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Administrator Inquiry Defined

Whether you are a twenty-year veteran principal, a brand-new administrator, or studying to complete your degree in educational leadership with an aspiration to become principal of your own school one day, you cannot help but be struck by the staggering demands that a principal faces each day, referred to by Roland Barth in the opening quote. These demands for a principal's time and attention come from an astonishing number of constituencies he or she must serve simultaneously—teachers, students, parents, the superintendent and district office, the board of education, and the community at large. For example, within a given day, a principal might interview and hire a new teacher, provide feedback to a veteran teacher whose lesson was recently observed, discipline a student, lunch with the kindergarten students of the week, complete a newsletter for staff and parents, calm a parent who is upset she wasn't selected as a chaperone for the upcoming field trip to Washington, DC, work on a state-mandated report for the superintendent, meet with the district business manager to discuss the budget, and explain to the disgruntled head of the local Boy Scouts organization that it can no longer hold its weekly Tuesday night meetings in the cafeteria because of a conflict with another school activity. Layer on top of this same day any of a number of "emergencies" that can surface at any time without warning—a break-in to your school's computer lab the night before resulting in twelve stolen computers, the discovery of vandalism in the boy's bathroom, a power failure, a leaking roof, renovations to your building, a teacher who tripped in the parking lot on her way into the building and broke her arm, or an impending snow-storm that threatens early dismissal with no way to notify parents.

With all of the never-ending demands on a principal from a large and diverse number of constituencies, coupled with the numerous emergencies

that surface on an almost daily basis, it is easy for principals to lose sight of why they aspired to be principals in the first place—leading and inspiring the teaching and learning that occur within their schoolhouse, a task that has become increasingly more complex in recent years. According to Ken Leithwood and Carolyn Riehl (2003), leading researchers in the field of educational administration:

Curriculum standards, achievement benchmarks, programmatic requirements and other policy directives from many sources generate complicated and unpredictable requirements for schools. Principals must respond to increasing diversity in student characteristics, including cultural background and immigration status, income disparities, physical and mental disabilities and variation in learning capacities. They must manage new collaborations with other social agencies that serve children. Rapid developments in technologies for teaching and communications require adjustments in the internal workings of schools. These are just a few of the conditions that make schooling more challenging and leadership more essential. (p. 2)

Historically, principals have not had access to tools that can help them untangle the complexity of their work as administrators and bring the focus of their work back to their leadership in teaching and learning. Rather, principals often find themselves focusing on the routine management jobs that must get done and, to survive, responding haphazardly and unsystematically to the constant demand after demand for their time and attention. Administrator inquiry is one tool that can be used by principals to untangle the intricate web of demands in which they become entangled each day, take charge of their own professional development, and become the “head learner” of their school. Transforming the profession is really the capstone of the principal inquiry story. Let’s begin our journey into the what, why, and how of administrator inquiry with a simple definition of this very complex, rewarding, transformative, provocative, and productive process!

WHAT IS ADMINISTRATOR INQUIRY?

Simply stated, administrator inquiry refers to the process of a principal engaging in systematic, intentional study of his/her own administrative practice and taking action for change based on what he/she learns as a result of the inquiry. Inquiring professionals seek out change and reflect on their practice 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 studying to be a school administrator or are a veteran administrator with years of experience but faced with new educational challenges every day, administrator inquiry becomes a powerful vehicle for learning and school improvement.

The notion of principal inquiry is adapted from the work on teacher action research (see, for example, Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008, 2009; Zeichner, 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999, 2001). In fact, you may already be familiar with teacher research as a mechanism for staff development for your teachers if you are currently a practicing administrator or have engaged in the process yourself as a classroom teacher. We know a good deal about the value of teachers' engagement in studying their own practice from the literature and work of many prominent scholars in this area. For example, engagement in teacher research, also referred to as teacher inquiry, action research, and practitioner inquiry, has been touted as a powerful tool for teacher professional development (Zeichner, 2003), an important vehicle for raising teacher voices in policy making (Meyers & Rust, 2003), and a mechanism for generating knowledge about teaching and learning and furthering educational reform efforts (Lieberman & Miller, 1990; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; 1999; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kincheloe, 1991; Miller, 1990). The promise that engagement in administrator action research holds for the principalship lies in the documented strength of this approach for teachers. Teacher researchers gain a better understanding of why they behave as they do and consequently make better choices in their classroom practice (Oberg, 1990). In a fashion similar to the ways teachers utilize this process to gain better understandings of themselves and their teaching practice, administrators can use it to gain deeper insights into their practice as administrators and their leadership role in school improvement efforts.

Another reason administrator action research holds promise as a powerful professional development tool for principals is that this movement is consonant with guidelines and suggestions for effective principal professional development. For example, Sparks (2002) cites the Educational Research Service's 1999 publication *Professional Development for School Principals*, which advocates that "effective staff development for administrators is long-term, planned, and job-embedded; focuses on student achievement, supports reflective practice; and provides opportunities to work, discuss, and solve problems with peers" (p. 8.3). Furthermore, Sparks and Hirsh (2002) state that school systems committed to improved student learning will provide principals professional

development in which they participate as members of ongoing study groups analyzing instructional issues for their schools. As you will see in the remainder of this text, engagement in administrator action research is aligned with each of these recommendations. In fact, many exemplary leadership development programs utilize action research as a component of the overall professional development of school principals (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). If you are using this text, you are joining hundreds of other prospective and practicing administrators across the nation who are committing to becoming the “head learner” in their school through the process of action research.

HOW IS ADMINISTRATOR INQUIRY OR ACTION RESEARCH DIFFERENT FROM TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH?

Two paradigms have dominated educational research on schooling, teaching, and learning over the past several decades. In the first paradigm, the concept of “process-product research” (Shulman, 1986) portrays teaching as a primarily linear activity and depicts teachers and principals as technicians. The practitioners’ role is to implement the research findings of “outside” experts, almost exclusively university researchers, who are considered alien to the everyday happenings in schools. In this transmissive mode, principals are not expected to be problem posers or problem solvers; rather, administrators negotiate dilemmas framed by outside experts and are asked to implement with fidelity a curriculum designed by those outside their school. Based on this paradigm, many principals and teachers have learned that it is sometimes best not to problematize their lived school experiences or first-hand observations because to do so may mean an admission of failure. In fact, the transmissive culture of many schools has demonstrated that principals can suffer punitive repercussions from highlighting areas they find problematic. The consequences of pointing out problems have often resulted in traditional top-down “retraining” or remediation from the district office or being placed in the superintendent’s “doghouse.” Our educational community does not encourage solution-seeking behavior on the part of administrators in the transmissive framework.

In the second paradigm, educational research drawn from qualitative or interpretative studies, teaching, and schooling are portrayed as highly complex, context-specific, interactive activities. In addition, this qualitative or interpretive paradigm captures critically important differences across classrooms, schools, and communities. Chris Clark (1995) identifies the complexity inherent in the educator’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 the studies emerging from this research paradigm are conducted by university researchers and are intended for academic audiences. Such university research provides valuable insights into the connections between theory and practice, but like the process-product research, the qualitative or interpretive approach limits practitioners’ 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 who work in the trenches of the school building on a daily basis and are therefore best positioned to understand and better the educational experiences for all members of the schoolhouse—administrators and teachers.

Hence, a third research tradition has emerged that highlights the role practitioners play as knowledge generators. This tradition is often referred to as “practitioner inquiry,” “classroom research,” or “action research.” In general, the practitioner inquiry movement focuses on the concerns of practitioners (not outside researchers) and engages practitioners in the design, data collection, and interpretation of data around their 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) practitioners become collaborators in educational research by investigating their own problems, and (3) practitioners play a part in the research process, which makes them more likely to facilitate change based on the knowledge they generate.

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 for improving the situation or resolving 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 my description of this third research tradition, I have used a number of terms synonymously—practitioner research, classroom

research, and practitioner inquiry. Although these phrases have been used interchangeably, they do have somewhat different emphases and histories. Action research, for instance, usually refers to research intended to bring about change of some kind, usually with a social justice focus, whereas practitioner research quite often has the goal only of examining a practitioner's practice to improve it or better understand what works. For the purposes of this text and to streamline our discussion of research traditions, I have grouped all these related processes together to represent administrators' and teachers' systematic study of their own practice. I use the term *inquiry* most often, however, because in my own coaching of administrators' and teachers' systematic study of their own practice I became discouraged by the baggage that the term *research* in the phrase *action research* carries when the concept is first introduced to educators. 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." Practitioners, in general, weren't overly enthusiastic about these images, and it took a good deal of time to deconstruct those notions and help practitioners see that they are antithetical to what action research is all about. So, over time, I began replacing the terms action research and practitioner research with one simple word that carried much less baggage with it—inquiry—and I will continue to use the word *inquiry* most often 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 (Table 1.1), acknowledged the limitations of the first two traditions, and introduced practitioner inquiry, our brief history lesson might suggest that practitioner inquiry is just another educational fad. However, although the terms practitioner research, administrator inquiry, and action research are comparatively new, the idea of teaching as inquiry and the role of practitioners as inquirers are not. Early in the twentieth century, John Dewey (1933) called for teachers to engage in "reflective action" that would transform them into inquiry-oriented classroom practitioners. Similarly, distinguished scholar Donald Schon (1983, 1987) depicts professional practice as a cognitive process of posing and exploring problems or dilemmas identified by practitioners themselves. Influenced by Donald Schon's work, the role of reflection in improving the learning and performance of schools received considerable attention throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Senge, 1990). During this time, many school administrator professional preparation programs adopted reflection as an instructional methodology for preparing principals to understand and

Table 1.1 Comparison of Research Paradigms

	Process-Product	Qualitative or Interpretive	Practitioner Inquiry
Practitioner	Practitioner as technician	Practitioner as story character	Practitioner as storyteller
Researcher	Outsider	Outsider	Insider
Process	Linear	Discursive	Cyclical
Source of question	Researcher	Researcher	Principal
Type of research question	Focused on control, prediction, or impact	Focused on explaining a process or phenomenon	Focused on providing insight into an administrator's own practice in an effort to make change and improve the school
Example of research question	Which teacher professional development strategy is most effective?	How do principals' knowledge of teacher leadership and their interaction with teacher leaders contribute to principals' support for teacher leadership? (Mangin, 2007)	In what ways can I as a principal help facilitate the professional growth of the teachers within my building through engagement in action research?

meet the changing social and political demands placed on schools (see, for example, Hart, 1993; Osterman, 1991; Short & Rinehart, 1993). Clearly, the concept of reflection as an essential skill for administrators to possess and use for understanding and improving schools has stood the test of time.

Administrators' engagement in inquiry is one vehicle for making reflection purposeful and visible. Given the complex environments of today's schools, where much of the decision making and discussion regarding what happens in the schoolhouse occur outside the walls of the school (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006), the time seems ripe to equip administrators with the tools of inquiry and thus enable them to cultivate the expertise residing within the schoolhouse itself and to utilize these critical, untapped resources to improve their

schools from the inside out rather than the outside in. In the words of Mark Bracewell, one middle school principal-inquirer I have worked with, administrator inquiry is powerful:

It's interactive, it's practical, and it's designed by student need and teacher need and principal need. Inquiry is different from traditional professional development I've experienced as a principal because it's introspective; it's not me sitting down in a chair and somebody else, who doesn't know me, my school, my teachers, my community, or my kids, telling me what I should be doing—the traditional “sit and get” or “spray and pray” professional development where you go, you listen, you get what you get, and maybe you use it or maybe you don't. Rather than someone else telling me what I should be doing *to* my teachers and *to* my students, through engagement in inquiry I'm learning *with* my teachers and *with* the students in my building by closely taking a really hard look at what I'm already doing and what I need to do to change it. (Personal communication, August 2008)

If this is the goal, we now need to understand how administrator inquiry can serve as a tool for achieving professional growth and educational reform. I believe that the best-stated definitions of administrator inquiry come from principal-researchers themselves. This section ends with a few descriptions from principals I have collaborated with on inquiry:

Principal inquiry is a process that allows me to do three things I need and like to do but rarely make time for—be a reflective practitioner, work with a true professional learning community, and model instructional leadership.

—Mike Delucas, Principal, Williston High School

Principal inquiry is when a principal stops and takes a breath, takes a look at the changes or decisions they have made, and gathers information needed to decide if success on the goals that were set has been achieved. That information may be test scores, teacher input, student input, parent input, evidence seen in classrooms, lesson plans, etc. . . . Compare the results to the goals, talk with all the stakeholders, then actively use this information to plan the next steps, maybe a new direction or keep on keeping on!

—Lacy Redd, Principal, Newberry Elementary School

Engagement in principal inquiry enables me to see things I wouldn't ordinarily see in my school or building when I don't make the time to step back, pose questions, really look at all kinds of data, read, talk with other administrators as well as my teachers and the students in my building, and commit to continuous school improvement. This is hard to do in the midst of the craziness of each school day, but once you engage in the process, you see how incredibly valuable and important it is. Inquiring into practice has become a part of who I am and what I do as a principal, and I can't imagine doing my job without the insights engagement in inquiry can bring.

—Patrick Wnek, Principal, Hilltop Alternative School and Summit Academy

Inquiry is at the core of everything that I do, whether it is working with students, teachers, colleagues, or our whole school. It is the nagging question (or questions) that stirs me to take action based on data, investigations, instincts, and more questions. It is a never-ending process. It is the process of creating and re-creating my school, my life, and my practice a question at a time.

—Donnan Stoicovy, Principal, Park Forest Elementary School

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADMINISTRATOR INQUIRY AND PRINCIPAL PROFESSIONAL GROWTH?

Simply stated, practitioner inquiry is defined as systematic, intentional study of one's own professional practice. 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 (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). Hence, whether you are a prospective principal at the dawn of your career in administration or a veteran principal with years of experience facing new educational challenges every day, administrator inquiry becomes a powerful vehicle for learning and reform.

As a principal-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 & Lytle, 1993). Administrator inquiry differs from traditional

professional development for principals, which has typically focused on the knowledge of an outside “expert”—what principal Mark Bracewell and others have referred to as “sit and get” or “spray and pray.” This traditional model of professional growth, usually delivered in the form of workshops, may appear an efficient method of disseminating information but often does not result in real and meaningful change in the schools. Kelline Stevens (2001) captures this sentiment in an article titled “Collaborative Action Research: An Effective Strategy for Principal Inservice”:

Inservice education for school principals is often viewed by principals as something “done to” them by others. Consequently, it is not surprising that inservice is seen in a negative light by many practitioners. A somewhat different approach to meeting the professional development needs of the principals can be found in the concept of collaborative action research. (p. 203)

Like Stevens, those dissatisfied with the traditional model of professional development suggest a need for new approaches, like action research, that enhance professional growth and lead to real change. For example, 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) and support collaborative learning structures that deepen innovation implementation efforts (DuFour & DuFour, 2007).

Consonant with the movement to change traditional professional development practices is the practitioner 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 for all. By participating in practitioner inquiry, the principal develops a sense of ownership in the knowledge constructed, and this sense of ownership heavily contributes to the possibilities for real change in schools.

The ultimate goal is to create an inquiry *stance* toward administrator practice. This stance becomes a professional positioning, owned by the principal, where questioning one’s own practice becomes part of the principal’s work and eventually a part of the culture within the principal’s school. Michael Copland (2003), in his article titled “Leadership of Inquiry: Building and Sustaining Capacity for School Improvement,” describes this notion of stance:

Leadership for improving teaching and learning is rooted in *continual inquiry* into the work at the school, inquiry focused on student learning, high standards, equity, and best practice. This process of inquiry does not cease; rather, the work is best thought of as an ongoing effort to build greater *capacity* with regard to instructional practices that improve learning among those who work in the school community. People in the school renorm their basic work around identifying, striving to solve, and continually revisiting critical problems. (p. 376)

By cultivating this inquiry stance toward practice, principals and 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 administrator development that can lead to meaningful change for schools and all the people who inhabit them—principals, teachers, and students.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING IN INQUIRY?

In addition to providing principals with a meaningful way to grow professionally, engaging in the process of inquiry reaps other numerous benefits for principals and their schools. First, there have been numerous discussions in the literature about teacher isolation, depicting a lonely profession in which teachers close their classroom doors and have little interaction with other teachers in their buildings (see, for example, Flinder, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Smith & Scott, 1990). While teaching has been characterized by norms of isolation, so, too, is the principalship. Professional isolation, defined as the “unpleasant experiences that occur when a person’s network of social relations at work is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively” (Dussault, 1997, p. 4), is pervasive in administration for many reasons. First and foremost, there exists a quantitative deficit of colleagues for the principal within his or her own building. Even for those who employ an assistant principal due to the size of their school or administrative structure in their districts, or for principals who have a strong leadership team they collaborate with for decision making, the principal is the *only* person within a school building that holds this unique position, a position that carries with it the ultimate responsibility for all members of the schoolhouse. To find other principals to converse with, administrators must

venture outside the four walls of the school sites, and principals feel uncomfortable being away from their buildings for any extended period of time. In addition, in some districts, principals compete with one another for scarce resources, and it can be perceived as risky to share anything but the very best that is happening at your school in an effort to protect your fair share of resources. In still other districts, the times set aside for principals to come together on a regular basis are jammed packed with new information coming from the central office. Principals sit and listen at these gatherings, leaving little time to converse with colleagues in any meaningful ways beyond congenial niceties such as, “Good to see you again,” and “How is your family?” Hence, perhaps even to a greater extent than for teachers, norms of isolation surround the principalship. Roland Barth (1990) writes:

Principals, like teachers, need and treasure collegiality and peer support. Yet, perhaps even more than teachers, principals live in a world of isolation. . . . There is often a huge distance between adjoining classrooms; the distance across town to the next school is even greater. When principals associate with peers, it is often at an administrators’ meeting. But just as it is forbidden for principals to “not know” within their individual school, principals often have trouble “not knowing” with peers. Seldom is time or setting conducive to collegial support or the exchange of ideas and concerns. (p. 83)

These very norms of isolation keep principals from learning, growing, and becoming the best administrators they can be and can even lead to professional atrophy (Smith & Scott, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). Engagement in administrator inquiry challenges these norms. By engaging in the process of administrator inquiry with other principals, or even in collaborative inquiry with a group of teachers within your own building, you are forced out of isolation and surround yourself with other professionals conversing about practice in systematic and meaningful ways. I’ll talk more about powerful structures that support inquiry and connect principals with others in the last section of this chapter.

A second benefit of principal inquiry is that, by engaging in this process, principals become role models for the teachers and students in their buildings. A critical belief about learning is ownership. Learning must be something teachers and students *do*, not something that others do *to* or *for* them. According to Roland Barth (1990), “School principals have an extraordinary opportunity to improve public schools. A precondition for realizing this potential is for principals to become head learners” (p. 84). He also states:

Perhaps the most powerful reason for principals to be learners as well as leaders, to overcome the many impediments to their learning, is the extraordinary influence of modeling behavior. Do as I do, as well as I say, is a winning formula. If principals want students and teacher to take learning seriously, if they are interested in building a community of learners, they must not only be head teachers, headmasters, or instructional leaders. They must, above all, be *head learners*. I believe it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who once said that what you *do* speaks so loudly that no one can hear what you *say*. (p. 72)

Illustrating this point, principal-inquirer Lynette Langford became involved in administrator inquiry when she realized that action research was growing as a professional development practice for teachers. Lynette wanted to set an example for her teachers by completing her own action research project, explaining, “I would never ask; I don’t care if it’s a custodian, maintenance, whomever, I would never ask them to do something I’m not willing to do. So, if I had the opportunity to do principal inquiry, how could I ever ask a teacher to do it if I hadn’t done it myself?” (personal communication, June 2007).

A third benefit of administrator inquiry is that engagement in this process can help best practices to flourish at your school. For example, Mark Bracewell, principal of Lake Butler Middle School, learned a great deal from his inquiry that explored how a newly implemented inclusion model in his middle school was affecting regular education students (Bracewell, 2008). Mark knew that the research touted the implementation of an inclusion model as an important setting for exceptional student education (ESE) students, and two teachers on his staff were interested in trying the model. Parents and other teachers, however, were skeptical about how this inclusion would affect regular education students. Mark navigated this tension in his building by utilizing inquiry to gain insights into how the model was playing out at his school and what he, as principal, could do to foster it. Mark learned that the regular education students placed in the inclusive classroom performed as well or better than their counterparts did on various measures of student achievement. In addition, through surveying students in the class, Mark learned that, contrary to popular belief that students might feel inferior to others because they were in a class with two teachers, they didn’t feel that way at all. Students reported that they felt fortunate to have two individuals from whom they could draw attention. Finally, through interviewing and observing the regular education and special education teachers who were coteaching this class, Mark discovered that teachers teaming in an

inclusion model need more time to plan what they are going to do. Through inquiry, Mark gained valuable insights into how coteaching by a special education and regular education teacher might play out in the classroom. Mark used the knowledge he gained through this inquiry to inform and educate other teachers on his faculty who were interested in coteaching, as well as to adjust scheduling to allow more time for coteachers to plan with one another. In the absence of Mark's inquiry, faculty enthusiasm for inclusion might not have received the administrative nurturing necessary for this innovation to expand and grow.

A final benefit of administrative inquiry is that, by making and taking time to engage in inquiry, principals slow down the harried pace that characterizes their work. In their book *What's Worth Fighting for Out There* (1998), Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan discuss the ways teachers and principals fall into the trap of being *projectites*, pursuing school improvement efforts frantically via one uncompleted task after another. This statement rings true for principal Mike Connolly (2007), who writes about what one might see by peeking into the office of a typical principal:

What would you see? A desk piled high with papers, the telephone ringing incessantly, 40 or 50 emails screaming for attention, a line of people queuing up outside the door, and a harried principal. Most principals have not learned you can't fit 10 pounds of task into a 5-pound day. Far from being models of self-control, balance, and rationality, many principals resemble butterflies on speed pills. They can't devote sustained attention to anything. (p. 32)

Because the nature of the principal's job entails a relentless amount of responding—to superintendents, to parents, to teachers, to students, to staff, and to the always unpredictable events of each school day—principals spend a good deal of their time *reacting* rather than *acting*. Engagement in inquiry enables you to take charge of something you can own and control in the midst of all the responding and reacting a principal does each school day. Engagement in inquiry forces you to devote sustained attention to one issue, tension, problem, or dilemma you face as an educator and, in focusing, enables you to become proactive rather than reactive to your administrative practice and your work as an educator. In sum, engagement in inquiry can help you, at least momentarily, step out of the frantic pace of the principalship! Veteran administrator-inquirer Mark Bracewell shares:

I think it's hard for any principal who's effective to sit down and focus on one thing at one time, because the nature of our job is many things all at one time. And inquiry requires you at some

point and time to sit down and say, “Ok, what does this information say?” and “What decision do I need to lead the way in light of this information?” That was hard for me to do because I was fighting fires all the time. . . . I’m not going to lie about that. But as far as the inquiry process itself, I think an effective principal participates in inquiry and finds a way to fit it into his or her schedule because you’ve got to do it. If your kids are going to excel, . . . you’ve got to look at what they’re doing. Where are they, where do they need to be, how do we get them there? That’s essentially what inquiry is. (Personal communication, August 2007)

HOW DO I FIND TIME TO ENGAGE IN INQUIRY AS A PRINCIPAL?

In the harried, everyday firefighting experience of the principal, a definite and very real impediment to engaging in inquiry is time! It is very normal and natural for principals to like the sound of inquiry and believe in it theoretically but to find it difficult to make time for inquiry in practice. There are many things a principal can do to create, find, take, and make time to squeeze the process of inquiry onto an already too full plate.

Perhaps most important is acknowledging that time is a factor that must be dealt with rather than pretending that issues of time management don’t exist or totally dismissing inquiry because you just don’t have the time. In many ways, inquiry is like exercise. When my own work and life became ultra busy, I gave up exercising, lamenting that “I just don’t have the time.” Yet, I was haunted each year at my annual physical when my doctor asked me what I was doing for exercise and throughout the year by continuing reports on the news and in magazines that exercising is an important ingredient for overall fitness and health. Although it was difficult for me to take the time to exercise, at the start of this school year, I made a commitment to join a gym and work out three days a week. I found that I felt better, I slept better, and even though exercise was dipping into my work time for three or four hours a week, when I returned to my work after exercising, I was more productive. Exercise rejuvenated me, and my hour break three days a week helped me respond to work tasks more productively and efficiently.

Engagement in principal inquiry is just like that. Research tells us that engagement in inquiry is an important ingredient for the overall professional health of an educator (Copland, 2003). Yet, many principals do not engage in the process because they just can’t find the time. Even though it is difficult to take the time to inquire, if you make a commitment

and safeguard a little time each week to engage in the process, you'll feel better, make important administrative decisions in a more informed, thoughtful way, and return to the never-ending demands of the principalship with more energy to face the challenges of each school day. Roland Barth (2001) informs us that one reason it is so difficult for school leaders to become learners is lack of time, but he reminds us, "For principals, as for all of us, protesting a lack of time is another way of saying other things are more important and perhaps more comfortable" (p. 157). The first step toward finding time to engage in inquiry as an administrator is to acknowledge that lack of time will *always* be an issue that confronts principals and then make a simultaneous commitment to engage in this important and necessary work anyway.

One way to help ease the tension of time is to make inquiry a part of your daily practice rather than a separate part of it. This can occur by reshaping already existing structures in your work. For example, each year Alachua Elementary School principal Jim Brandenburg had a regular meeting with his superintendent to evaluate his work as a principal and set goals for the following school year. In previous years, these meetings were shaped by a lengthy district form that had to be completed by Jim prior to the meeting. Committed to finding time to inquire, Jim asked his superintendent if they might abandon that form and replace it with a report about an inquiry Jim wished to engage in during the following school year. Ironically, Jim's inquiry would be driven by the question, "In what ways can I as a principal help facilitate the professional growth of the teachers within my building through engagement in action research?" The superintendent agreed, and Jim reports that the meeting where they discussed his plans for inquiry was the most productive and meaningful year-end evaluation he ever had! Jim immediately began collecting data to gain insights into his question even before that school year ended by having his teachers complete a survey, which Jim termed "Druthers" (see Figure 1.1). "Druthers" contained a series of questions that Jim asked his teachers based on the idea that, "If you had your 'druthers' (what you'd rather do), what would you choose?"

Another way to create time for inquiry by making it a part of your normal administrative practice is to formulate a study based on something you must do anyway. For example, principal Terry Buckles needed a plan to deal with her school's inability to make her state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement the previous school year and, thus, being placed on corrective action. She writes:

This is my sixth year of being a principal at Mellon Elementary in Palatka, Florida. The test scores have shown a slow increase each year during this time, however Mellon Elementary has not been

Figure 1.1 Druthers Survey

Please return to Jim by Monday, May 19.

DRUTHERS

Teacher _____

Please take a few minutes and share your thoughts, concerns, plans, or ideas with me.

1. Grade level or teaching assignment preference for next year:
 - a. 1st _____
 - b. 2nd _____
2. Possible teammates, partners, neighbors that I'd like to work with: _____
3. Possible leadership opportunities: _____
4. Openness to change:
 - definitely want to do something different, like _____
 - maybe ready to change, depending on _____
 - please leave me alone because _____
 - none of the above: _____
5. What were some of your successes this year?
6. What was your biggest frustration?
7. The biggest problem that our school needs to address is: _____
8. Share any random thoughts on:
 - technology
 - coteaching
 - master schedule
 - discipline issues
 - ESE class content/scheduling/inclusion
 - professional learning community stuff
 - summer inservice training
 - security
 - clerical support
 - administrative support
 - inquiry
 - subject area needs
 - FCAT/testing issues
 - maintenance
 - front office
 - special class content/schedules
 - etc.
9. The one thing that Jim could do that would make my life easier is: _____

10. Anything else on your mind: _____

able to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or earn an “A” based on the A+ criteria. The teachers and I have worked very hard to try to improve and this is very frustrating for everyone. During the 2005–2006 school year the teachers mapped out the curriculum and identified our bottom quartile students and we were able to make improvements. Even though we improved, we missed making AYP, due to lacking one more student earning a 3.0 on the Florida Writes State Test, which we needed to make the 1% required increase. We met all of the other AYP criteria. In addition, we missed earning a “B” by 4 points. Mellon Elementary is in corrective action this year, because we have not been able to make AYP. This is a serious problem that has to be corrected. If we do not make AYP during the 2006–2007 school year, Mellon will be facing restructuring in 2007–2008. This could mean that the teachers would have to reapply for their positions and that the administration would be replaced.

Another school in our district was required to implement the Florida Continuous Improvement Model (FCIM) during the 2005–2006 school year, because they earned an “F” the previous year. The school earned points to receive a “D,” but because fifty percent of their bottom quartile students did not make a year’s growth in reading they were dropped to an “F.” After implementing the Florida Continuous Improvement Model (FCIM), they moved from an “F” to an “A” in one year. I presented this model to our teachers at the end of the 2005–2006 school year, after this school’s test scores and “A” status was published in the newspaper. They were all very receptive to fully implementing the Continuous Improvement Model (CIM) during the 2006–2007 school year. Therefore, the purpose of my inquiry is to address the question, “In what ways will implementing the continuous improvement model help increase student achievement at Mellon Elementary School?” (Buckles, 2008, pp. 229–230)

In this most extreme, but very real, example, Terry had to address that her school was being placed on corrective action. Terry turned to the process of inquiry to find insights into what she needed to do anyway, enabling her to more naturally engage in practitioner research as part of her administrative work.

One final helpful hint in finding time to engage in inquiry is to schedule at least some time that you will commit to doing *something* for your inquiry each week—whether it is spent reading an article related to the topic of your study, writing in your journal about a piece of data that

puzzles you, or collecting a new piece of data that will glean insights into your question. For example, just as many people block out Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons to go to the gym to exercise, commit to every Thursday afternoon from 4:00 to 5:00 (or any other consistent time each week) to be your “reflection and inquiry time.” Write it into your calendar, and be sure your secretary knows that this time each week is valuable to you and that you don’t wish to be disturbed unless it is absolutely necessary. Principal Mary Ann Chapko (2006) writes:

The never-ending excitement of [the principalship] lies in the unexpected events, life-altering decisions, and controlled chaos that occur at regular intervals throughout the day. As principal, my best defense is to control what I can control, for example: selling 12 kinds of ice cream at lunch, consistently greeting my afternoon kindergartners at 12:40, or scheduling a monthly “Make Your Own Sundae Birthday Party with the Principal.” Scheduling events from which I rarely deviate allows me to better deal with the multitude of unscheduled events that occur daily. At the very least, it leaves me with the feeling that I have some control over my day. (p. 30)

By scheduling a planned, consistent time for reflection and inquiry in the same way that you schedule menu items for the lunchroom, your greeting of afternoon kindergartners, and the monthly special events with students in your building, you’ll be surprised at how much you can accomplish and how you will feel a greater sense of control over all of the other line items on the principal’s ever-growing “To Do” list.

WHAT ARE SOME CONTEXTS THAT ARE RIPE FOR PRINCIPAL INQUIRY?

With an understanding of what administrator inquiry is, how it differs from traditional educational research, how it contributes to principal professional development and other benefits for the principal, and how to find time in the busy administrator’s life to engage in research, let us now consider the kinds of contexts that support administrator inquiry. As previously discussed, administration is full of enormous complexities, and, hence, administration itself invites inquiry. Never a day goes by without at least one problem, issue, tension, or dilemma arising for a principal that beckons for the deep exploration and insights that the process of inquiry can bring! However, even as inquiry beckons each and every administrator, becoming a “lone inquirer” is difficult. For this reason,

it is important to explore four particularly ripe contexts for facilitating the development of inquiry stances for practicing and prospective school administrators—university coursework, superintendent/district meetings, leadership teams, and professional learning communities. You may currently be a part of one of these four contexts, or you may wish to seek them out as you begin and continue your career in administration.

University Coursework

Many principals and aspiring principals enroll in coursework at a local college or university or online as they pursue an advanced degree (master's, specialist, or doctorate) or an initial principal certification in their state. Many of these exemplary leadership development programs utilize action research as a component of the overall professional development of school principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Sometimes engagement in practitioner research serves as the culmination of the program, with master's, specialist, or doctoral students engaging in action research as a portfolio project, paper, thesis, or even dissertation. Although sometimes learning practitioner research skills are a part of coursework, some institutions devote an entire course to practitioner inquiry, with aspiring and/or practicing administrators either completing a proposal for action research or actually completing an entire inquiry project within a sixteen-week semester timeframe. Students who enroll in these courses or have these experiences bond with one another as they share with each other and help their classmates and colleagues through each aspect of the inquiry process.

Superintendent/District Meetings

In an effort to find meaningful professional development activities for their principals, some districts, such as Florida's Pinellas County, are recreating the bonding that often occurs among classmates at the university within the districts themselves. They are accomplishing this task by reconceptualizing their traditional monthly administrative team meetings to being entirely devoted to, or at least a portion of the meeting devoted to, principals' engagement in action research. Rather than sit passively at meetings and listen to a long list of announcements, many announcements are now taken care of through e-mail, and principals are organized into small groups to complete a series of interactive tasks to help each principal identify an area to study about his or her own practice. At the end of the school year, Pinellas County holds an "Inquiry Celebration" where principals and teachers who have engaged in the process of inquiry during

the school year share their work with others. Principals (and teachers) in this county often speak of inquiry as the most rewarding and powerful professional development they have ever experienced as educators!

Leadership Teams

While the first two contexts for inquiry occur outside the principal's school building, a third context ripe for inquiry exists right within the principal's own backyard—the leadership team. A focus in schools in recent years on building a culture of collaboration coupled with educational reform, accountability, and improved standards that require visionary and strategic planning, not only from the principal but also from the whole school community, have led to a leadership team phenomenon (Zappulla, 2002). Leadership teams are instituted by principals and usually include any assistant administrators and at least three teachers who also have classroom responsibilities. The leadership team shares problems, responsibilities, and decision making with the administrator. In fact, according to Pauline Zappulla (2002) and other leading scholars in educational administration, leadership teams may be used for consultative purposes, participative decision making, strategic planning, policy development, monitoring and coordinating programs, and maintaining a commitment to collaboration and shared leadership. In whatever ways principals utilize their leadership teams, however, one vital component for the success of the team is its ability to engender learning: "Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. This is where the 'rubber meets the road': unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn" (Senge, 1990). Engagement in inquiry with the leadership team is a natural way the principal can be assured that his or her leadership team is learning and is another way to make inquiry a part of, rather than apart from, the regular practice of an administrator. Some principals have even gone as far as organizing their leadership teams as a professional learning community.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities (PLCs) serve to connect and network groups of professionals to do just what their name suggests—*learn* from practice. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of discussions in both the education and business literature as well as in schools across the nation about PLCs and their ability to help institutions improve. For example, in *Professional Learning Communities That Work*, Dufour and Eaker (1998) argue, "The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional

learning communities” (p. xi). PLCs took hold across the nation as many top scholars and leaders in education, including Linda Darling-Hammond and Milbrey McLaughlin (1995), Michael Fullan (2001), Peter Senge (1990), and Andy Hargreaves (1994), claimed that schools must become “learning organizations.” However, according to Whitford and Wood (in press), there is a stunning lack of clarity about what actually is being proposed. “A wide variety of distinct professional development approaches, school social groupings, and change and improvement strategies appear in the literature labeled as ‘professional learning communities.’” For this reason, it is important to clarify the meaning of PLC as it is used in this book.

In this book, I define PLCs generically as small groups of faculty who meet regularly to study more effective learning and teaching practices, with their time together 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 PLCs 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, www.usm.maine.edu/smp/teaching.htm), and the National School Reform Faculty (www.nsrffharmony.org), who developed one version of a PLC called Critical Friends Groups (CFGs). In its work conceptualizing CFGs, the National School Reform Faculty laid much of the groundwork for shifting the nature of the dialogue that occurs between and among teachers and their principals about their practice in schools, and it is responsible for training thousands of teachers and an increasing number of principals in developing collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership in restructuring schools. The CFGs provide deliberate time and structures dedicated to promoting adult professional growth directly linked to student learning.

By their own nature, then, PLCs enhance the possibilities for conducting an inquiry and cultivating a community of inquirers. In fact, in a companion book to this text titled *The Reflective Educator’s Guide to Professional Development* (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008), my colleague and I name a model for school-based professional development that combines some of the best of what we know about action research and PLCs and, in the process, rectifies a weakness that has been identified in traditional professional development practices. We name this new entity the “inquiry-oriented professional learning community.” We define this community as a group of six to twelve professionals who meet on a regular basis to learn from practice through structured dialogue and who 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).

Many principals are instituting this model in their schools as a powerful form of professional development for their teachers, as well as for themselves. In addition, some principals gather with other principals to form their own inquiry-oriented learning communities where they support each other in the study of one another's school and administrative practice (Dana, Tricarico, Quinn, & Wnek, 2008; Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2007). Whether principals are instituting this model in their own buildings or replicating this model with groups of other principals to serve as role models for their teachers back in their own buildings, the success of inquiry-oriented learning community work within a school is directly tied to how aware and connected principals are to the PLC work unfolding in their buildings. What better way for you as a principal to be connected and aware than to join one of your building PLCs yourself or, if appropriate to the goals of your leadership team, to run your leadership team as a PLC?

Whatever context you find yourself in as a principal-inquirer, your first step in your inquiry journey is to develop a question or "wondering" you wish to study, a step we'll discuss in detail in Chapter 2. To illustrate the power of a PLC or lead team functioning as a context for principal inquiry, however, I end this chapter with the story of Marion, an exemplary elementary school principal I worked with, and the ways her wondering developed with the help of her lead team.

PRINCIPAL INQUIRY IN A PLC: CASE STUDY

Elementary school principal Marion and five of her faculty members met regularly to reflect on the teaching and learning that was occurring in their school building for all members of the community—students, teachers, and administrators. Through the use of protocols to examine student and educator work, they uncovered and addressed problems and took action to address them. The group was facilitated by Adam, a veteran fourth-grade teacher who had been through the National School Reform Faculty's intensive, weeklong training on PLCs three years earlier.

About to embark on a new school year, teachers reported to work one full week before the students after summer vacation to prepare for their students' arrival. During this planning week, Marion called her PLC together to look at their students' results on standardized test scores from the previous school year. Along with Marion, all members of the PLC concluded that they really needed

(Continued)

(Continued)

to focus on the bottom quartile of students in their school and that they could utilize the process of action research to make a difference for this population.

Marion shared with Adam and the group, “I’ve been thinking about this a lot over the summer, and I’m also thinking of a lot of ongoing initiatives in our building. I played around with a question that might guide us this year.” She handed out a paper with the following words typed across the top:

Will focusing on the lowest student quartile through teacher culture awareness, mentoring, progress monitoring, intervention by the reading teacher, and the afterschool program be sufficient to raise our percentage making AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) in reading from 47 to 65 percent?

There was a pause as members of the group silently read and considered the wondering statement, and then Marion queried, “Is this too wordy, or is it even where we should be headed?”

Adam began the dialogue.

Marion, thank you so much for getting us started! This actually comes at a great time—I just finished reading an article about teacher and principal research in the Madison, Wisconsin, Metropolitan School District. The article shares ideas for what they believe makes a good action research question. I think we can learn a lot from this article. Among other things, the authors believe that good action research questions are clear and concise, are “doable,” and require a more complex answer than yes or no [Caro-Bruce & McCreddie, 1994]. I think we should play with this research question with these three things in mind. To start, how might we rephrase this question so it is not stated as a dichotomous question?

PLC member Rita gave it a try, saying, “How about something like: What role do teacher culture awareness, mentoring, progress monitoring, reading teacher intervention, and afterschool program participation play in raising the AYP of our lowest student quartile?”

Adam wrote the question on the whiteboard as Rita spoke. He stepped back and looked at what he had written and responded, “I think that’s good. Now it reads as an open-ended question. By carefully wording questions so they are open-ended, we open ourselves up to frame the design of our research to uncover lots of possibilities. When a question is posed in a dichotomous fashion, we force the design of our research to fit into narrow categories.”

Marion replied, “OK, I see that. But I still think the question is really wordy—not clear and concise like that article shares.”

Adam responded, “Well, what if we broke that question down further into an overarching wondering with subquestions? Would that make it more clear and concise?”

All members of the PLC agreed that this was a good plan and contributed to the discussion for ideas about how to “pare down” the wondering on the whiteboard. After lots of crossing out and erasing, their discussion led to the following revision of Rita’s question, which Adam inscribed on the whiteboard for all members of the group to view:

Overarching Wondering: What actions can our faculty take to improve reading achievement for our lowest-quartile students?

Subwonderings:

- What is the relationship between teacher culture awareness and raising the AYP of our lowest quartile?
- What is the relationship between progress monitoring and raising the AYP of our lowest quartile?
- What is the relationship between mentoring and raising the AYP of our lowest quartile?
- What is the relationship between reading teacher intervention and raising the AYP of our lowest quartile?
- What is the relationship between afterschool program participation and raising the AYP of our lowest student quartile?
- How do our lowest-quartile students experience and benefit from engagement with each of these strategies (teacher culture awareness, progress monitoring, mentoring, intervention, afterschool)?

The group all agreed that they were making progress, but Rita expressed that it still didn’t feel quite right to her.

The process of breaking down this wondering has helped me realize how many initiatives we are participating in. No wonder our faculty was feeling so overwhelmed and stressed at the end of the last school year. Morale was low. I think we should consider the feasibility of this research—are we trying to do too much all at once? And if we attempt to do too much at once, can we really do anything well? And if we end up not really doing anything well, how can we get good data to understand how various initiatives are working? If we do too much at once, we’ll only drag ourselves down. We ought to consider this before we proceed.

All members of the group nodded in agreement. As it was nearing 4:00 p.m., Adam drew attention to the clock and reminded everyone that one of their ground rules was that they always started and ended on time and that they were scheduled to end in five minutes. Through discussion, the group members decided that they shared a commitment to focus on the bottom quartile of students this school year but needed to work further on framing their question and research plan. Adam agreed to look through his book of protocols and find one that might help accomplish this goal at their next meeting.

In this story, Marion was well on her way to beginning the process of inquiry with five teachers at her side. Just as Marion began her inquiry journey by exploring possibilities for her research questions, you will begin question exploration in Chapter 2—“The Passions That Drive Your Journey: Finding a Wondering.”

CHAPTER 1 EXERCISES

1. Taking some time to reflect on who you are or plan to be as a principal is a critical first step in becoming an inquirer. To begin this process, complete the following open-ended sentences and share your responses with a principal colleague, your lead team, a few trusted teachers, or even a member of your own family. If you are not yet a principal, project into the future and answer these questions as if you were the principal in the school in which you are currently working as a teacher or assistant administrator. After completing these sentences, consider what you have discovered about yourself as a principal and how these discoveries might lead to your first inquiry.

Open-Ended Sentence Completion Activity

My greatest accomplishment as a principal is _____
_____.

One thing I wish I could change about my school is _____
_____.

One thing I'd like to learn to do better as a principal is _____
_____.

One thing my faculty can do to make me happy is _____
_____.

If I were forced to leave the principalship tomorrow, three things I would most want my faculty to say about me:

1. _____.

2. _____.

3. _____.

What the phrase "principal as inquirer" means to me: _____
_____.

2. As you embark on your inquiry journey, you will be doing a lot of thinking about what you want to study and how to best study it! A wonderful way to think about your inquiry is to write. Noted educational ethnographer Harry Wolcott (1990) goes as far as to state that writing