Teacher Inquiry: By Any Other Name

1. Teacher Inquiry

Teacher inquiry is a form of professional development that enables, enriches, and extends a teacher’s understanding of their professional practice. As such, teacher inquiry is knowledge generation about one’s practice. There is general consensus that there are three elements to teacher inquiry. The first is the ability to make explicit the particulars of one’s practice relative the inquiry being undertaken. Second is the ability to make sense of those elements in light of experience and knowledge towards new understandings about one’s practice. Finally, it is important to make public those understandings so that they can be part of a larger conversation about professional practice that prompts further refinement and reflection of practice. These elements are presented as distinct from one another in this chapter but in reality they overlap and unfold in unexpected ways with each interacting and informing the other. Although difficult to visualize, one depiction of this interaction that comes close is a Mobius strip (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Teacher Inquiry: Make sense, make explicit, and make public. (Thanks to Kieran Forde for suggesting this image.)
It is challenging for any abstraction to fully capture the complexity of practice; for example, not all teacher inquiries unfold in a linear fashion. Also, while there might be a nominal start and end point to a particular inquiry, in truth the idea that sparks a particular inquiry likely has traces that reach back in time and continues to evolve into other questions well after the initial inquiry concludes.

1.1 Make Explicit
The starting point for most teacher inquiry studies is an attempt to make explicit an aspect or aspects of practice that surprise, intrigue or challenge us in our daily work as teachers. These aspects are often embedded in stories or narratives of practice. As teachers, we have many stories that accumulate over time. Some stories stick in our mind or pique our curiosity more so than others. Often we can’t quite make sense of them in the immediate retelling of the story after the event. However, there is often a nugget within the story that prompts further thinking. In this sense, making explicit our stories of practice is an important first step in attempting to better understand and makes sense of our practice. It is only when we articulate and make explicit aspects of our practice that our stories are available for closer scrutiny. One of the stories from my practice is about Lara, a Year 10 student at East Doncaster High School in Australia.

One Monday morning Lara ran up to me in the courtyard during recess and asked excitedly: “Mr. Clarke, Mr. Clarke, did you hear about the contest? Can we enter it?” I had taught Lara a few years previously but hadn’t had a lot of contact with her since then. So her sudden approach and exclamation took me by surprise. The competition was sponsored by a local radio station and the school with the greatest number of entries would win a live concert at the school by the Australia’s most popular rock band at that time, the Angels. After several discussions with the school administration and my teaching colleagues my response to Lara’s question was “Yes.”

The above paragraph is an excerpt from my attempt to use teacher inquiry to better understand and make sense of this story in light of my teaching practice (Clarke, 2014).
Prior to framing this as a teacher inquiry, I had shared this story of the Angels performing at our school many times with colleagues, friends, and other students after the concert but I always told it as a story about the Angels performing at our school. However, after repeated retelling I became increasingly curious about Lara’s role in the story. As a result, when I deliberately began to make explicit the key details about this story, its essence shifted and I found myself asking: What if I had said “No” to Lara? The challenge at this point was to make sense of this question in terms of my practice as a teacher at East Doncaster High School.

1.2 Make Sense
Making sense of one’s practice means analyzing or interrogating more fully that which has been made explicit. This move—from identification to interpretation—represents a second important element of teacher inquiry. To appreciate the significance of this shift, it is helpful to understand the emergence of teacher inquiry within the broader context of educational research over time, in particular, in relation to four distinct trends: (1) research on pupils, (2) research on teachers, (3) research with teachers, and (4) research by teachers (Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Four trends in educational research over time](image-url)
The first trend is associated with a natural science approach to educational research that was prevalent in the 1950s. Teacher education research at this time was imbued with a strong cognitive psychology approach to student learning (e.g., a focus on I.Q. tests, knowledge retention, knowledge transfer). Research at this time was characterized by attempts to isolate elements of learning into discrete units so that they could be the focus of intensive statistical analysis. This was called experimental research. While it had an impact on education, it is generally regarded as having a relatively minor influence on teaching and learning. A second trend emerged in the late 1960s and coincided with a dramatic political and public shift in interest in education. Events such as Sputnik suddenly brought a renewed interest in education, particularly in North America. As a result, educational researchers were forced to rethink their approach to research as well as expanding the focus of that research from solely student learning to teacher actions (Erickson, 1986). Still, many of these experimental and quasi-experimental efforts were based upon linear causal models that implied that professional practice could be regarded as the field of theoretical application (Connelly and Clandinin, 1987), and further, that the knowledge, skills, and competencies required by teachers could be precisely specified in advance (Zeichner, 1987). Much of the process-product, teacher effectiveness, and teacher competency research was based upon a technical rational approach to teaching and learning (Shulman, 1981; Boydell, 1986).

The next trend became fully developed in the 1980s. As dissatisfaction with a technical rational approach to education became more widespread, alternative research methods emerged (Houston, Haberman, & Sikula, 1989). It was during these years that Zeichner and others sought approval by the American Educational Research Association (the largest educational research association in North America) for a Research Division specifically devoted to teacher education (Zeichner, 1998). The AERA governing body rejected their proposal on the basis that there was insufficient scholarship in the field of teacher education to warrant such a Division. However, the governing body felt that if the proposal was to include the ‘study of teaching’ as well as the ‘study of teacher education’ then there were sufficient grounds for the establishment of a new Division.
As a result a new division called “Teaching and Teacher Education” (Division K) was created within AERA in 1984. Division K, with its broader mandate, prompted a shift from research on teachers (which, among other things, was largely objective analyses of teaching actions) to research with teachers (which acknowledged the legitimacy of more subjective analyses of teaching practice) with a corresponding increase in the use of more qualitative research methods.

Finally, the early 1990s saw a further evolution of educational research to include inquiries ‘by teachers.’ Evidence of this fourth trend can be found in special theme issues in professional journals, for example, volume 22, issue 3, of Teacher Education Quarterly and the development of special interest groups (SIG) such as the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) at AERA. More significantly, an even broader range of research methods was now deemed legitimate in education (e.g., the use of case study research for a Ph.D. degree in faculties of education was allowed for the first time in many North American universities). The significance of the fourth trend was that it opened up a colour fan of possibilities for teacher inquiry in the new millennium (Tidwell, Heston, & Fitzgerald, 2009) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: A colour fan of possibilities for teacher inquiry
It is worth noting at this point that although this trend was only formally recognized within academia in the 1990s, it confirmed the early writings of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), one of the earliest advocates of teacher inquiry. This long overdue recognition of Stenhouse’s pioneering work confirms, even to this day, the glacial pace of innovation within the academy (Diamond, 2006).

The colour fan of possibilities depicted above lists fifteen forms of teacher inquiry. This is not an exhaustive or definitive list. However, each possibility provides a springboard for making sense of practice. Each form provides guidance and direction for advancing various teacher inquiries. Some forms require the collection of additional information or data. Others draw on existing sources (e.g., journals, artifacts, memories). The choice of form most appropriate for a particularly inquiry is not always obvious at the outset and it may take some time before finding the most suitable form for the questions one asks and the claims one wishes to make. In my case, it took some time for Lara’s story to land on narrative inquiry as the most appropriate form for my teacher inquiry.

Narrative inquiry demands that I set the stage and paint the backdrop to portray as vividly as possible the essence of the key elements of the story. Narrative inquiry demands that I use writing as a way to refine and reflect upon my inquiry. When writing Lara’s story, I had to go beyond my own local knowledge and experience and engage in the literature on teaching and learning. As a result I was better able to situate my inquiry and draw upon a frame for making sense of that inquiry. The outcome of these deliberations was an acknowledgement that I was teaching students, not subjects (Moje, 1996; Palmer, 1997; Sparks and Pole, 2019); a maxim that is old as teaching itself but my analysis of Lara’s story drove this home for me. This realization was reinforced by Fenstermacher’s (1992) distinction between ‘a system of schooling’ and ‘an educative agenda.’ This distinction highlights the difference between being an educator and being a teacher. The development of my inquiry was very much a result of the opportunity to share my evolving understandings with others, bringing us to the third element of teacher inquiry.
1.3 Make Public

For our investigations to be considered teacher inquiry, the outcomes need to be shared with knowledgeable others, that is, the emerging results of our inquiries begin to move from the private to the public domain. As noted at the outset, teacher inquiry is about knowledge generation. LaBosekey (2004) argues that an important part of any knowledge generation is that “we formalize our work and make it available to our professional community” (p. 860). Further, as Davis, Sumara, and Simmt (2003) remind us, the intelligence of the group is always greater than the intelligence of the individual.

The use of the phrase ‘knowledgeable others’ is deliberate here. Knowledgeable others might include our colleagues in the next classroom. It might include members of a study group within our school. It might include teachers attending a district workshop. It could also include readers of a teacher magazine or professional journal where our work is published. All these are ways of making public our teacher inquiries. As such, they provide opportunities for those with a knowledge of teaching to react and respond to our work which, in turn, presents opportunities to extend and further our own and the profession’s understanding of practice.

By sharing Lara’s story with knowledgeable others, I was moving my understandings of teaching and learning from the private to the public domain. In doing so, I was opening myself (and my practice) up to scrutiny. I was consequently subjecting myself to the ‘terror’ inherent in interrogating one’s practice! However, making my story public by sharing with knowledgeable others and listening to their feedback was absolutely critical to the new understandings that I gained about my practice. It helped me to think more deeply about why I do what I do as an educator.

Lara’s story as a form of teacher inquiry began when I first shared fragments of the story in conversation with a small study group who were exploring a teacher’s ‘inner work’ and its role in successful teaching practice (Cohen & Bai, 2012). The group asked a number of questions about the story and encouraged me to capture it more fully in written
form. After much to-ing and fro-ing, I decided on narrative inquiry as the most appropriate form for my inquiry. When my writing was sufficiently coherent, I shared Lara’s story with other teachers and colleagues during local workshops and then later at provincial conferences. The feedback I received on these occasions prompted further analysis and refinement of the story (Clarke, 2014).

As noted above, narrative inquiry is one of a range possibilities for teacher inquiry. In the section that follows, a summary of fifteen other forms is provided as a stepping stone for thinking further about teacher inquiry as a form of professional development in practice settings.

2. A Colour Fan of Possibilities

The colour fan of possibilities depicted above lists various forms of teacher inquiry that have been defined and used in educational research. As such they provide substantive examples of how teacher inquiry has been taken up by practitioners. There are undoubtedly other forms of teacher inquiry that are being explored at the present time and will at some point become part of the educational research lexicon. A quick perusal of the fifteen forms suggests some overlap between forms and, in some cases, only very slight or subtle shades of difference. For example, narrative inquiry and pedagogical narration share story telling as a central component of the inquiry process. Sometimes teacher inquirers use variations of 15 forms or combine them with other social science practices to create a distinct approach for their context. For example, Participatory Action Research (MacDonald, 2012) is a combination of action research and a ‘Communities of Practice’ (CoP) (Lave & Wegner, 1991) approach to teacher inquiry requiring a commitment to ongoing participation. Some forms are difficult to neatly categorize because of their broad ambit (e.g., Scholarship of Teaching and Learning or SoTL). Nonetheless, each form provides teachers with a way of advancing their understanding of practice. The descriptions provided here are meant as starting points for exploring possible forms of teacher inquiry that can be taken up in educational settings.
2.1 Action Research (AR) … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘action’
Action research, as the name implies, places a strong emphasis on ‘action.’ In particular, the anticipated outcome of action research is a change in one’s practice. Action research is a cyclical process with four distinct phases per cycle: plan, act, observe, and reflect. The outcomes from one cycle are used as the basis for continued exploration of practice in the following cycle. Thus, each cycle leads to new understandings of practice. One of the greatest appeals of action research is tangible improvement in practice with direct benefits for both the teacher and the students. One of the earliest attempts to articulate action research as a form of inquiry was by Lewin (1946). Other useful references for AR include:


2.2 Quality Teaching Rounds (QTR) … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘rounds’
Quality Teaching Rounds (QTR) is a recent Australian initiative and occurs within the context of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). QTR is based on series of instructional rounds focused on a particular aspect of pedagogy as decided by the PLC. QTR has echoes of hospital teaching rounds used in medicine where the immediacy of the action setting is the crucible for learning. An instructional round is held over the course of a single day and involves reading a text or related article, an observation of a lesson taught by one of the teachers from the group, and “a rigorous diagnostic professional conversation” (Gore et al., 2017, p. 100) following the lesson. Each member of the group teaches at least one lesson as part of the QTR and the members stay together for an entire set of rounds. A key characteristic of QTR is the intense juxtapositioning of literature, observation, and conversation. Useful references for QTR include:


### 2.3 Lesson Study … is distinguished by its an emphasis on ‘design’

Lesson Study (‘jugyou kenkyuu’) originated in Japan in the 1990s. It is teacher-led inquiry where a small group of teachers collectively identify an aspect of a lesson (e.g., classroom management or climate, teaching strategies, etc.) that they are seeking to better understand or improve through the development of more appropriate lesson design. They plan, teach, observe, and reflect upon the same “research lesson” (Fernandez, 2002, 394) as taught by various (but not necessarily all) members of the group. Thus, lesson design and reteaching of the same lesson are central to lesson study. Useful references for lesson study include:

2.4 Learning Study … is distinguished by its emphasis on the ‘object of learning’

Learning study originated in Hong Kong and is similar to lesson study in many ways. However, a distinguishing feature is that it always takes the ‘object of learning’ as its starting point (i.e., what is to be learned). Further, learning study is always grounded in a theory of learning. To date, proponents of learning study typically use variation theory (Martin, 2015), which has its basis in phenomenography (Martin 1986). Proponents of variation theory contend that learning results from the experience of difference, and that difference is what allows learners to discern the critical features of a particular phenomenon. Runesson (2015) argues that, “variation theory synthesized with other theories might contribute to a further development of learning study” (e.g., cultural historical activity theory or CHAT).

Useful references for learning study include:


2.5 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) … is distinguished by its emphasis on the turn to ‘scholarship’

SoTL is a form of inquiry into practice undertaken by college and university professors in higher education. SoTL researchers view classrooms and related university learning spaces (such as labs, tutorials, field experiences) as sites for inquiry into practice. SoTL also encompasses other forms of inquiry into practice such as the Scholarship of Curriculum Practice (SoCP) and the Scholarship of Educational Leadership (SoEL). SoTL emphasizes the difference between *scholarly approaches* to teaching and learning and the *scholarship* of teaching and learning in Higher Education (Richlin, 2001). SoTL
practitioners often begin with investigation methods consistent with the signature pedagogies in their academic disciplines and then expand beyond those methods over time and as appropriate. Not all SoTL inquiries fall strictly within the definition of teacher inquiry, however the majority do. Useful SoTL references include:


2.6 Appreciative Inquiry (AI) … is distinguished by its initial emphasis on ‘what works’

In stark contrast to many approaches to teacher inquiry that start by identifying an issue, problem or challenge, AI begins by articulating “what’s working” (Kung, Giles, and Hagan, 2013, p. 3) in one’s practice. Practitioners then use that as the starting point and platform for their inquiries into practice. Because of this very distinct approach to teacher inquiry, AI is referred to as a strengths-based, positive approach to change. AI is often associated with system level change within organizations but the principles of AI are equally applicable to individual classroom contexts. AI typically has four stages that practitioners move through during their inquiries: discovery, dream, design, and destiny. The beginnings of appreciative inquiry can be traced back to the early work of Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987). Useful references for AI include:


2.7 Self-study … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘self’

Self-study as a form of educational research came to prominence in the 1990s when a group of teacher educators in colleges and universities began to deliberately explore, critique, and publish inquiries about their teaching practices (Loughran, 2004). In 1994, the American Educational Research Association (AERA)—arguably the largest association of educational researchers in North America—permitted these professors to establish a Special Interest Group (SIG) within AERA. The SIG was called as Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP). S-STEP has since developed forums, journals, and international handbooks to support this form of teacher inquiry. Today, the ripple effect of S-STEP is felt across all levels of education as self-study moved from the shadows of academia into the full sunlight of legitimate educational research.

The focus of self-study is the ‘self.’ In the beginning the ‘self’ for S-STEP practitioners was understood to be the individual. However, debates quickly arose within S-STEP about what constituted the unit of analysis for the ‘self.’ For example, could a science department using the principles of S-STEP conduct a self-study where the ‘self’ was the department? Subsequent S-STEP studies suggest that this is possible. Finally, proponents of self-study have steadfastly held to the term self-study to describe their inquiries while drawing upon a multitude of approaches and strategies for those inquiries. Useful references for self-study include:


**2.8 Insider Research … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘positionality’**

Insider research is the analysis of practice from the unique perspective of someone from ‘inside’ the practice. As an insider, the practitioner possesses intimate knowledge of the practice under study. Thus positionality is an important aspect of insider research:

Positionality refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group. The position adopted by a researcher affects every phase of the research process, from the way the question or problem is initially constructed, designed and conducted to how others are invited to participate, the ways in which knowledge is constructed and acted on and, finally, the ways in which outcomes are disseminated and published. (Rowe, 2014, p.628)

Further, insider knowledge may differ from one insider to another insider within the same practice. Thus, the imperative for those engaged in insider research is that “you have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all” (Hall, 1990, p. 18).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) were among the first to write about insider research as a form of teacher inquiry. Other useful references include:


2.9 Narrative Inquiry … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘story’

Narrative inquiry is the study of experience interpreted by and through stories of practice. For Connelly and Clandinin (1990), "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives" (p. 2). Stories embody knowledge accumulated and experience gained over time. Narrative inquiry is one way of making sense of that knowledge and experience. In the process of telling a story, the teacher inquirer sets the stage and paints the landscape as vividly as possible to portray the essence of the event(s) that are the focus of the inquiry. The inquirer emphasizes some elements and relegates others to background colour. Each of these decisions requires one to pause, think, and then act—that is, to make judgments about what is important and relevant to the story as it unfolds. Useful references for narrative inquiry include:


2.10 Pedagogical Narration … is distinguished by its use of ‘multimedia’

Pedagogical Narration is the systematic documentation of teaching practice through multimedia, including text, images, and artifacts. Using multimedia to make learning visible emerged in the late 1970s within the context of early childhood settings, in particular, Reggio Emilia (Giudici, Rinaldi, Krechevsky, Barchi, Gardner, & Filippini,
Pedagogical narration allows for the assemblage of one’s practice in ways that are not always possible in more traditional forms of documentation. This assemblage provides alternative ways of seeing and noticing that practice, leading to new insights and understandings. Pedagogical narration is not a bulletin board of disconnected artifacts. Rather it is deliberate and intentional in terms of inviting curiosity, wonder, and engagement. As Browne, Cutler, DeBates, Gilkerson, and Stremmel (2010) argue, “when we document children’s learning, we consider and reflect on what the children may be thinking, doing, and/or learning and then apply these insights to the unique manner of teaching them” (p. 49). Thus, pedagogical narration has the potential to make both children and teachers’ learning visible. Useful references for pedagogical narration include:


2.11 Autobiography … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘pattern’

Autobiography provides the opportunity to explore and understand “the self” over time. It is argued that an understanding of oneself is critical in any attempt to understand others and the world about us (Böckler, Herrmann, Trautwein, Holmes, & Singer, 2017). Autobiography is a highly personal endeavor: “it is … simultaneously historical record and literary artifact, psychological case history and spiritual confession, didactic essay and ideological testament,” (Stone, 1981, p. 80). Thus, what one includes and why it is included are all ‘in play’ in autobiographical account. Even the veracity of the
autobiographical accounts may not be confirmed because they are stories written by oneself about oneself:

Autobiography is not the story of a life; it is the recreation or the discovery of one. In writing of experience, we discover what it was, and in the writing create the pattern we seem to have lived. Simply put, autobiography is a reckoning.

(Heilbrun, 1995, p. xvii)

Autobiographies are not always linear in their construction and it is the patterns that emerge that say more about one’s practice than the fullness of the account itself. Useful references for autobiography include:


2.12 Autoethnography … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘context’

Autoethnography is similar to autobiography but differs in that it places an emphasis on understanding the self within the context in which one is embedded. Mishler’s (1979) rhetorical question: “Meaning in context: Is there any other kind?” speaks to the importance of context in making sense of who we are and what we do as educators. Thus, for autoethnographers, the self is part of a larger picture. Denshire (2014) argues that autoethnographic accounts “can function as something of a corrective” (p. 833) to highly personalized and therefore potentially decontextualized accounts of practice. In this sense, autoethnographic writing is a relational endeavor seeking to understand one’s practice in light of the political, social, and cultural contexts in which it is embedded. Useful references for autoethnography include:
2.13 Life History … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘temporality’

Those who take up life history as a research method have a particular interest in understanding the connection between people, places and events over time. Thus, temporality is central life history. Bullough and Gitlin (1995) argue that “To know the past is to know oneself as an individual and as a representative of a socio-historical moment in time; like others each person is a victim, vehicle, and ultimately a resolution of a culture’s dilemmas. (p. 25). As with any historical account, there is the expectation that life history is based and draws upon on reliable and verifiable sources. For Watson and Watson-Franke (1985) life history is “any retrospective account by the individual of his life in whole or in part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person’ (p. 2). And by extension, traditionally, a life history is written by somebody other than the person whose history is being written. It is at this point that Fitzpatrick’s (2011) question becomes relevant: “Can You Write a History of Yourself? Although Fitzpatrick found this difficult to do (she made the shift to autobiography), Samaras, Hicks, and Berger (2004) argue that:

Personal history self-study is increasingly becoming an essential methodology
towards teacher educators’ personal and professional growth and especially to improving their teaching practice and impacting their students’ learning. Through a personal history self-study approach, professors and their students are able to reconstruct significant life events to inform them of their professional identity formation and to help them make meaning of their pedagogy and the connections of their practice to theory. (p. 905)

Useful references for life history include:


### 2.14 Memoir … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘memory’

Memoir draws on a variety of elements in making sense of one’s practice. Perhaps its most defining characteristic is the use of memory. Keightley (2010) notes: “The turn to memory in social research enables the role of the past in the present to be explored. … Not simply concerned with the past, memory studies are concerned with the ways memories respond to the demands of current experience and future desires …” (p. 67). One reason for this response is that, as humans, we try to overcome cognitive dissonance and therefore attempt to align our emotions, behaviours, and practices in terms of what we remember (Ghalipour, 2017). Therefore, memoirs are more reflective than reportorial; they reveal as much about feelings as they do about facts (Radden, & Varga, 2013). Useful references for memoir include:
2.15 Portraiture … is distinguished by its emphasis on ‘aesthetics’

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argue that portraiture “blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience (p. xv). The portraitist combines scientific aspects of inquiry through systematic use of observation, interviews, and other forms of data collection to describe phenomena, while simultaneously capturing the beauty and aesthetic properties of phenomena (Quigley, Trauth-Nareb, & Beeman-Cadwallader, 2015, p. 21). This form teacher inquiry is perhaps the most expressive, possibly artistic, of all the forms discussed thus far. The work of Carl Leggo (2014), a renowned educator and poet, exemplifies this sort of ‘life writing’:

I grew up in a working-class home where few photographs were taken. It was too expensive to pay for film and developing. So, the entire collection of photos from my childhood is approximately fifty images. This is the whole of a working class family archive. Therefore, the school photos of elementary school are especially significant because they are a part of a small collection. I don’t have photos of high school classes. Most of the photos are black and white, and most are blurry or faded. Nevertheless, when I look at the photos, I am struck by the still seriousness in so many of the images. Like Barthes (1977), I see in these images something irreducible in my childhood: “everything which is still in me, by fits and starts” is “in the child” (p. 22). Above all, I see fear in the face of the child in so many of the
photos. (p. 63)

Useful references for portraiture include:


All of the above forms of teacher inquiry require practitioners to make explicit, make sense, and then make public their explorations of practice. Those explorations can include the personal, the professional, or both, in various measures. The outcomes contribute to one’s understandings of practice and encourage all of us to think more deeply about why we do what we do. Further, the outcomes advance understandings of the profession where both teachers and students are the beneficiaries.

3. Professional Practice: What’s Inquiry Got To Do With It?

To be a member of a profession it is incumbent upon practitioners to meet a number of expectations. For example, a professional needs to meet the qualifications stipulated for entry into a profession, abide by the ethical principles developed by the profession, and be accountable to a regulatory body of the profession. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, professionals must always be knowledgeable about the latest developments in their field and, in turn, ensure that that knowledge becomes a part of and embedded in their daily work. In short, they must be curious, inquisitive, and generative in sustaining and maintaining their professional practice. Failure to do so means that their practice becomes perfunctory, routinized, or even duplicative.
Practice becomes perfunctory when we lose interest in why we do what we do. Our practice becomes routinized when we simply do tomorrow exactly what we did today regardless of the contexts or circumstances in which we find ourselves; we become automatons. Our practice becomes duplicative when we surrender our agency as professionals and mindlessly copy or mimic what others do. When our practice is perfunctory, routinized, or duplicative it becomes labour or technical work. Labourers follow a predetermined plan of action provided to them by others in order to achieve a particular goal. Technicians have the opportunity to choose a plan of action from among a set of predetermined plans provided for them in order to achieve a particular goal. Professionals differ from labourers or technicians in that they have the freedom to a plan their own course of action to achieve a particular goal. For example, the Ministry of Education sets out particular goals in a curriculum document but teachers have freedom to develop their own plans of action for implementing that curriculum in their classrooms. As noted above, exercising that right requires teachers to be curious, inquisitive of and generative in the daily enactment of their professional practice. These dispositions are embedded in professional standards for teachers in most jurisdictions throughout the world. For example, in the United States, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) notes that teachers as professionals:

serve as paradigms of lifelong learning and achievement. … Moreover, they epitomize the intellectual capacities they foster: the ability to reason carefully, consider multiple perspectives, question received wisdom, adopt an inquiry-based approach, solve problems, and persevere. In all aspects of their action and demeanor, accomplished teachers convey the significance of reflection and learning … (NBPTS, p. 33)

Similarly, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), which is responsible for establishing the standards for teaching in Australia, stipulates that it is the responsibility of all teachers to “identify their own learning needs and analyze, evaluate and expand their professional learning both collegially and individually” (AITSL, 2018, p. 5). In sum, teacher inquiry—making explicit, making sense, and making public—is
what provokes, nourishes, and advances deeper understandings and broader conceptualization of teaching and learning in the profession. In sum, inquiry is a defining feature of professional practice.

References


