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Inquiry-Minded District Leaders Evaluation as Inquiry, Inquiry as Practice

Sharon F. Rallis
Matthew Militello

CHAPTER 14

Inquiry-Minded District Leaders

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Introduction

The term *accountability* dominates the vocabulary of educators: Schools are accountable to demonstrate annual yearly progress, leaders are accountable to hire and retain qualified teachers and to provide instructional leadership; and teachers are accountable to ensure that all students meet standards. Yet whether all stakeholders share common understandings of what it means to be accountable is doubtful. This narrow focus on outcomes over instruction has created normative bureaucratic frameworks and directive stand-and-deliver professional development that prevents meaningful and real accountability (O'Day, 2002). Accountability does not have to imply coercion or imposition of external standards or measures. To be accountable means to be obligated to explain one's actions and to demonstrate effectiveness—and to accept responsibility for reaching a desired outcome (see Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997; O'Day, 2002; Rallis & MacMullen, 2000). Accountability relies on inquiry with feedback that links performance with results, inquiry that looks inside the school and classroom where instruction occurs and questions the practices, their origins, their supports, and their impact on student learning. Internalizing accountability as a professional responsibility turns processes and outcomes into ones the professionals can control. To be accountable, educators must engage in ongoing iterative evaluation. They must be inquiry-minded.

The dominance of accountability crosses national borders. Accountability is a global phenomenon both because it is everywhere and because the forces of globalization are changing schools. Scare resources; issues of migration, immigration, and refugees; along with a globalized market economy are influencing national policy and local practices. Students throughout the world come to school bringing greater diversity and greater needs than ever before, and

more and greater demands are put on them. Reactions to these challenges have been legislative in nature and focused on outcomes. For example, the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000 emphasized the improvement of "all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills" (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2000, p. 8).

In the United States, federal mandates via No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have directed educators away from an evaluation process that considers inputs and inquiry toward a narrow emphasis on student achievement outcome measures. This accountability package, in part a response to global forces, raises the stakes for student performance (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The policy, however, ignores the multiple and varying local contexts. The result is a rush to disjointed and ambiguous implementation activities (e.g., overuse of waivers in urban settings to meet the "highly qualified teacher in every subject" mandate). On an international level, a similar phenomenon is occurring; for example, the rush to implement policies that increase access for all students has led to overcrowded classrooms with unqualified instructors (Association for the Development of Education in Africa, 2003; Independent Evaluation Group, 2006; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2005). As a consequence of this external pressure, educational organizations throughout the world respond with command-oriented implementation (to say/show that it is being done) (Rowan, 1990), and leaders engage in command-directive behavior (this is what you have to do) (Spillane, 2000). The approach is additive (i.e., solutions are layered on), *not* evaluative (i.e., solutions are continually reexamined and modified).

An alternative approach for improvement stipulates that student outcomes are improved through collaborative inquiry-based processes around teaching and learning; leaders facilitate these processes. But how the theory plays out in real schools and classrooms is less clear and simple; what actions do leaders take to alter teaching and learning? The ability to translate accountability efforts into new behaviors and structures in schools has proved difficult (Elmore, 2003, 2004; Massell & Goertz, 2002; O'Day, 2002). Use of an inquiry cycle, which begins and ends with questions of evaluation, is crucial to this approach, which is the antithesis of the layering solutions often prescribed in schools.

We suggest that asking schools to evaluate (over *being accountable*) is foundational to successful teaching and learning because the process entails explicating what actions are taken, why, and to what effect—and then learning *from* and acting *on* that knowledge. We define *evaluation* as a planned, purposeful, and systematic process for collecting information, decision making, and taking action as a means of contributing to improvement of policy and programming for the well-being of all within an organization or a community (see Weiss, 1998). Evaluation employs an inquiry cycle that iteratively frames and examines problems of practice, chooses actions to address the problems, assess effects of these actions, and then reframes the original problems of practice. The inquiry framework combines elements of people and action beyond an individual school leader. Elements include individual attributes or capacity (e.g., mindsets, vision, self-recognition) as well as activities (e.g., engaging in dialogical conversations, professional learning communities). For us, evaluation is a dispositional quality that, much like social justice and collaboration, is an essential process embedded within and throughout any efforts to improve learning. When evaluation is inquiry, then inquiry becomes practice. Only practice can strike at the accountability demands of improving student achievement.

From our perspective, rather than demand that schools be held accountable for externally defined results, schools should be accountable for evaluating their processes, progress, and outcomes (i.e., they would engage in a cycle of questioning and informing action). In such a scenario, school leaders would ask the evaluation questions

of: What do we want our students to learn and why? What are we doing to meet these goals? Specifically, what instruction do we offer to facilitate this learning? What happens as a result of our efforts? What do students do and learn? What successes do we experience and what challenges do we encounter? What counts as evidence of success or failure? How do we support, modify, or change our practices to better meet our purposes? Because most would agree that the purpose of schools is student learning, what happens *inside* the school and classroom—instruction—is key. An inquiry-minded school is constantly engaged in learning-based tasks that are naturally evaluated and measured. We note that these questions about internal choices have become more insistent and complex in the increasingly globalized and politicized world where external environments permeate the school boundaries.

In U.S. schools, the burden of buffering and bridging the school boundaries and facilitating meaningful evaluation falls to the district leader. However large the forces influencing their worlds, superintendents realize they must act as instructional leaders in their districts. Their actions can shape building leaders' actions that in turn shape what teachers do in the classroom with students. How to turn each school into such a learning organization is the superintendent's challenge. Our experience working with superintendents who do engage in the evaluation inquiry cycle reveals that their efforts have moved the standards for success and the criteria for meeting them toward their local schools and in turn increased their districts' capacities for improvement. We call these superintendents *inquiry-minded leaders*, and we offer the Connecticut Superintendents Network as a case of these leaders in practice.

This narrative case describes the Connecticut Superintendents Network as a community of practice for instructional improvement. The case explores what these inquiry-minded leaders do and how their actions change policies and practices in their schools. The case raises questions of the effectiveness of the process: Whose capacity is built for what? How are student learning and achievement affected? Is organizational learning culture strengthened? What supports or hinders the process? Equally important are the questions of the leaders' own growth and development. The case considers the challenges of defining and meeting standards in a world deeply shaped by external forces. The details of this case are informed by Rallis' role as documenter/evaluator of the network's activities.[1]

Collaborative Inquiry: Change Through Communities of Practice

The case of the Superintendents Network is grounded in the belief that successful leaders who engage in inquiry for improvement cannot operate in isolation. Given the distributed perspective of leadership as a construct of relationships rather than roles (Firestone, 1996; Halverson, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, 2004), inquiry-minded leaders collaborate in their search for organizational coherence, clarity, and reform (Elmore, 2003). Communities of practice that collect data on what people do in schools offer one structure for meaningful collaboration. Such communities explore "the activities engaged in by leaders, in interaction with others in particular contexts around specific tasks" (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 5) with a goal of supporting the members' work toward instructional reform. Such groups focus on their practice.

Wenger (1999) explains that a "practice is the source of coherence of a community" (p. 73), and this coherence is manifested in a community as three basic characteristics: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and a shared repertoire. Wenger defines *joint enterprise* as the meaning or understanding that the members of a community have negotiated regarding what they will mutually accomplish. *Mutual engagement* requires that members of the community of practice interact with one another regularly to develop new skills, refine old ones, and incorporate new ways of understanding (Wenger, 1999). In a community of practice, *shared repertoire* is the "communal resources that members have developed over time

through their mutual engagement" (Wenger, 1999, p. 4). This shared repertoire may consist of artifacts, documents, language, vocabulary, routines, technology, and so on.

Still, the ultimate influence of the community on practice remains unknown (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). A community of practice that is not rooted in elements of inquiry-based practice may only provide a superficial belief system without impact on practice and student achievement. Consequently, we posit that a community of practice must work within a *cycle of inquiry*. Rallis and MacMullen (2000) developed a set of activities that make up an inquiry cycle for inquiry-minded schools:

- Establish outcomes for which we accept responsibility,
- Identify important questions concerning student learning,
- Collect and manage data derived from the assessment of performance,
- Conduct mindful analyses of the data in light of the desired outcomes and interpret information in lights of the school's purposes,
- Take action based on knowledge, and
- Assess the effects of action.

Such an inquiry-minded school, born into the belief system of a community of practice and rooted in a cycle of inquiry, should spawn organizational learning focused on improved teaching and learning. As an organization learns, coherence is established and individual capacity is built. Under such circumstances, forces of reciprocal accountability (Resnick & Glennan, 2002) or comparative advantage (Elmore, 2000) will highlight school improvement efforts, rather than a set of abstract, ambiguous external efforts to promulgate improvements. Under these circumstances, internal professional accountability can be built to consider and leverage external accountability efforts in the local context.

This internal professional accountability is facilitated by inquiry-minded leaders who know how to transform data into meaningful information that becomes useful knowledge for practice (see Petrides & Guiney, 2002). These leaders recognize that their practices and problems are not theirs alone. Thus, they join informal and formal communities of practice that harness the power of collective knowledge (see Brown & Duguid, 2000). This collective knowledge goes beyond local and national boundaries to achieve more than the ends for which immediate reforms press. The following case illustrates such a community of inquiry-minded leaders. Although this case is based in the U.S. context, it strikes at a global theme—advancing student learning.

A Community of Practice in Practice

The Superintendents Network, in its sixth year of operation, consists of a dozen public school superintendents who wrestle with establishing high-level, demanding curriculum and instruction in classrooms throughout their districts, which are geographically and demographically diverse, serve more than 57,000 students, and range from postindustrial cities to affluent suburbs to less wealthy small towns. The Network is sponsored by the Connecticut Center for School Change (hereafter called the Center), a local school reform organization, and has met monthly for 6 years with the goal of forming a community of practice to explore the improvement of teaching and learning. Nonsuperintendent members of the group are present as facilitators: the executive director and the program officer of the Center and two university professors whose expertise is leadership and school reform. Another member is the documenter, a university professor of leadership and school reform whose specialization is evaluation.

This blended network of practitioners, academics, and change agents espouses a model of professional development that differs from more traditional single-event, decontextualized, sit-and-listen practices prevalent in education settings. The model recognizes that learning is both social and situated—that professional

adults learn not through workshops, but through multiple opportunities to examine closely real problems of practice with peers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They are committed to a process where members go into classrooms to observe teaching and learning directly and then support each other in problem solving around what they have seen in practice. For 2 months, they focus on a problem related to student learning in a particular school identified by a superintendent. Specifically, the host superintendent articulates his or her theory of action (a causal *if, then* statement). The group visits that school, conducting 20-minute observations in several classrooms and collecting data. After the observations, they meet with the school leaders to debrief. The following month, they meet for a reflection session, during which they analyze the instructional issues raised in the observations, consider potential solutions and implications for practice, and make sense of what has been learned. In the sixth year, the network added a consultation follow-up to occur after the second site-based superintendent's visit. The consultation follow-up consists of two superintendents returning to the district to serve as critical friends (see Rallis & Rossman, 2000).

The Superintendents Network Theory of Action

Central to the social nature of learning is the concept of *community of practice* for the purpose of learning and capacity building. Members work "together to test out ideas, critique one another's work, offer alternative conceptualizations, and provide both emotional and intellectual support" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. xvi). Discourse within the community becomes dialogic, new ideas emerge, individuals develop deeper knowledge about their work, and these new conceptualizations prompt and guide improved practice. Specifically, the Network's goals are to:

- Develop superintendents' knowledge and skill to lead large-scale instructional improvement;
- Assist superintendents in developing *distributed leadership* (Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001, 2004) throughout their districts (i.e., building a cadre of knowledgeable and skilled leaders who assume responsibility for developing their own practice around improvement); and
- Enable superintendents to build an infrastructure that supports improvement work—evaluation, professional growth, networks, and opportunities for collaboration.

The Network has explicitly stated its axiomatic theory of action:

> *If* we collectively participate in a community of practice grounded in on-site classroom observation and focused on large-scale instructional improvement, *then* participating superintendents will become more effective instructional leaders as demonstrated by changes in their practice (as a result of their use of leverage points to affect classroom teaching) and ultimately improvements in student achievement.

The Network emphasizes that their focus is on instruction, their talk must be grounded in data over opinion, the activities are collaborative and context-specific (site-based), and goals are focused on impacts on practice. Figure 14.1 illustrates that the Network is situated in an inquiry cycle.

We examine the Network's theory of action through discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) from transcripts of the visit debrief sessions and the subsequent reflection sessions.

Evidence of Network Practices: What Really Happened?

The group began working in October 2001. Initially, the university facilitator assumed leadership by proposing topics, but he emphasized that members of a community of practice accept collective responsibility for how it should engage

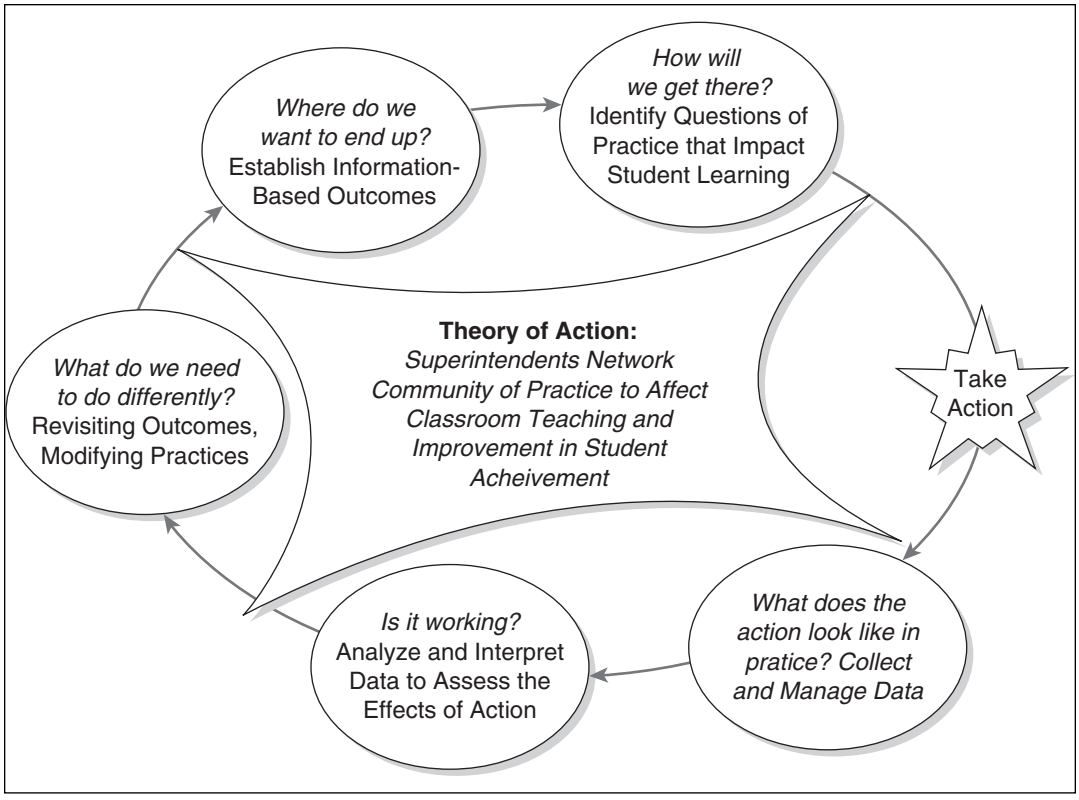

Figure 14.1 Community of Practice Within the Inquiry Cycle

in the work. The expectations were explicit: Everyone in the Network had to do the work, everyone had to model the practice of sustained focus on an issue, *and* everyone had to base their discussions on the details of teaching and learning. To provide a concrete focus, the facilitator posited as a leadership strategy the notion of *leverage points* (key components of the system around which people agree to work to realize large-scale systemic improvement): resources, knowledge/skill/expertise, accountability, assessment, curriculum, capacity building and professional development, and structure.

A crucial move toward the Network functioning effectively was the establishment of group operating norms. These norms included agreements on: *attendance* (Everyone attends every meeting), *involvement* (Everyone puts work out for discussion), *respect for confidentiality* (All agree not to discuss sensitive matters beyond the group), *candor and humility* (All commit to be candid and willing to acknowledge what they don't know), and *attentiveness* (Every member invests in listening).

However, disconnect remained between the ideal of community practice and the actuality of the Network's performance. Talk was not concrete and dialogic, but rather abstract and univocal (e.g., "In my district, we are always striving to increase achievement for all students"). To put actual practice at the center, the facilitator and the Center staff recommended that the group move to the next activity of the inquiry cycle (i.e., data collection) and visit classrooms together. A site visit would be driven by practice-oriented questions about instruction, and direct observation would provide members with a shared experience. Follow-up conversations would be data-based, tolerating only minimal "degrees of separation"[2] from instruction. Defined protocols would guide both the visit and the reporting out of the observations.

The superintendents were initially reluctant but agreed to give the observation process a try. The first site visit occurred in April 2002 at an elementary school in a small suburban district. Just prior to the observations, the facilitator reminded the Network to focus "on what we actually see going on in classrooms, not judgments we make about what we see." Just before the debrief, he reminded members to "try to stick to the discipline of responding to the question: 'What did you see?' " Yet by the end of the debrief, it was clear to all present that the superintendents were not *seeing* classrooms as thoroughly as the facilitator. The facilitator's notes were precise—clinical in the sense of medical grand rounds (e.g., numbers of students doing particular tasks, verbatim teacher remarks, and detailed summaries of student work on desks). Other reports on the same classes were more generalized, subjective, and judgmental (e.g., "Teacher used evaluative language" and "A marvelous lesson"). Early transcripts reveal that network members avoided specifics and were hesitant to be critical. The following remark, made during a visit debrief, is representative: "Let's spend some time validating the positive things happening in that school." Others followed with warm generalizations about the culture and feel of the school. Later, the group came to call this stance as operating in the "land of nice."

As a result of the visit, all the Network members agreed on the value of informing selected instructional problems through data gathered directly in classrooms. One participant spoke for the group by affirming that the "site visit experience brought us to a different level of discussion."

The development of the community of practice emerged as the superintendents' candor increased, and they overcame the tension they had originally felt in giving critical and descriptive feedback. Compare the comments after the first site visit with the following conversation that occurred 4 months later:[3]

Bea: I did not see what I would call effective instruction in either 3rd grade. Children were just rotating in groups through the same activities. There were no less than eight groups. The teacher was running from group to group. [He had] no time to give more than 5-8 seconds of attention to any child.

Don: I was struck that two students were sitting off by themselves and never had any interaction with any adult.

Ellie: Every group was doing essentially the same worksheet. Not clear how the groups were determined. Differentiated instruction is not just dividing kids into groups.

This exchange illustrates members' growing willingness to critique and question what they had observed and to use observational data to uncover the reality of the setting. Over time, comments became increasingly detailed and focused. Descriptions of what members saw in class became richer and finer grained, and judgments were increasingly grounded in specific observed data.

By the end of Year 2, feedback was grounded in evidence, not mere opinion. Members asked: "Did you see what I saw?" For example, the following conversation is drawn from the debrief following the last school visit of Year 3:

Alan: [The teacher] was having them write a story. She did not give them the elements. They wrote it, and then she went around and critiqued—why didn't she go over what we want in a good story? Some of the pieces were lacking, but I did not see how the children would have known.

Mario: We saw that part, how they would know—it was the "diamond" [a figure on the board that came from the writing program].

Don: I saw writing in almost every classroom, but nobody was addressing things like audience. Basically prompt writing. That is what [they think] good writing is—the "diamond."

Ellie: That was not my observation—she was not following a script.

Fran: She had kids working. I saw her give them a lot of signals and cues about what would make their writing distinctive. She asked: "What am I looking for?" They gave her a bunch of well-rehearsed answers.

Discourse grew from this fine-grained description to interpretations grounded in the observed data. The interpretations became increasingly analytical and dialogic. An example is the discussion during a reflection session about the relationship between behavior and beliefs; note the development of insight:

Fran: Our [state test] scores came in, but they did not want the scores to be the focus. They wanted the focus to be on beliefs and what we need to do with kids.

Tom: Do you have a theory about change?

Fran: Yes. The only way they can change is by themselves—get their mental models out on the table and then look at the data and reflect on their beliefs.

Tom: What about behavior?

Fran: I think behavior is tied to beliefs.

Tom: I sort of surprised myself by coming down on the other side—that behavior comes first, especially around how students learn. Teachers seem to change their values and beliefs in response to what they have seen students do in response to their [teacher] behaviors—rather than change behavior based on beliefs.

Fran: Teachers see that the practice creates a positive change in kids' behaviors, so they are willing to examine their beliefs. Now they are able to put their beliefs on the table and change their own ways of thinking.

Pete: This suggests to me that teachers might learn to behave into a way of thinking differently.

Although discourse became increasingly dialogic during Year 2, at least one person's responses remained unconnected, and a few members contributed only marginally. The Center's staff recognized the issue and intervened, reiterating the norms that superintendents speak first and that all members have a chance to comment before anyone offered a second observation. At that time, the group had not assumed direct and collective responsibility for the nature and process of the discourse. However, as evidenced in the transcripts by the end of Year 3, discourse was predominantly dialogic; all members contributed at each meeting, and seldom was discourse dominated by only a few. Frequently, members commented on the value of talking and learning specifically about instructional practice together with respected colleagues.

By the sixth year, the group talked directly about their community of practice, questioning and critiquing themselves. The following comments are from a reflection session in January 2007:

Gary: Yes, I believe we are a community of practice. We've made decisions about norms and the processes. I don't know if we've made any decision about our learning and what as a group we do about our learning.

Mario: I suspect that each of us could share the impact of our conversations over time in what we are doing in our districts, but I don't think we've ever done that in a systematic way—only anecdotes. But if the intent has been to expand our own knowledge-base in the way we do things in our districts and to share that—that's not something we have done.

Mara: Maybe that's what we're starting to get to with this revisit—we are revisiting relatively soon the problem and what

> we've done—holding our feet to the fire in terms of what went on. I agree that we're pretty good at dialogue, but I think we've avoided making group decisions and thinking about and sharing with the group the actions we've taken.

In summary, they agree they have learned through their participation in this professional learning community; they also recognize that their practice back home in their districts may not yet be sufficient to affect teaching and learning in their schools.

Analysis of Superintendents' Learning

Evidence demonstrates that the superintendents were engaged in an inquiry-based community of practice. This did not happen through the mere organization of a formalized network. Rather, the development came, like most processes, with frustration and difficulties. In the end, the superintendents were no longer using a series of independent comments to talk about instruction; they were creating new learning through threads of linked comments. Rather than carry on parallel conversations, their ideas intersected and interacted. The fledgling community of practice had taken hold. The new community was defined by elements of practice; instructionally based, problem-focused work; agreed-on protocols for evidence gathering; strategies of instructional improvement; strong group norms and periodic reflection; devoted use of evidence; and peer-to-peer collegiality. As a result, the Network discourse developed in the following ways:

- Less expressing positive generalizations ("land of nice") to more rigorous questioning, critiquing, and "truth telling";
- Avoidance of storytelling (fewer "In my school we. . . .");
- Rules, norms, and common language of engagement established over time;
- Consistent, site-based meetings rooted in cases of *actual* practice;
- Movement from mostly univocal opinion-based discourse (one speaker, one idea) to evidence-based, analytical, and dialogic interpretations of what was happening; and
- Transactively generating new understandings.

We posit that this community of practice developed by the convergence of two forces: experience and specific attention to an inquiry-focused purpose. To begin, the group engaged in difficult activities (e.g., debriefs) that resulted in establishing new norms of practice. Second, over time, Network practice incorporated elements of the inquiry cycle. Both the norms and the cycle were critical for the evolution from a group of superintendents toward a community of practice. These two forces combined and paved the way for *learning in action*. That is, participants set the norms and then used and reflected on them. This process proves to be an important step toward a culture of inquiry-minded practice. While we see evidence of the development of a community of practice within the Network, how this inquiry-mined community did or did not impact practices in the schools and in the classroom warrants additional analysis. This is the focus of the next section.

Learning in Action

Use of the inquiry cycle shaped the practice of the Network—that is, *learning in action*. This phrase captures the iterative process whereby the superintendents were learning from action and acting on their learning. Prior to a visit, the host superintendent shared his or her theory of action and posed a related problem of practice. The identified problem served as a focus for classroom observations and data collection. During the visit, teams of four observed for 20 minutes in five classrooms collecting data using a common protocol that asked observers to note what the teacher was doing and saying, what the

students were doing and saying, and what artifacts were present in the room. Often an observation of a teacher team or administrative work meeting was included.

After a morning of observation, the teams reunited for lunch and a debrief in which the principal participated. During this time, network members were encouraged to state simply what they had observed—for example, "In the third grade class four of the students not working with the teacher were looking out the window, three were completing the worksheet, and one was kicking the chair in front of her." Commentary moved away from offering opinions and toward reporting data-based observations and then drawing interpretations from them. What follows are two examples illustrating the Network's practice from problem framing to considering changes in the schools.

Example 1: Raising Expectations and Increasing Energy

A fall 2003 Network visit to a high school reveals leadership focus on how teachers addressed student achievement. The superintendent (Lin) framed her problem in these words: "As the leader of a district where community expectations for students in many areas are either very low or non-existent, I struggle with the change that must take place if all students are to achieve at high levels." The superintendent moved to the high school one of her effective elementary school principals and charged him to lead this change. In turn, the principal challenged each of the high school teachers to ensure that every child learned to an appropriately high level each day. The superintendent asked Network members to focus their observations of the high school classrooms on two questions: (a) What are teachers doing instructionally? (b) Are high expectations for student achievement evident in classroom instruction? A section of the debrief reveals the superintendents' critique of instruction and expectations:

Tom: The civics teacher had kids doing nothing at all. They were polite, nice kids, but they were not on-task. Some were just sitting there. The teacher kept saying to us [the observers] how hard it was to have kids with different skills in the class.

Al: In what we saw, he did all the work. He handed out a page and read it all.

Pete: A student in the class told me: "this is what we do every day. He comes and he talks and then he hands us an assignment. We read the book, answer the questions, and hand it in."

Mara: I could see into their notebooks—what he was teaching them on the board was already in some of their notebooks.

Dick: Another pattern—constant repetition.

Jill: The repetition struck me—I asked one girl how long they had been on this one unit. She said a week and half. Roughly half was new instruction and half preparation for the exam. And it was not a mid-term. Just a lesson to test out the unit.

Carl: He had all this stuff on minerals. I asked him why this? He said, "Oh, I did this when I was in college and liked it. The guy down the hall does gems. He likes them." No alignment; they do their own thing.

Dialogue during the reflection session summarized the observed patterns of practice: failure to use available instructional time; low energy levels; low performance expectations, no curriculum alignment. One observer commented:

> I was angry—that [teacher] in civics was too ignorant to be embarrassed. The staff is so comfortable because they have not been asked to do anything for 30 years. This principal can get by for one year, but he

> needs to set some goals by spring. He needs to evaluate teachers—say to them, "You're negligent in your teaching." Putting people on notice that change is coming. I'd take some of the best teachers and put them in the lower-level classes so that those teachers cannot say that these kids cannot learn.

Network members acknowledged the superintendent's bravery in exposing her problems so openly with her colleagues and recognized both challenges and opportunities for change. For example, one superintendent commented:

> I have been thinking about [the principal] as opportunity. He is new. But he is also an elementary-trained educator. He has two channels he can go. He can see the outside perspective. The risk for him is enormous but positive. Or he can take the other path—live in that barbed-wire atmosphere and pretty soon he ceases to be the outsider. How do you take someone in that leadership position and give him the psychological fortitude to take this crew the first anguishing step to teach differently? A very exciting challenge but how can you transfer what you know about leadership into practice that works? If we came back in three years, what would we see?

The reflection ended with the superintendent asking what she could do to support the principal in his efforts and the Network members generating ideas. Suggestions (such as modeling language and practices and arranging teacher visits to other schools) focused on the need for teachers to see new instructional behaviors and to hear positive ways for talking about and with students.

The September 2006 visit returned to this same high school. At this time, the superintendent's theory of action had become explicit: *If we use student data to inform instruction, then student achievement will increase.* The concern was still student achievement, but the superintendent asked for two foci for observation, the classroom and team meetings: (a) Can we see evidence in the *classroom* of improvement in the problems of practice identified during the first visit (i.e., teacher misuse of available instructional time, low student energy levels, and low performance expectations)? (b) Can we see evidence in the *team meetings* of a shared-results orientation across the leadership and faculty (i.e., shared vision, collaborative work, commitment to improvement, data-driven decision making)? In reference to the first question, the debrief transcript indicates that the energy and expectations remain low and that teachers' use of time does not challenge students to achieve:

Gary: The teacher used the microphone and sat on a rolling chair in front of the computer. Said we are not learning anything new. There was a boy on the front row who never even opened his notebook but at 9:15 he got up and sharpened his pencil. A girl was doing her other homework.

Tom: The teacher was using the PowerPoint as the main lesson. He read the slides. Gave students chance to respond to one example. Who got it and who did not? Not what you would call teaching. Mostly just a PowerPoint review.

Gary: The PowerPoint was by McGraw Hill. It came with the book.

Pete: We saw the same behavior [during our visit]. The formulas were up on the board, and the teacher asked students if they understood. Students were compliant. Passive non-engagement. After they read—or re-read them, teacher asked them to calculate, but the only way to do it was to go to a table in the book. As the kids were working, the teacher sat in the chair and from time to time asked the individual students: "Joe, did you get that yet? OK, keep working. You know how to use the chart." Finally he asked

the kids if they had an answer; only two were correct. Not much discussion about how they got the answer or how they got it wrong. He assumed they saw the process and understood.

Other segments report similar classroom interactions, whereas others explore the question about results orientation. As after the earlier visit, Network members again applauded the superintendent for her bravery in opening her doors, revealing that the problem continued. Yet they found no evidence that her theory of action (teachers used data to inform their instruction) was operational.

Next, the debrief turned to analyzing the team meeting. The Network focused on how the high school principal modeled leadership with his team. One Network member observed that he did not hear the principal clearly articulate how mission, expectations, curriculum, and instruction were to be connected. Others noted that they heard a lot of "if" statements that were not connected to a "then" statement and wondered how faculty would know what the principal wanted. Another noted that the principal had not explicitly prioritized the expectations for the faculty and asked: "Are they all equally important?" Others heard that the principal was trying to do too many things at once with the danger that "you don't do any well." In summary, Network members observed that the principal appeared to assume actions more than model them.

A Network facilitator asked, "But how would the principal know what to model?" The superintendent felt she was trying to model with her administrative team: "We're always looking at data, informing our instruction, reading." However, she wondered why her theory of action was working with some principals but not with the high school principal. Another Network member asked, "How do you develop that capacity in the entire administrative team?" This led Lin to consider that the high school principal might not have the skills to lead the instructional improvement. The question becomes less a search for answers and more an inquiry into specific aspects of the problem.

At this point, the group discourse reveals their recognition that a problem of practice needs to be more targeted before solutions can be explored. Within the context of this example, they looked at the impact of their own work on helping each other:

Bea: This is just a back and forth. Our talk takes place, and Lin [superintendent] listens and responds.

Pete: One problem is that we set it up that way.

Gary: I say to the entire group: I think we need to be cognizant that Lin *is* asking for some advice. And therefore we should respect her direction to us, that this is how our debrief should go. I think we should proceed and then end with questions for Lin. Do you think the question is lack of the principal's skill? Or that he does possess the skill, but that it's that there's no accountability?

Mario: I'm wondering if part of the challenge is to find answer to those questions. I think in a way we're all on a rescue mission; we can say to each other "hey, I need help!" I would ask us to frame a theory of action relative to the work Lin does. *If* Lin does the following things—and we don't know what they are—*then* the principal would be more successful. Part of it is *if* Lin can find out the principal's need is a lack of skill, *then* it might point you to how to improve his skill set. *If* it's an inability for him to take skills and operate with them, *then* the question is how do you help him use the skills?

Rather than supply ready-made solutions, the debrief session broke down the original questions into a set of more meaningful questions. They resisted becoming a garbage can that simply matches the unexamined problem with the first solution that appears (see M. D. Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; March, 1999). The

discourse moved from how can Lin help the principal to what really is the principal's problem? What began as a set of questions into a problem of practice from Lin has developed into an inquiry process about what the problem really is and how she will deal with it. The Network's observations and reflections contribute to building Lin's capacity to have an impact on the system. The Network helped Lin reframe her inquiry.

Example 2: Can We See the Strategies in the Classroom?

Another visit in February 2003 to an elementary school illustrates a superintendent's focus on a specific instructional problem. A group of students consistently scored at *Basic* or *Below Basic* levels on the state test even though the school's average Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) scores were above the state goal. The superintendent theorized that achievement for all students would increase were the norm for daily planning and classroom practice to be differentiating instruction, consistent checking for understanding, and modifying instruction based on that feedback. To that end, he and the principal built professional development efforts around differentiated instruction, creating, they hoped, an environment where teachers knew the needs of each student and provided instruction accordingly. The question for the Network was: How did differentiated instruction look in the classroom?

The superintendent and principal asked the network members to address these specific questions in their observations of Grades 1 and 3 (teachers were aware of the protocol):

- What is the teacher doing? What are the aides doing?
- What modes of instruction are you seeing? What kinds of questions are being asked?
- What activities/questions does the teacher use to assess student understanding?
- What adjustments do teachers make (e.g., accelerate instruction, regroup students, remediate, reteach, and vary pace) based on observations of student work or responses?

During the debrief, detailed descriptions of what network members saw paint a picture that reveals inconsistencies among teaching practices including the misuse or misunderstanding of differentiated instruction as a teaching strategy (e.g., "I saw a 1st grade where there was no differentiated instruction. There was whole class math instruction with choral reading. All were filling out worksheets and responding to simple prompts").

When the Network met the next month for the reflection session, the superintendent reported the principal's insights from the visit debrief:

> I asked her: "What did you learn?" She answered, "Well, it made me aware that I could see a class and observe something that may not be real." This *Aha* is really important for instructional leaders not to just make decisions from observation, but to connect with teachers. To approach the teacher to say, "Here is what I saw; tell me about it." We need to make sure that the talk is always about the instruction.

Dialogue during the reflection session casts doubt on the effect of district efforts at implementing differentiated instruction to improve student learning (e.g., "Differentiated instruction should be evident in every lesson. They are not there yet as a routine. Or they are confused. If there were collective understanding, we would have seen patterns; we did not"). The group questions whether the principal's leadership and the accompanying professional development had changed instructional practices as the superintendent and principal had hoped.

By 2006–2007, the Network was revisiting schools to gauge improvement, so in February the Network returned to this school. The principal described her efforts to support teachers' use of formative assessments to modify instruction

accordingly. She reported that she was trying to get into classrooms often to collect data as a basis for conversing with teachers, but she also indicated that the teachers want more of her drop-in, nonformal visits. Network members were asked to look for evidence that teachers were using formative assessments and differentiating instruction. Network observations revealed some progress in use of differentiated instruction, but also raised questions of how much principal leadership practices and teacher instructional practices had changed. Later, one of the superintendents summarized his impressions:

> I was so disappointed last week. Nothing had changed in the classrooms at the school; the principal admitted that she still seldom got into classrooms. Is it the size of the districts that make the difference? Is it that superintendents assume that principals understand broad concepts in the same way they do?

Evaluation in Action: Using the Full Inquiry Cycle?

The Network has engaged in the first activities of an inquiry cycle: They frame and accept the problem of practice; and they collect, analyze, and make sense of data related to the problem. Still, if the cycle is to result in action and that action is to initiate a renewed cycle, we ask what actions emerge from the Superintendents Network community of practice and how they evaluate their actions so as to shape the inquiry anew? Do their deliberations and dialogue actually change their practices back in their districts? If so, do their changed practices influence instruction and in turn improve teaching and learning? Transcripts during Years 2 and 3 provide evidence of insights and activities to improve instruction that superintendents are taking back to their districts.

- Many report their own efforts to visit schools and get into classrooms more often: "The work of the superintendent is far more intimately connected to the classroom than I had thought."
- Many are replicating this process with their management teams: "We are having classroom visits modeled after the Network school visits."
- Another has scheduled visits for principals with another district: "I have them take a day off and visit another school."
- Another talked about understanding how systems/organizations work: "Principals teach teachers; I teach the principals. Replicating is the next step."
- Still, superintendents identified obstacles to replication in their districts.
- "You have to make sure [inquiry] does not become a 'project.' You make it a way of being and operating—integral to the other [items on the agenda]. People in the district must make it a part of the way they do things."
- "People think the critique is saying something 'about me.' People are afraid, so they want you to stay out of your schools."
- "Part of the problem in replicating is us. We are seen as the ones who have the answers. Now we are saying to forget that I am the boss; I do not have the answers."
- "Time . . . principals would say the visit and reflection is the most important thing, but we do not have time for it."

None of these comments indicate direct changes in teacher behavior or student outcomes attributable to the superintendent's actions. They do, however, clearly express awareness of their struggle in facilitating change.

More recently, the questions about action and results have surfaced in the group discourse during reflection sessions. The following dialogue occurred in the January 2007 reflection session in response to this question: Are we a community of practice that includes action as part of our inquiry cycle?

Jim: Certainly the esprit de corps is real, but I am very anxious about the next level of

work [refers to action steps taken back in districts]. If we have concluded that we know what we know—then okay, now what?

Bea: For me, we are successful if I grow in my role and we collectively grow stronger and function better with one another. Any one of us might take individually what we heard here today, but I don't see these pieces as influential for the group. That may be what we should pursue—engage more together in looking at how this experience reflects back on our work in our districts. I don't necessarily do that, and if others do, we don't hear that.

Kit: I agree. The group has helped keep me grounded. I return with more energy and passion to my district. The next level—I'm not sure what that is. Are we at the point where we can talk about this? I wish we could share more of what's going on [back in our districts] even if we don't have a visitation.

Mario: I think we spend enough time on how we interact with one another, and we get better at it. It's so different than it was three years ago. We are all about instruction, and our talk is grounded in data. But I don't think I would define action as essential to community of practice.

Dick: There is a certain value of a community with consequences. We could say: "I think we've learned something from this visit—I'm going out and try X. I'd like some support from other members of the network, and I'd like to come back and say what I did and the consequences." That requires a higher level of consequences than we have. That's one way in which a community of practice becomes tighter. We do that, sort of. When we put a superintendent on the spot after the visit, but we don't do it when we're not in the bucket. That's the next level of work—specific ways we can support each other in our work in addition to doing the routine?

Lin: Really what I asked this group to do—be a community of practice—to come in and to really push me, help me make decisions, make me accountable. So that's really what I was looking for. I think there was hesitance because we don't own, we're all separated, independent, rather than owning our accomplishments. We were relatively gentle around the table concerning me, when we were debriefing after the visit. It was difficult for me to say "Look at what I'm doing—help me change." Very difficult. I think collectively we need to talk about whether this is where we want to go?

Tom: One of the things that is hard to measure is the extent we choose to do this work. By default this Network has kept me on this work. All of us use this Network to help us stay in the work. We make conscious choices to stay in the work. Many of our colleagues who don't belong to the Network don't have the reinforcement and can't stay in the work.

Dick: There is an accountability in that. If you're not involved in the work you're a spectator—no collegial accountability. We have an effect on each other's standards of what the work is—being in school. When we're in somebody's school we're going through a [lateral accountability] process. Those social expectations are part of being in a network—putting yourself in the way of that influence.

This interchange revisits the Network's theory of action. Together members fulfill the first part of the statement, the If we collectively participate in a community of practice grounded in on-site classroom observation and focused on large-scale instructional improvement. The then

is more challenging. Dialogue indicates that participating superintendents have become more effective instructional leaders because their interactions revitalize them and keep them in the work, but not as demonstrated by changes in their practice, as a result of their use of leverage points to affect classroom teaching and ultimately improvements in student achievement. They see their work together as meaningful, but they may not be connected once they are apart. The experience helps them "stay in the work," but they are not sure exactly how the work affects teaching and learning in their districts. Evidence shows beliefs and interactions among themselves to be changing, but is this enough to improve teaching and learning? What occurs between Network meetings and visits and teaching and learning in classrooms remains a black box.

Conclusion

Accountability via national mandates using standardized measures has proved difficult to operationalize for improving classroom instruction and learning. Rather than be held accountable solely by external forces, school districts can take charge of accountability through internal mechanisms of ongoing evaluation, defining terms, and demonstrating outcomes. Action in an inquiry cycle such as described in this chapter provides a more powerful accountability: professional accountability. Engagement in dialogue with other professionals about *real* problems of practice in contextualized settings allows educators to make choices and take responsibility for their actions; they become accountable *through* their actions.

We framed evaluation as an inquiry cycle that raises problems of practice, explores behaviors, and generates changes that iteratively raise new problems of practice. We also posited that leadership for change develops through interaction *and* action. We set out to explore how school leaders who participate collaboratively in a community of practice that uses the inquiry cycle for school improvement can make changes in their practice, their principals, and in classroom instruction. What the case reveals is that the real changes occurred within the community of practice. For example, these brave superintendents took risks by opening their schools and their practices to collegial critique. Moreover, they were willing to give and receive this critique. The Network exemplifies the elements identified as essential for effective and meaningful professional development: centered on instruction, collaborative, ongoing and iterative, and context-embedded (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Hawley & Valli, 1999).

But the case also reveals that major improvements have not yet been realized to scale within the classrooms back in the superintendents' district schools. Without inquiry as practice at the school level, the danger of teachers' misuse or misunderstanding of new instructional practices is highly likely (see D. K. Cohen, 1990), as revealed in our example of differentiated instruction. In summary, while there was a culture shift for this network of superintendents, their ability to have substantive influence within their schools is less visible.

Figure 14.2 illustrates the gap between the *theory-of-action* and what Argyris and Schon (1974) call *theory-in-use*. The theory-of-action (in the grey area in the center circle) stipulates changes in practice to establish leverage points. The good news is that the use of the inquiry cycle established a true professional learning community among the superintendents. The process begins with an openness to expose theories-of-action versus theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974) or the "gap between the ideal and the actual" (Wiggins, 1996, p. 6)—and to confronting the stark reality of the gap and the difficulty in narrowing it.

However, comparing theories offers a counternarrative. What began as single-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1974) was turning into double-loop learning as the inquiry cycle became part of their practice. The superintendents began by examining their beliefs about instruction, and their real work became embedded in concrete, on-site practice (e.g., what is actually

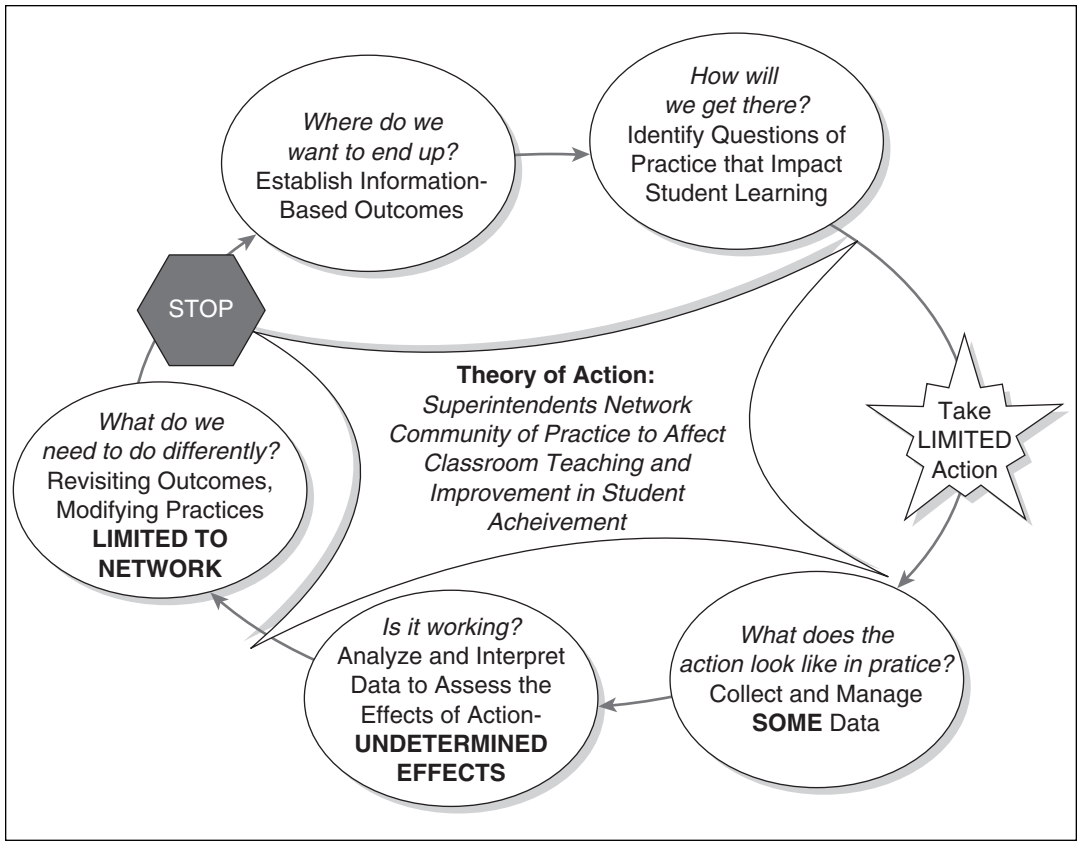

Figure 14.2 The Theory-in-Use: Incomplete Inquiry Cycle

happening in their classrooms). Iteratively, action had deep impact on their belief systems, but they have miles to go in regard to making an impact at the building level (teaching and improved student achievement). Specifically, we do not have clear evidence that network superintendents' work affected teaching and student achievement in district schools. Instead, we see limited action, undetermined impact of actions, and the constraint of collecting, managing, analyzing, and interpreting a partial set of data. A fully implemented inquiry cycle promises to be the tool to narrow the gap between theories-of-action and theories-in-use.

The next challenge for these superintendents is to bring the inquiry cycle to those closest to student achievement—the teachers. The model suggests that a similar process embedded at the school level may pave the way for teaching and learning improvements. We see emerging evidence that continuing action and collaboration at the school and classroom levels may yet yield the impact anticipated from the theory-of-action: If teaching and learning are to be effects, the roots will be grounded in the development and replication of evaluation as inquiry and inquiry as practice. But the theory needs to be revisited and constantly revised; the axiomatic implementation of policies based on theories has not proved wholly rational or scientific (M. D. Cohen et al., 1972). Without a meaningful, effective, and iterative internal accountability cycle, educators will continue to react in institutional ways to the external mandates and sanctions that are employed in the absence of achievement results.

We believe superintendents can lead use of inquiry cycles in schools through the persistent

attention to the genesis, support, and resourcing of collaborative work in each building. Such leadership demands new norms of collegiality to be sure. Most important, action must be a vital component of the work. Activity can generate new learning and additional distribution of leadership. As our analysis indicates, belief may follow action. Elmore (2002) stipulates, "Only a change in practice produces a genuine change in norms and values. Or, to put it more crudely, grab people by their practice and their hearts and minds will follow" (p. 3).

At the end of the day, every school around the world is accountable for its core technology: learning and instruction. Global forces have defined accountability outside of the school, but

> accountability systems will foster improvements to the extent that they generate and focus attention on information relevant to teaching and learning, motivate individuals and school to use that information and expend effort to improve practice, build the knowledge base necessary for interpreting and applying the new information in improve practice, and allocate resources for all of the above. (O'Day, 2002, p. 294)

Whether the classroom is located in the United States, Japan, or Malawi, district leaders recognize instruction and inquiry centered on instruction as the means for the accountability ends. Authentic and professional accountability uses evaluation by integrating the external accountability demands with the internal goals and challenges. Moreover, such accountability is feasible because it draws on existing resources and capacities.

In recent decades, accountability has driven educational research to track output on national- or state-level assessments. Well-conducted international comparisons of student achievement (e.g., TIMSS and PISA in science and mathematics) provide data on education outcomes in many countries. Yet critics have noted that much remains to be learned from these outcomes, "especially when they are examined in fine detail and considered alongside other relevant findings, e.g., those relating to school improvement and effectiveness" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 157). Moreover, we suggest that differences in achievement across states and nations are less important than understanding what lies behind them. Discovering reasons for differences is complex and requires profound sensitivity to the social, cultural, and historical contexts of education systems. Until we understand both theories-of-action and theories-in-use of world education systems, policies for improvement will be simply policies, not practices that bring change. Meanwhile, little research has been directed toward evaluating the utility and effectiveness of local efforts to improve schooling. The framework in this chapter provides such a lens for local inquiry, as well as for future research on professional accountability efforts.

Improving practice is a never-ending process that requires collaboration, dialogue, and communication. The superintendents in the Network sought to become—and did become—self-learners. They used an evaluation process as inquiry, and inquiry became their practice. They became collaborative learners in a professional learning community—the Network. As such, each has become the district chief learning officer. Their work allowed a leadership flow embedded in an inquiry cycle that was reflexive, not static—proactive, not reactive. Now their challenge is to lead inquiry-minded practices within their schools so that principals and teachers also engage in the evaluative practice that is the inquiry cycle—and thus improve instruction and student learning. In short, inquiry as practice requires inquiry-minded leaders.

Notes

1. Having been the documenter of the Network for 5 years now, I (Rallis) have come to feel as a member of the group. Thus, I recognize that I write this case narrative with a more personal perspective than commonly attributed to such studies. I do not feel that my closeness to the events and activities is a detriment to my portrayal of the case On the

contrary, I believe that my relationships and longevity with the members facilitates insights and offers ample opportunity to test these ideas. Still, I cannot imagine that I have captured the depth and nuance of the Network operation. My analyses only scratch the surface of the dialogic processes. I can only hope to honor the intellect and practices of the Network superintendents (Kathy Binkowski, Mary Conway, Sal Corda, Chris Clouet, Betty Feser, Doris Kurtz, Mike McKee, Pat Proctor, John Ramos, Diane Ullman, and Bob Villanova) and the facilitators (Dick Elmore, Andrew Lachman, Jane Tedder, Lee Teitel, and Steve Wlodarczyk).

2. This is a term used by Elmore to emphasize that the focus of the discourse must be tightly tied to instruction.

3. All names used in the dialogues throughout the chapter are pseudonyms.

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Jacob Marszalek is Assistant Professor of Counseling and Educational Psychology in the School of Education at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. His research interests include applying new quantitative techniques to address research questions in education, program evaluation, testing, and psychology. As a student at the University of Illinois, he assisted with several program evaluations funded at the local, state, and national levels. He consults regularly on the design and implementation of grant evaluations in the Midwest.

Sandra Mathison is Professor of Education at the University of British Columbia. Her research focuses on educational evaluation and especially on the potential and limits of evaluation to support democratic ideals and promote justice. She has conducted national large- and small-scale evaluations of K-12, postsecondary, and informal educational programs and curricula; published articles in the leading evaluation journals; and edited and authored a number of books. She is editor of the *Encyclopedia of Evaluation* and co-editor (with E. Wayne Ross) of *The Nature and Limits of Standards Based Reform and Assessment* and *Battleground Schools*; she is co-author (with Melissa Freeman) of *Researching Children's Experiences*; and she is Editor-in-Chief of the journal *New Directions for Evaluation*.

Gerry McNamara, PhD, is Professor of Education at the School of Education Studies, Dublin City University. His research interests include educational evaluation and practitioner research. He is an active member of both the European Evaluation Society and the Irish Evaluation Network, and he is a member of the Council of the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society. Their (see O'Hara) most recent publications include *Trusting Schools and Teachers: Developing Educational Professionalism Through Self-Evaluation* (Peter Lang, 2008) and "The Importance of the Concept of Self-Evaluation in the Changing Landscape of Educational Policy," *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, *34*, 173–179.

Matthew Militello is Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at North Carolina State University and has taught at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Prior to his academic career, Militello was a middle and high school teacher and administrator. His current research centers on preparing school leaders. Most recently, Militello coauthored *Leading With Inquiry and Action*: *How Principals Improve Teaching and Learning*, a book that provides explicit examples of how principals enact collaborative inquiry-action cycles to increase student achievement. He has published in *Education and Urban Society*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Journal of School Leadership*, and *Qualitative Inquiry*.

David Nevo, Tel Aviv University, Israel, is Professor Emeritus at the School of Education, Tel Aviv University. His professional interests include evaluation theory,

program evaluation, school-based evaluation, and student assessment. His current research is focused on dialogue evaluation, combining internal and external evaluation and working with schools and teachers to improve their evaluation capabilities and their ability to cope with external evaluation requirements and accountability. Dr. Nevo is the author of *Evaluation in Decision Making* (with Glasman, Kluwer, 1988) and *School-Based Evaluation*: *A Dialogue for School Improvement* (Pergamon, 1995), the editor of *School-Based Evaluation: An International Perspective* (Elsevier, 2002) and the editor-in-chief of *Studies in Educational Evaluation.* He served as Head of School of Education, Tel Aviv University, and Chief Scientist of the Israeli Ministry of Education.

Theo Niessen is a researcher and lecturer at Fontys University of Applied Sciences-Faculty of Nursing. He is also appointed as the head of an ethics committee at a home for elderly people. Within his PhD, he developed an enactivist epistemological framework to understand teachers´ learning processes during responsive evaluation. Currently his research is concentrating on ethics and moral deliberation and practice improvement.

Joe O'Hara, PhD, is Senior Lecturer at the School of Education Studies, Dublin City University, with responsibility for Initial Teacher Education. His research interests include educational evaluation and initial teacher education. He is an active member of the Irish Evaluation Network and European Evaluation Society. He is currently a member of the General Council of the European Educational Research Association and is Vice President of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland. Their (see McNamara) most recent publications include *Trusting Schools and Teachers: Developing Educational Professionalism Through Self-Evaluation* (Peter Lang, 2008) and "Importance of the Concept of Self-Evaluation in the Changing Landscape of Educational Policy," *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, *34*, 173–179.

Sharon F. Rallis is Dwight W. Allen Distinguished Professor of Education Policy and Reform at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. A past president of the American Evaluation Association, Rallis has worked with evaluation for over three decades and has published extensively in evaluation journals. Her research focuses on local implementation of policy-driven programs. She has taught on education leadership and policy faculties at University of Connecticut, Harvard, and Vanderbilt. Rallis' doctorate is from Harvard University. Her books include *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (with Gretchen Rossman) and *Leading with Inquiry and Action: How Principals Improve Teaching and Learning* (with Matthew Militello).

Dana K. Rickman was recently named the Director for Research and Policy at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Atlanta Civic Site. Before then, she was a Senior Research Associate at Georgia State University, Andrew Young School for Policy Studies. Rickman has participated in a variety of public policy evaluations including North Carolina's Disadvantaged Student Supplemental Fund, Georgia's Universal Pre-K, and Georgia's TANF system. Rickman has published in the fields of evaluation, and education policy.