Chapter 1

Teacher inquiry

A defining feature of professional practice

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Tony and a colleague recently submitted a self-study manuscript (an analysis of two faculty members inquiring into their use of technology) to a journal that was recommended as a viable outlet for their research. After almost a year, the manuscript was returned with an invitation to resubmit with revisions. Although the editor did not indicate any difficulty he had with self-study manuscripts, the reviewers certainly did; for example, one wrote:

> These experiences are very individualistic and may or may not be generalizable to broader populations of teacher educators. (Manuscript review, personal communication, April 15, 2002)

This refrain, familiar perhaps to others who inquire into their own practice and seek to share those inquiries with a wider audience, represents a range of issues that confront those who engage in teacher inquiry. While some of our colleagues find it difficult to appreciate teacher inquiry as a legitimate form of research, this form of inquiry is increasingly being recognized by a broad spectrum of educators who constitute our professional communities (Clarke 2001). Teacher inquiry – or teacher research as it is sometimes known – has made significant inroads at local, national, and international levels. Indeed, one such forum, the International Conference on Teacher Research, now in its tenth year, was the impetus for the collection of papers that appear in this text. The emergence of a vibrant and extensive teacher inquiry literature not only attests to its importance for understanding the complex world of schooling but supports our contention that it is one of the defining features that distinguishes teaching as a form of professional practice and not as labour or technical work.

What is professional practice?

There are many definitions of professional practice. Key dimensions common to all definitions include: specialized knowledge, intensive preparation, a code of conduct, an emphasis on continued learning, and the

rendering of a public service (Brown 2001; Sachs 1997; Sykes 1990). Only in recent times has the practice of teaching been considered a profession. Important to our discussion here is the concept of "continued learning" and its emergence in teaching.

Hargreaves (2000) charts four distinct phases over the past 100 years that illuminate the development of teaching as a profession: pre-professional, autonomous professional, collaborative professional, and the post-modern professional. In the first two phases teachers are primarily technicians in the classroom. In the first phase teachers follow system-wide directives about particular teaching practices, and in the second phase, although given greater authority to select from among particular pedagogical strategies, teacher practices are carefully prescribed by those in positions of higher authority (superintendents of instruction, etc.). In both instances curriculum is "a given" with little discretionary license on the part of the teacher to negotiate or modify it.

In phases three and four we witness the emergence of teacher inquiry as an element of teaching practice where recognition of personal practical knowledge (Connelly and Clandinin 1985) signals a shift in our appreciation of how teachers continue to learn about their practice and the role that inquiry plays in curricula and pedagogical decisions: "teachers often learn best in their own professional communities … on-site, built into ongoing relationships … ." (Hargreaves 2000: 165) In the third phase, collaboration among teachers enables authentic professional communities to develop in schools that investigate and respond to local problems and issues. In the fourth phase, the post-modern phase characterized by a recognition of complexity and uncertainty, Hargreaves argues that now more than ever it is imperative for teachers to engage in systematic and sustained inquiry that "lifts teachers out of the pre-professional prejudice that only practice makes perfect." (p. 167) Failure to do this, Hargreaves cautions, will result in deprofessionalization forces wresting control of curricula and pedagogical practices from teachers (witness recent calls for "centralized curricula, and testing regimes," Hargreaves 2000: 168).

While Hargreaves warns of the political agenda that underlies any formalized standards for a profession, nonetheless, there is almost universal agreement that inquiry and reflection in and on practice are essential elements of the teaching profession. For example, in the United States, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards defines a teacher as one who is able to "analyze classroom interactions, student work products, their own actions and plans in order to reflect on their practice and continually renew and reconstruct their goals and strategies." (NBPTS 2002) In England, the General Teaching Council regards professional teachers as those who "continually reflect on their own practice, improve their skills, and deepen their knowledge." (GTC 2002) The Australian College of Educators argues that it is incumbent upon members of the teaching

profession to be "reflective practitioners … committed to their own professional development: seeking to deepen their knowledge, sharpen their judgment, expand their teaching repertoire, and to adapt their teaching to educationally sound developments arising from authentic research and scholarship." (Brock 2000: 11)

In short, for teaching to assume the mantle of a profession a central tenet of that practice is the ability and willingness of its members to inquire into their own practice; into ways of improving and developing their practice consistent with the unique contexts in which they work and with an appreciation of current trends in education. Most of the chapters in this book, particularly in the first section on Enacting Teacher Research in Practice Settings, exemplify this focus on the improvement of practice through systematic inquiry – a focus strongly supported by Bullough and Pinnegar (2001).

What is teacher inquiry?

> Teacher inquiry is … a generally agreed upon set of insider research practices that promote teachers taking a close, critical look at their teaching and the academic and social development of their students. … Although known by many names – teacher research, action research, practitioner research, insider research – teacher inquiry involves classroom teachers in a cycle of inquiry, reflection, and action. In this cycle, teachers question common practice, approach problems from new perspectives, consider research and evidence to propose new solutions, implement these solutions, and evaluate the results, starting the cycle anew. (Lewison, in press)

As Lewison (in press) indicates, teacher inquiry is *research*. We emphasize the word research to deliberately signal that self-study in teaching is a systematic and rigorous process designed to explore and extend teacher knowledge (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). The word research here is consistent with the type of activities that Hargreaves uses to delineate between the pre-professional and professional phases in the history of teaching.

As the chapters in this text reveal, teacher inquiry takes on many forms and includes practitioners at all levels of the educational system. Underlying all forms, is the analysis of one's own practice with all the attendant challenges and celebrations associated with such scrutiny. It is encouraging to see these issues, prominent in the current literature, for example, Pritchard's (2002) and Zeni's (2001) analyses of ethical issues in teacher inquiry, taken up in a variety of forms by the authors within this text. Teacher inquiry is also an active enterprise with outcomes more often represented as *teacher knowing* (learning that is in a state of evolution) rather

than *teacher knowledge* (implying learning that is more fixed and stable). This shift represents a further movement towards Hargreaves' post-modern professional. It is no coincidence that paralleling the emergence of teacher inquiry as a legitimate form of research, is the development of richer and more varied representational forms that capture the essence of teacher inquiries; forms that were unheard of in the educational literature 25 years ago. This text captures a sampling of those forms, some more established and others more exploratory. In fact, some of these forms, drawing upon the uses of new digital tools and media, are extremely difficult to represent in a text format.

Mindful of Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1993) admonishment against shuttered insularity within teacher inquiry communities, this text also provides an opportunity for comparison and cross-referencing by presenting cases, methods, models, and emergent issues from an international community of educators. This comparative dimension is particularly important as teacher inquiry – largely a case-study literature – requires peer review, commentary, and critique to ensure substantive development and contribution for those engaged in the investigations and for the members of the broader professional community to which they belong. As announced at the beginning of this chapter, the issues surrounding the public credibility and publishing of this work remain problematic. A crucial aspect of this public credibility is negotiating the tension between one's own practice and the more public understanding of that practice. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), in their important article on establishing quality criteria or guidelines in self-study research, nicely capture this tension:

> Quality self-study research requires that the researcher negotiate a particularly sensitive balance between biography and history … such study does not focus on the self per se but on the space between self and the practice engaged in. There is always a tension between those two elements, self and the arena of practice, between self in relation to practice and the others who share the practice setting.
>
> (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001: 15)

Inquiry is embedded in *professional* practice

Some authors highlighting the interesting tension that exists between practice and inquiry suggest that the former sometimes constrains the latter. For example, Sachs (1997) acknowledges that teacher inquiry is a hallmark of professional practice but, following Fullan (1993), worries that at times teachers become so preoccupied with pupil learning that they often neglect their own learning and therefore diminish their standing as professionals:

> One of the hallmarks of being identified externally as a professional is to continue learning throughout a career, deepening knowledge, skill judgment, staying abreast of important developments in the field and experimenting with innovations that promise improvements in practice (Sykes, 1990). Here lies one of the paradoxes for teacher professionalism for as Fullan (1993) notes, as a profession, we are not a learning profession. While student learning is a goal, often the continuing learning of teachers is overlooked. While continuous learning and the improvement of our practice should be at the core of teacher professionalism in many instances this is not so. (Sachs 1997: 7)

We share this concern but believe there is an important distinction between a preoccupation with "student learning" (which includes class scheduling, record keeping, and report writing) and a preoccupation with "how students learn." Schön (1988), among others, argues that the latter is the cornerstone of professional practice. Further, a preoccupation with how students learn is a necessary precursor to being curious about one's own practice. When reframed in terms of "how students learn," inquiry is embedded in practice and teacher learning as a natural (unavoidable?) outcome. This is an important distinction for us. In contrast, we suggest that when a teacher ceases to be inquisitive about his or her practice – inquisitive about how students learn – then his or her practice ceases to be professional. Without inquiry practice becomes perfunctory and routinized.

In the chapters that follow, the authors demonstrate how inquiry is embedded in professional practice. They share insights about how their inquiries are enacted, the methods and models they use, and the issues that emerge from their inquiries. Teacher inquiry is carried out in the "indeterminate, swampy zones of practice" (Schön 1987: 3) and benefits from the support of colleagues engaged in similar enterprises and the scrutiny of the wider educational community. The accounts confirm Hamilton and Pinnegar's (1998) observation that "the multilayered, critically imbued, reality-laden world is the text of the self-study scholars." (Hamilton and Pinnegar 1998: 235) At times provocative, and at other times contemplative, this collection of writing provides an important resource for the teaching profession and illustrates the level of scholarship that this genre of inquiry generates and sustains within our profession.

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