher educator Ken Zeichner (1996) traces and summarizes more than 30 years of research, calling for cultivating an informed practice as illustrated in such descriptors as “teachers as action researchers,” “teacher scholars,” “teacher innovators,” and “teachers as participant observers” (p. 3). Similarly, distinguished scholar Donald Schon (1983, 1987) also depicts teacher professional practice as a cognitive process of posing and exploring problems or dilemmas identified by the teachers themselves. In doing so, teachers ask questions that other researchers may not perceive or deem relevant. In addition, teachers often discern patterns that “outsiders” may not be able to see.

Given today’s political context, where much of the decision making and discussion regarding teachers occur outside the walls of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006), the time seems ripe to create a movement where teachers are armed with the tools of inquiry and committed to educational change. In the words of Joan Thate, one teacher researcher we have worked with:

Teachers have for so long had perfunctory or no influence on school policy, on curriculum frameworks, on time use, on professional standards—or pretty much anything involving their work experience—EXCEPT in the privacy of their own classrooms. I think this is why the deadly and stifling isolation has become such an intractable monolith. We’re all trying to preserve the one area in which we have some choice. But I have long known—gut knowledge eventually found words—that in preserving isolation we were doomed to forever have the locus of power stay in other hands than ours. And real power could only come when we could justifiably say: we know what’s best because we have tested the possibilities and have found what works. Inquiry is exciting because it allows for the testing of ideas in real life, and begins to give us the concrete support for insisting attention be paid to what we have to say (Thate, 2007).

If that is our goal, we now need to understand how teacher inquiry can serve as a tool for professional growth and educational reform. We believe that the best stated definitions of teacher research come from
teacher-inquirers themselves. We end this section with a few from teachers we have collaborated with on inquiry:

Very simply put, inquiry is a way for me to continue growing as a teacher. Before I became involved in inquiry I’d gotten to the point where I’d go to an inservice and shut off my brain. Most of the teachers I know have been at the same place. If you have been around at all you know that most inservices are the same cheese—just repackaged. Inquiry lets me choose my own growth and gives me tools to validate or jettison my ideas (Kreinbihl, 2007).

You know that nagging that wakes you in the early hours, then reemerges during your morning preparation time so you cannot remember if you already applied the deodorant, later on the drive to school pushing out of mind those important tasks you needed to accomplish prior to the first bell, and again as the students are entering your class and sharing all the important things happening in their lives. Well, teacher inquiry is the formal stating of that nagging, developing a plan of action to do something about it, putting the plan into action, collecting data, analyzing the collected works, making meaning of your collection, sharing your findings, then repeating the cycle with the new nagging(s) that sprouted up (Hughes, 2007).

Teacher inquiry is not something I do; it is more a part of the way I think. Inquiry involves exciting and meaningful discussions with colleagues about the passions we embrace in our profession. It has become the gratifying response to formalizing the questions that enter my mind as I teach. It is a learning process that keeps me passionate about teaching (Hubbell, 2007).

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER INQUIRY AND TEACHER PROFESSIONAL GROWTH?

Simply stated, teacher inquiry is defined as systematic, intentional study of one’s own professional practice (see, e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dana, Gimbert, & Silva, 1999; Hubbard & Power, 1993). Inquiring professionals seek out change by reflecting on their practice. They do this by posing questions or “wonderings,” collecting data to gain insights into their wonderings, analyzing the data along with reading relevant literature, making changes in practice based on new understandings developed during inquiry, and sharing findings with others. Hence, whether you are a prospective teacher at the dawn of your teaching career or a veteran teacher with years of experience facing new educational challenges every day, teacher inquiry becomes a powerful vehicle for learning and reform.
As a teacher-inquirer in charge of your own learning, you become a part of a larger struggle in education—the struggle to better understand, inform, shape, reshape, and reform standard school practice (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Teacher inquiry differs from traditional professional development for teachers, which has typically focused on the knowledge of an outside “expert” being shared with a group of teachers. This traditional model of professional growth, usually delivered as a part of traditional staff development, may appear an efficient method of disseminating information but often does not result in real and meaningful change in the classroom.

Those dissatisfied with the traditional model of professional development suggest a need for new approaches that enhance professional growth and lead to real change. For example, over 30 years ago, Goldhammer (1969) emphasized the need for supervision to become an opportunity to help teachers understand what they are doing and why, by changing schools from places where teachers just act out “age-old rituals” to places where teachers participate fully in the supervision process and their own professional growth. Nolan and Huber (1989) described teacher reflection, a key component of inquiry, as the “driving force” behind successful professional development programs. They described successful professional development programs as “making a difference in the lives and instruction of teachers who participate in them, as well as the lives of the students they teach” (p. 143). More recently, in the *Journal of Staff Development*, educators from across the country put forth their vision for “The Road Ahead” for professional learning. These ideas included the importance of creating activities, tools, and contexts that blend theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, 2007); supporting collaborative learning structures that deepen innovation implementation efforts (DuFour & DuFour, 2007); strengthening professionalism by recognizing the complexity and importance of teacher professional knowledge (Elmore, 2007; Hord, 2007; Schlechty, 2007); and making professional learning a part of the everyday work of each teacher in every classroom (Fullan, 2007).

Consonant with the movement to change traditional professional development practices is the teacher inquiry movement. This movement toward a new model of professional growth based on inquiry into one’s own practice can be powerfully developed by school districts and building administrators as a form of professional development. By participating in teacher inquiry, the teacher develops a sense of ownership in the knowledge constructed, and this sense of ownership heavily contributes to the possibilities for real change to take place in the classroom.

The ultimate goal is to create an inquiry stance toward teaching. This stance becomes a professional positioning, owned by the teacher, where questioning one’s own practice becomes part of the teacher’s work and eventually a part of the teaching culture. By cultivating this inquiry stance toward teaching, teachers play a critical role in enhancing their
own professional growth and, ultimately, the experience of schooling for children. Thus, an inquiry stance is synonymous with professional growth and provides a nontraditional approach to staff development that can lead to meaningful change for children.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER INQUIRY AND DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION?

The most important benefactors of taking an inquiry stance towards teaching and actualizing that stance by engaging in action research are the students you teach. Just as teaching is complex, so is the makeup of each individual student that walks through your classroom door. Each individual student enters your classroom with unique life experiences as well as differing social, emotional, and academic needs. Each individual student who enters your classroom varies in background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, and interests. Yet, in the ways traditional school structures are set up, individual needs can easily become lost.

One current emphasis in the field of education targeted at making visible individual student needs that can become lost in traditional school structures is differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001; 1999). According to Hall (2007), “differentiated instruction applies an approach to teaching and learning so that students have multiple options for taking in information and making sense of ideas. The model of differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjusting the curriculum and presentation of information to learners rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum” (n.p.). Through engaging in action research, teachers can generate valuable knowledge about their learners’ readiness, interest, learning styles, and more! With this knowledge, teachers make adaptations to instruction, increasing the probability that the needs of all learners will be met within one single class period or lesson.

For example, through engaging in action research to better understand the reading habits of his high school seniors, Tom Beyer (2007) adjusted his summer reading list and built in choice for his students, accommodating the vast differences in their interests his research uncovered. Engaging in action research to ascertain better ways to structure chemistry extra-help sessions, Steve Burgin (2007a) adjusted his approach to these sessions to accommodate both his general chemistry students, who benefited from an enriched repeat version of a lesson on a particular chemistry concept taught during the regular school day, and his honors students who benefited from independently working though more challenging chemistry problems based on particular concepts to be tested in an upcoming exam. Through engaging in action research to better understand student anxiety associated with the upcoming probability and statistics unit, Kristin
Weller (2007) rewrote her lessons that strictly followed the adopted mathematics text book to introduce the same concepts through studying the upcoming NCAA basketball tournament and the odds of each team reaching the Final Four. Action research is a wonderful tool teachers can utilize to differentiate instruction, ultimately making schools a better place for all students, regardless of their interests, abilities, background, and learning styles.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER INQUIRY, DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING, AND PROGRESS MONITORING?

In line with the goals of teacher research, data-driven decision making (DDDM) and progress monitoring are two professional activities that school reformers suggest will lead to improved student learning. According to Scott McLeod (2007), DDDM is a system of teaching and management practices that places information about students into practitioners’ hands. Data-driven decision making is embedded in teacher inquiry as teachers use assessment data and background information to inform decisions related to planning and implementing instructional strategies at the school, classroom, or individual student levels.

Similarly, the National Center of Student Progress Monitoring (2007) defines progress monitoring as “a scientifically based practice that is used to assess students’ academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction.” Teachers engaged in progress monitoring follow a series of stages that are embedded in the teacher research process including: identifying students’ current level of performance, establishing learning goals that will be targeted during the inquiry, monitoring students’ academic performance on a regular basis, comparing expected and actual rates of learning, and adjusting instruction based on these data.

Given these definitions, DDDM is used to inform decisions prior to instruction and progress monitoring is used to assess the effectiveness of the instruction. In combination, data-driven decision making and progress monitoring share the same basic steps underlying the “cycle of inquiry.” For example, when teacher-inquirer Debbi Hubbel reviewed multiple sources of reading data, including student performance on her state’s assessment test, DIBELS test scores, and informal assessments, she decided that a subset of her students struggled with reading fluency. In response, she selected instructional interventions that targeted fluency, and then used progress monitoring to understand the degree of student growth after the intervention. Her teacher research work integrated both data-driven decision making and progress monitoring.

Central to the success of data-driven decision making, progress monitoring, and teacher research is the degree of teacher “data literacy.” Data
literacy refers to the teacher’s basic understanding of how data can be used to inform instruction, which assessment is a valid and reliable measure of what is being taught, and what types of assessments are appropriate for district-, classroom-, or individual student-level decision making. In returning to Debbi Hubbel’s teacher research, Debbi had a sophisticated ability to interpret the high stakes scores as well as identify valid and reliable tools that could measure her students’ fluency development. Teacher researchers, data-driven decision makers, and progress monitors are aware of the problems associated with an overreliance on high stakes testing. As described, Debbi Hubbel used multiple types of data (e.g., DIBELS, running records, informal observation) to study her students and discovered what worked within her specific classroom. Teachers who effectively use data within the teacher-research process find that identifying the right kind of data to use in their work can improve their instructional interventions, reenergize their enthusiasm for teaching, and increase their feelings of professional fulfillment and job satisfaction.

McLeod explains that, “Data-driven decision making requires an important paradigm shift for teachers—a shift from day-to-day instruction that emphasizes process and delivery in the classroom to pedagogy that is dedicated to the achievement of results” (p. 1). Fundamental to teacher research, data-driven decision making, and progress monitoring is the importance of helping practitioners develop the inclination to wonder, “Is there a better way?” and “How can I do things differently?” This inclination is essential to the teacher-research movement. By embracing an inquiry approach, teachers expand their idea of what data is and how using data can inform their teaching and enhance student learning. The inquiry stance embraced by teacher researchers supports both data-driven decision making and progress monitoring.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER INQUIRY AND RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION (RTI)?

Another approach that shares similarities with teacher inquiry and is receiving current attention from educators across the United States is referred to as Response to Intervention or RtI. Response to Intervention is an intervention approach that is a part of the eligibility process for Emotional Behavior Disorders (EBD) and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and this process is strongly supported by both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB). However, the application of RtI is much broader than a screening process to determine special education eligibility. The goal of RtI is to prevent unnecessary student assignment to special education by offering low performing students intense, individualized academic intervention paired with systematic study of the intervention. According to Jim Wright, a
school psychologist and administrator from central New York, RtI gives a student with delays one or more research-validated interventions. As the intervention is used, the student’s learning is systematically studied or monitored to identify whether the interventions will allow the student to catch up with his or her peers (http://www.jimwrightonline.com/php/rti/rti_wire.php).

The RtI process follows the inquiry process described in this book as the intervention is systematically studied. The process begins with problem analysis that identifies the desired change for the student experiencing academic or behavioral difficulty. Next, educators design and implement an evidence-based intervention. Finally, the effectiveness of the intervention is determined by synthesizing and analyzing the data collected. This step is termed Response to Intervention since during this step a student’s response to the implemented intervention is measured to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction. Just as inquiry focuses on the systematic and intentional collection of data focused on a wondering, in RtI, educators focus on systematically and intentionally collecting data to understand if the response to the intervention results in adequate academic and/or behavioral growth. According to Jim Wright, to implement RtI effectively, schools must develop a specialized set of tools and competencies, including a structured format for problem-solving, knowledge of a range of scientifically based interventions that address common reasons for school failure, and the ability to use various methods of assessment to monitor student progress in academic and behavioral areas (http://www.jimwrightonline.com/php/rti/rti_wire.php).

Given the sophistication that educators need to possess in each step of the inquiry process as well as the importance of adequate knowledge of powerful interventions, the success of RtI will likely depend on whether the process is appropriately implemented and whether an inquiry stance is embraced by highly skilled professionals. The inquiry process illustrated within this book can offer support to those engaged in RtI.

**HOW IS TEACHER INQUIRY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT I ALREADY DO AS A REFLECTIVE TEACHER?**

All teachers reflect. They reflect on what happened during previously taught lessons as they plan lessons for the future. They reflect on their students’ performance as they assess their work. They reflect on the content and the best pedagogy available to teach that content to their learners. They reflect on interactions they observed students having, as well as their own interactions with students and the ways these interactions contribute to learning. Teachers reflect all day, every day, on the act of teaching while in the act of teaching and long after the school day is over.
Reflection is important and critical to good teaching (Schon, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). In addition, reflection is a key component of teacher inquiry. Yet teacher inquiry is different from daily reflection in and on practice in two important ways. First, teacher inquiry is less happenstance. The very definition of teacher inquiry includes the word *intentional*. We do not mean to suggest that reflection is never intentional, but in the busy, complex life of teaching, reflection is something that occurs most often in an unplanned way, for example, on the way to the teachers’ room for lunch, during a chat with a colleague during a special, when the students are engaged in an independent activity, on the drive home, in the shower, or during dinner—wherever and whenever a moment arises. Unfortunately, few teachers have a planned reflection time. Teacher inquiry invites intentional, planned reflection, heightening your focus on problem posing. Second, teacher inquiry is more visible. The daily reflection teachers engage in is not observable by others unless it is given some form (perhaps through talk or journaling). As teachers engage in the process of inquiry, their thinking and reflection are made public for discussion, sharing, debate, and purposeful educative conversation, and teaching becomes less isolated and overwhelming. Figure 1.1, created by veteran teacher researcher from Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia, Gail Ritchie, in collaboration with a teacher-research group she was leading at the time, summarizes the differences and commonalities between a reflective teacher and a teacher researcher. As inquiry raises the visibility of teachers’ thinking, the profession garners a new respect for the complexity teaching entails.

**WHAT ARE SOME CONTEXTS THAT ARE RIPE FOR TEACHER INQUIRY?**

With an understanding of what teacher inquiry is, how it contributes to professional growth, how it relates to differentiating instruction, data-driven decision making, and progress monitoring, and how it differs from natural, daily reflection, let us consider the kinds of contexts that support teacher inquiry. As previously discussed, teaching is full of enormous complexities, paradoxes, and tensions, and hence, teaching itself invites inquiry. However, even as inquiry beckons each and every teacher, becoming a “lone inquirer” is difficult! For this reason, we explore three particularly ripe contexts for facilitating the development of an inquiry stance in practicing and prospective teachers—Professional Learning Communities, student teaching and/or other clinical experiences, and Professional Development Schools. You may currently be a part of one of these three contexts or you may wish to seek these contexts out as you begin and continue your teaching career.
Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) serve to connect and network groups of professionals to do just what their name entails—learn from practice. Professional Learning Communities meet on a regular basis and their time together is often structured by the use of protocols to ensure focused, deliberate conversation and dialogue by teachers about student work and student learning. Protocols for educators provide a script or series of timed steps for how a conversation among teachers on a chosen topic will develop.

A variety of different protocols have been developed for use in Professional Learning Communities by a number of noteworthy organizations such as the National Staff Development Council (see, for example, Lois Brown Easton’s Powerful Designs for Professional Learning, 2004); the Southern Maine Partnership (see, for example, http://usm.maine.edu/smp/about/index); and the National School Reform Faculty (www.nsrfharmony.org), which developed one version of a Professional Learning Community called Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). In their work conceptualizing CFGs, the National School Reform Faculty laid much of the

ground work for shifting the nature of the dialogue that occurs between
and among teachers about their practice in schools, and is responsible
for training thousands of teachers to focus on developing collegial rela-
tionships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership in
restructuring schools. The CFGs provide deliberate time and structures
dedicated to promoting adult professional growth that is directly linked
to student learning.

By their own nature, then, PLCs enhance the possibilities for conduct-
ing an inquiry and cultivating a community of inquirers. In fact, in our
companion book to this text, The Reflective Educator’s Guide to Professional
Development (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008), we describe a model for
school-based professional development that combines some of the
best of what we know about action research and Professional Learning
Communities and, in the process, address a weakness that has been
defined in traditional professional development practices. We name this
new entity the “inquiry-oriented Professional Learning Community,” and
define it as a group of six to twelve professionals who meet on a regular
basis to learn from practice through structured dialogue, and engage in
continuous cycles through the process of action research (articulating a
wondering, collecting data to gain insights into the wondering, analyzing
data, making improvements in practice based on what was learned, and
sharing learning with others).

Student Teaching and/or Other Clinical Experiences

If you are a veteran teacher, you likely reminisce about your own stu-
dent teaching experience as an important feature of your preservice edu-
cation. Similarly, if you are a prospective teacher, you have likely looked
forward to your field experience and student teaching with great anticipa-
tion. According to a research report prepared by the U.S. Department of
Education and the Office for Educational Research Improvement:

Learning to teach typically involves spending considerable time
in schools participating in field experiences of varying lengths, the
staples of teacher preparation programs. Study after study shows
that experienced and newly certified teachers alike see clinical expe-
riences (including student teaching) as a powerful—sometimes the
single most powerful—component of teacher preparation. Whether
that power enhances the quality of teacher preparation, however,
may depend on the specific characteristics of the field experience.
(Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001, p. 17)

Mounting evidence suggests that field experiences that include engage-
ment in teacher inquiry enhance the quality of teacher preparation (see,
e.g., Dana & Silva, 2001; Wilson et al., 2001). The reason for this is quite
logical. Given that the act of teaching is an enormously complex endeavor, “learning to teach” in any simple, step-by-step, short period of time is impossible. As a preservice teacher, you are immersed in the complexities of teaching for the first time in clinical experiences. Immersion in this complexity naturally encourages engagement in inquiry, as questions about teaching, schools, and schooling abound. As you student teach, inquiry can help you learn to identify the complexities and problems inherent in teaching and tease these complexities apart to gain insights into your work with children. Given the comprehensive nature of teaching, identifying complexities and striving to understand them is a process that lasts an entire career. Engagement in teacher inquiry as an integral component of field preparation enhances the power of the field experiences. As you simultaneously learn to teach and to inquire into teaching, these two processes become intricately intertwined. When teaching and inquiry become synonymous, you have cultivated an inquiry stance toward teaching that will serve you, your students, and the field of education well for the duration of your career!

Professional Development Schools and Other Networks

Since the late 1980s, a specialized setting for student teaching and other field experiences has emerged—Professional Development Schools (PDSs). According to Darling-Hammond (1994), Professional Development Schools

aim to provide new models of teacher education and development by serving as exemplars of practice, builders of knowledge, and vehicles for communicating professional understanding among teacher educators, novices, and veteran teachers. They support the learning of prospective and beginning teachers by creating settings in which novices enter professional practice by working with expert practitioners, enabling veteran teachers to renew their own professional development and assume new roles as mentors, university adjuncts, and teacher leaders. They allow school and university educators to engage jointly in research and rethinking of practice, thus creating an opportunity for the profession to expand its knowledge base by putting research into practice—and practice into research. (p. 1)

Professional Development Schools grew out of Goodlad’s Teachers for Our Nation’s Schools (1990) and Tomorrow’s Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group (Holmes Group, 1986). Tomorrow’s Teachers was written by the Holmes Group, “a consortium of education deans and chief academic officers from the major research universities in each of the fifty states” (p. 3). Their primary purpose was to come together as a group to
improve the quality of their teacher education programs. Although The Holmes Group (1986) has evolved significantly since the mid-1980s, one of the original goals of the group is still strong:

If university faculties are to become more expert educators of teachers, they must make better use of expert teachers in the education of other teachers and in research on teaching. In addition, schools must become places where both teachers and university faculty can systematically inquire into practice and improve it. (p. 4)

This goal from the original Holmes Group publication clearly notes the importance of systematic inquiry in PDSs. The Holmes Group has evolved to become The Holmes Partnership, with public schools and universities applying for a joint membership in the organization. (If you are a practicing or prospective teacher in a PDS, your school and university may be a member of this growing organization that promotes teacher inquiry.) In addition to the Holmes Group, Professional Development Schools have organized themselves through another network, the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS). The vision of this organization is to serve as an advocate for those dedicated to promoting the continuous development of collaborative P–12 school and higher education relationships. The work of teacher inquiry remains a vital component of the NAPDS and teacher inquirers regularly share their work at the NAPDS conference.

In an inquiry-oriented PDS, teacher inquiry is a central part of the professional practice of all members—practicing teachers, prospective teachers, administrators, and university teacher educators. This transition to inquiry is the mechanism for reinventing schools as “learning” organizations. Hence, a PDS culture supports and celebrates the engagement of teachers and other PDS professionals in constructing knowledge through intentional, systematic inquiry and using that knowledge to continually reform, refine, and change the practice of teaching.

In addition to Professional Development Schools, a variety of other educational networks support the teacher inquiry movement. For example, the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) embraces the work of inquiry as a central component to school improvement. The Network’s goal is to improve the quality of P–12 education for thoughtful and informed participation in a democracy. One way that this improvement occurs is through developing programs that encourage teachers to inquire into the nature of teaching and schooling, with the intention that practitioners will make inquiry a natural aspect of their professional lives. In addition, the Teachers’ Network Leadership Institute (TNLI) seeks to improve student achievement by bringing the teachers’ voice to education policymaking. They address this goal through action research that allows TNLI teachers to bring their experience and expertise to current debates
on education policy. These are just a few of the larger national networks that support teacher inquiry.

HOW DOES MY ENGAGING IN TEACHER INQUIRY HELP SHAPE THE PROFESSION OF TEACHING?

Regardless of your method of inquiry, the subject of your inquiry, or the context of your inquiry, what is most important is that you do inquire!

According to numerous leading scholars on teaching and teacher education, such as Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), Greene (1986), and Zeichner (1986), “teachers are decision makers and collaborators who must reclaim their roles in the shaping of practice by taking a stand as both educators and activists” (Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 280). Inquiry is a core tool teachers evoke when making informed and systematic decisions. Through the inquiry process, teachers can support with evidence the decisions they make as educators and, subsequently, advocate for particular children, changes in curriculum, and/or changes in pedagogy. Inquiry ultimately emerges as action and results in change.

As a prospective teacher, practicing teacher, or mentor-teacher interested in problematizing your professional practice, you have committed to simultaneous renewal and reform of the teaching profession and teacher education! Teacher inquiry is the ticket to enact this reform! Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) claim that in any classroom where teacher inquiry is occurring, “there is a radical, but quiet kind of educational reform in process” (p. 101). Your individual engagement in teacher inquiry is a contribution to larger educational reform, a transformation of the teaching profession…so let us begin the journey!