Encouraging Teachers to Design Their Own Professional Learning Through Inquiry: An Elementary Principal Conducts Practitioner Action Research

Michael G. Ryan
Montclair State University

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ENCOURAGING TEACHERS TO DESIGN THEIR OWN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH INQUIRY: AN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL CONDUCTS PRACTITIONER ACTION RESEARCH

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
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by

MICHAEL G. RYAN
Montclair State University
Upper Montclair, NJ
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Dissertation Chair: Dr. Monica Taylor
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

ENCOURAGING TEACHERS TO DESIGN THEIR OWN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH INQUIRY: AN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL CONDUCTS PRACTITIONER ACTION RESEARCH

of

Michael G. Ryan
Candidate for the Degree:
Doctor of Philosophy

Program:
Teacher Education and Teacher Development

Certified by:

Dr. Joan C. Ficke
Dean of The Graduate School

Date 4/14/16

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Monica Taylor
Dissertation Chair

Dr. Kathryn Herr

Dr. Emily J. Klein
ABSTRACT

ENCOURAGING TEACHERS TO DESIGN THEIR OWN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH INQUIRY: AN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL CONDUCTS PRACTITIONER ACTION RESEARCH

by Michael G. Ryan

Imagine school-based meetings that encourage faculty to design and direct their own professional learning during the course of a school year. This is the type of structure I implemented at Lakeside Elementary School during the 2013-2014 school year. With this practitioner action research study, I seek to add to the research related to the ways inquiry is presented and used as a professional learning structure within schools. I examine the way I, an elementary school principal, established a series of faculty meetings called “Design Your Own Learning” in which teachers were responsible for planning and carrying out professional learning based upon their own inquiry into their daily practices with students. Using a framework that defined inquiry as the many professional interactions within a school that promote processing and questioning of student and school needs, professional knowledge and understanding, as well practices that open a dialogue about ways to address and learn from each, I investigated the core question, “What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry based professional learning structure (Design Your Own Learning) in my school?”

I found that the Design Your Own Learning structure provided dedicated time and space for teachers to direct their own learning and reimagine the way a “meeting” structure, such as a typical faculty meeting, could be a space in which to engage in
professional inquiry. I came to see myself as a teacher educator, learning how to support
my faculty as they engaged in inquiry. This highlighted a challenge between what I (the
principal) “understood” about being a principal or educational leader and my emerging
conception of a principal as teacher educator. Additionally, I found that the teachers who
engaged in Design Your Own Learning gained useful inquiry skills that helped them
think critically about their teaching, learn with and from colleagues, and challenge school
norms to ask meaningful questions about their practices. This study made clear that
teachers do have the willingness and capacity to engage in meaningful and practical
inquiry.
Acknowledgement

While a dissertation seems like the work of one person, I have learned that it really takes a village to make this happen. I feel so lucky to have had such a caring, dedicated, and supportive community cheering me on and working with me along the way.

First, I thank my family, Kevin, Noah, Mom, and Dad. Each of them has been so supportive in different ways, giving the time, space, and strength to finish this endeavor. I love them all so much! Kevin, you kept things going in our house and family while I went to class, spent hours reading, and worked on endless projects. Mom, you were always there to help out with a smile, a Sunday meal, or just a hug when I really needed it. Dad, although you are not here to see the finished project, I know that you have been watching over me, pushing me forward, and giving me that extra drive and fight during the times when I thought I could not move forward. Noah, thank you for doing homework next to me and playing around me as I worked on my big assignment. I can say that my “night work” and “homework” are finished, for now.

I also am so grateful for the support of my Montclair State University family. Monica, you not only helped to light the path for me during this journey, but also helped me identify my voice as a teacher educator and an intellectual. Thank you for putting up with my cranky e-mails and crazy texts, but always reading everything I wrote. Emily, thank you for helping me find my research interest. It was in your class that the first seeds of this study were born, leading in many ways to the birth of Design Your Own
Learning. Kathryn, thank you for helping me learn to dig deeply into the data and find meaning in the words and the process. You were right; it is like wandering in the mud! Natalie, my study buddy and good friend, thank you for always listening to me, working with me, and putting up with me through this process.

Finally, I must thank the faculty of the “real” Lakeside Elementary School. Working with you will forever be such a special part of my career. You are all so smart, talented, and dedicated to teaching. Thank you for teaching me and allowing me to be part of your learning community.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing, loving, and supportive family: my husband Kevin, my son Noah, my mother Claudia, and my father James.
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Chapter One: Introduction

I no longer think of myself as just a teacher of children; I believe that I am part of a larger learning community that requires me to wear several hats. As a teacher, I try to facilitate discussions and provide opportunities for discoveries for my students. Simultaneously, I learn with my students, answering my questions and theirs as we move along together. As a teacher leader, I open up forums for discussions and encourage others to teach and learn together and from each other …providing an open and encouraging environment. (Ryan, 1997)

These words, from the introduction to my portfolio for the completion of my Masters degree, ring true seventeen years later. As an elementary school principal, I was still trying to foster discovery for the students in my school, as well as open those forums that encourage others to teach and learn together and from each other. Those spaces for dialogue and open inquiry are difficult to create and foster in schools, especially among faculty. However, picture a professional learning structure that turns typical faculty meetings into opportunities for professional inquiry. Imagine school-based meetings that encourage faculty to design and direct their own professional learning during the course of a school year. After nine years as the principal of Lakeside Elementary School, I began to employ this type of structure during the 2013-2014 school year in an effort to reimagine the way faculty meetings were structured and used to promote professional learning and school development.

While much has been written and suggested about the changes that should take place in schools, the professional culture of schools has remained static. Too often,
because of the fixed nature of schools and the dominant existence of high stakes testing, professional learning for teachers tends to be determined by policy or administrators alone and is facilitated by those who are not necessarily part of the school community and use pre-packaged programs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). These initiatives run counter to authentic teacher inquiry in which teachers enhance their understanding of students and learning and, ideally, develop new teaching practices (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Authentic inquiry offers teachers opportunities to enhance their understanding of students and learning, to intellectualize their practices and, ideally, to develop new teaching practices (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Lieberman, 1986, 1992). It encourages teachers to problematize their work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Dewey, 1904) and casts teachers as active learners who tend to their professional lives by reflecting upon their work with students and teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Grossman, et. al. 2009, Opfer, & Pedder, 2011).

School cultures create scripts for the way things “should be”, and a change in beliefs is required to promote a change in practice (Darling-Hammond et. al, 2009; Kennedy, 2005; Lieberman, 1992; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). This suggests that schools must wholly conceptualize teaching and learning differently as part of professional learning and development in order to impact classroom practice. Inquiry is a powerful form of professional development that can encourage meaningful, collegial interactions within schools (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Lieberman, 1986;
Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). This type of inquiry enables teachers to become involved in practitioner action research in which all who participate are invested in developing meaningful knowledge and enhancements of their daily practices (Anderson et. al., 2007; Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Newton & Burgess, 2008; Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008). Teachers who engage in action research develop close relationships that foster mutual learning (Harris, 2003). This, in turn, helps teachers make sense of teaching and learning within their own settings (Lieberman, 1986; Richardson, 1994). They demonstrate an interest in scholarly activity that improves their practices as well as a willingness to make their learning and practices public to support professional growth (Blase & Blase, 2009; Lieberman, 1992, Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, Zeichner, 2003).

Changes do happen within schools, often prompted by small groups of teacher leaders (Lieberman, 1986; Lieberman & Mace, 2010) who seek to take charge of their careers and work to intellectualize their work through inquiry and/or participation in action research projects. Over the last ten years or so, much has been written about the work of these teacher leaders (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Lieberman & Mace, 2008, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2005; Lieberman, 2000; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Taylor et. al., 2010). While this work is critical, it still impacts a small pocket of select few teachers who are engaging in this type of professional learning.

More needs to be done in order to make inquiry an integral part of professional learning within schools. Across the country, school administrators and school faculties like mine are working together to make the structural changes necessary to make inquiry
a key element of professional learning within schools. At this time there is very little written about grassroots efforts to make meaningful changes to professional learning structures in schools, the way they came to be, and the impact these types of efforts have had on establishing inquiry as a tool used to promote professional learning for all teachers. It is time to make these types of efforts public and to learn from these experiences in order to foster meaningful changes within the professional cultures in schools. With this practitioner action research study, I seek to add to the body of research related to the ways inquiry is presented and used as a professional learning structure within schools by examining the way I, an elementary school principal, established an inquiry-based series of faculty meetings called “Design Your Own Learning” where teachers were responsible for planning and carrying out professional learning based upon their own inquiry into their daily practices with students in an elementary school. My research is guided by the following questions:

What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure (Design Your Own Learning) in my school?

- How did teachers describe their emerging practice of inquiry?
- How did their learning affect their professional practices?
- What did I, as the principal, learn about implementing an inquiry-based form of professional development?

**Teacher as Intellectual**

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, 1983) the “professionalization” of teaching and teacher development has been highlighted as a means of reforming and
improving the work of public schools in the United States (Lieberman, 1995). This has raised awareness of the need to improve teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions in order to take steps toward improving student achievement (King & Newmann, 2001). A Nation at Risk (Gardner, 1983) issued a call to educators and citizens to better understand learning and teaching, in hopes that such knowledge would inform school practices in useful ways. However, this report lacked specific strategies for meeting goals as well as for funding to support changes (Cohen-Vogel, 2005), resulting, as with other change initiatives, in few concepts making it past the classroom door to make any change in teaching practices (Cuban, 1993).

With the publication of What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future (1996), the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future focused on encouraging schools to think systematically about encouraging and rewarding efforts to investigate and promote excellent teaching within schools. Professional development was positioned as an opportunity to connect teachers in various communities to tackle understanding, problems, challenges, and practice over time (What Matters Most, 1996). This affirmed Dewey’s (1910) claim that problematizing practices and concepts helps make learning experiences intellectually effective. As such, teachers were being challenged to intellectualize their work and take responsibility for questioning their teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cohen, 1988; Giroux, 1988; Lieberman, 1991; What Matters Most, 1996).

This movement toward the professionalization and intellectualization of teaching led to the creation of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (Darling-
Hammond, 1999). The Board developed a set of standards that encouraged a broadened view of teachers, one that moved from individuals simply responsible for curriculum delivery and assessment of student performance, to include their development of curriculum, their learning with and from colleagues, as well their collaboration with families and community agencies (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Value was placed on the concept of practitioner knowledge, making schools sites of rich learning for students and teachers (Lieberman, 1991). Teachers were encouraged to intellectualize their work by questioning their practices and making their work public by learning from and with each other (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). For this study I use the term intellectualize to describe the way I envision teachers engagement in open inquiry: processing and evaluating their daily work in order to become “students of their own practice” (Lieberman & Mace, 2010, p. 78).

As educators worked to professionalize their work, there was a push from educational researchers to identify specifics about what educators do and what they should know to help them better perform in each of these new and revised roles (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001; Shulman, 1987). However, despite people’s best efforts, it was challenging to identify a common knowledge base (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001; Shulman, 1987) as well as to develop a cohesive and coordinated approach to enhancing teacher learning within schools (Eun, 2008; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Since it is understood that “good teaching can come in many forms” (Zeichner &
Liston, 1996, p. 53), this quest to codify teacher knowledge is certainly a challenge we as educators continue to face today.

**Professional Development and Professional Learning in Today’s Schools**

Despite a relatively long history focused on trying to professionalize educators, the bulk of current professional development opportunities in schools typically comprises the use of a pre-packaged program or system and its implementation using directed lessons or presentations for teachers rather than focusing on changing teaching practices in contextualized and meaningful ways or by allowing educators to self-identify ways in which they themselves could change teaching practices to best meet the needs of students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). For example, administrators and teachers continue to look outside the school community for training or support in the form of videos, professional workshops, or work with outside consultants, seeking “instant” ways to improve classroom practices (Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Talbert, 2010). There is a hope that teachers will learn to follow a particular script that will allow them to raise student scores on standardized assessments (Lieberman & Mace, 2008). These scripts are often used in relation to existing school “structures,” such as faculty meetings, professional development days, and professional release time (Cohen, 1988; Elmore, 1996; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Talbert, 2010).

Clearly there has been slow progress toward the goals outlined for professional learning by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Stigler and Hiebert (1999) present one reason for such slow progress, noting that since teaching is such a
constant in our culture, we fail to imagine how it might be changed, much less to truly believe that it should. School cultures create scripts for the way things “should be”, and a change in beliefs is required to promote a change in practice (Kennedy, 2005; Lieberman, 1992; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). The basic culture of schools must be changed in order reap the benefit of any “new curricula or pedagogical techniques - even though they might be better” (Lieberman, 1992, p. 7). This suggests schools must wholly embrace different concepts presented as part of professional learning and development. A community must be fostered that supports a culture of professional learning in which teachers teach, learn from, and share with one another (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Another probable cause is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which shifted the lens from learning (that of both student and teacher) to “training and testing as the bottom lines of the educational process” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 63). No Child Left Behind downplayed the importance of “knowledge of” and “knowledge in” practice, instead pushing assessment and content knowledge and promoting “scientifically based” practices as keys to improving learning for students as well as for teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore, 2004; United States Department of Education, 2004).

Many “professional development” providers present information in a linear fashion with the expectation that teachers will implement these new practices “as is” in classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Richardson & Placier, 2001). This form of professional development is supported by the stance promoted by the No Child Left
Behind Act and is also a result of an absence of a coherent approach to professional learning within many schools, namely one that might help to focus goals, gain investment from practitioners, and promote the problematizing of practices within schools (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Rather than on promoting a community of learners among school faculty members, the emphasis is on promoting a best practices approach to be followed without question or discussion by all (Lieberman & Mace, 2008). Despite the suggestion of research findings promoting the contrary, school cultures in the U.S., in general, still do not promote dialogue about practice among teachers and administrators, nor do they seem to overtly value the wealth of knowledge and learning embedded in the daily work of teaching (Elmore, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

This creates a split in the meaning and conception of professional learning and professional development. Indeed, the two are very different. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), for example, define professional development as learning that accrues “when wholesale participation in teacher learning initiatives is mandated at the school or school system level or when teacher learning is scripted in certain ways it becomes a substitute for grass roots change efforts” (p. 293). This suggests, and resonates with ideas promoted by the No Child Left Behind Act, that professional development guides teachers’ actions but not necessarily their “understandings,” thus helping to identify “best practices” that teachers can use, while not necessarily helping them to learn when to use those practices (Lampbert, 2010; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Opfer & Pedder 2011; Richardson & Placier, 2001). Practitioners, within this framework,
lack choice, control, and voice in their own professional development. Typical professional development opportunities tend to be driven by bureaucratic systems within a school district and to focus on quick fixes in response to data such as test scores or ratings based upon “school report cards” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Opfer, & Pedder 2011). As Hargreaves (as cited in Lieberman & Mace, 2008) notes, policies tend to hinder the development of a learning community by placing too many specific restrictions upon practitioners and not providing them with the supports necessary to develop the structures and relationships needed to intellectualize their practices. Ironically, who is better able to identify ways to improve student learning and performance than the practitioners who work with the children and know the particular challenges of their own setting (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007)?

Professional learning, by contrast, involves an active stance that encourages educators to take responsibility for their professional lives as well as for reflecting upon and rethinking the work they do each day with students (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle 1999, 2009; Giroux, 1988; Grossman, et. al. 2009, Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Professional learning, in this sense then, describes learning that takes place as a result of personal or collective inquiry that supports educators in problematizing their knowledge and understanding of teaching, learning, and students (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Dewey, 1904; Giroux, 1988; Shulman, 1998). This position argues that professional learning is a thoughtful and collaborative experience in which all involved are responsible for their learning as well as for enhancing learning experiences for others (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lieberman
ENCOURAGING TEACHERS

& Miller, 2011; Talbert, 2010). Professional learning involves the opportunity to also make teaching practices and reflection on practices public, thus allowing for a new type of conversation about teaching and learning (Lieberman & Mace, 2010).

The principle difference between professional development and professional learning is located in the ways in which each promotes or challenges typical school structures. While educators may work together during professional development opportunities, the work typically is focused on learning specific strategies and/or implementing or mastering curriculum programs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Elmore, 1996, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). For example, Lieberman and Miller (2011) report that for years, the assumption was that professional development should be delivered by external sources to better help the practitioner; that is, the “outside source” was considered to be an expert who could help the teacher improve his or her practices. This suggests that the work teachers “do” together within these contexts is simply related to the execution of “Program X.” That is, the “expert” taught the teachers how to teach something so that their students can be more successful (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Elmore, 1996, 2004; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). Within this model, a teacher may be shown student scores and provided with an “off the shelf solution” to raise student performance, which would not require practitioners to think about or respond to the academic development of their students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Elmore, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011, Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

By contrast, professional learning’s focus on inquiry requires the development of a culture of learning that engages all members of the school community and is based on
the work educators are doing with their students within their school contexts (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Eun, 2008; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2011; Lieberman, 1991; Lieberman & Mace 2008; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). These types of communities are grounded in the idea that professionals can learn from and with each other within an environment of true collaboration; this orientation underscores the importance of talk and fosters a commitment from practitioners and promotes an understanding of the students’ and practitioners’ learning development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Dewey, 1904; Elmore, 2004; Giroux, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Shulman, 1998; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Kennedy and Kennedy (2011), for example, note that the varied assemblage of ideas in a community of inquiry can influence and be influenced through dialogue, which helps individuals build on each other’s ideas, suggesting that professional learning is more focused on learning and understanding. Lieberman and Mace (2008) note that the communities that develop when teachers have a chance to engage in inquiry, discussion, and reflection about their practices provide spaces to break away from pedagogical loneliness and develop professional collaboration. Thus, it seems critical to examine the ways that a culture of professional inquiry develops at a school and the ways in which engaging in inquiry may encourage practitioners to problematize their teaching in order to become students of their own practices.
Origins of My Practitioner Action Research to the Professionalization of Teaching

There is continuity in inquiry. The conclusions reached in one inquiry become means, material and procedural of carrying on further inquiries. (Dewey, 1938, p. 140)

This practitioner action research study really began over twenty years ago when I was an undergraduate studying to become a teacher. As part of my methods courses I had to do “field work” in “real” classrooms and was fortunate enough to work with an advisor who sought to place me with an amazing mentor teacher. “You really need to see her,” Libby would say, “She’s just dynamite.” And she was. There were no textbooks in Jill’s classroom; students were engaged in project-based learning and authentic reading and writing throughout the day. I was introduced to the concept of “professional reading” and developed a passion for professional texts that still exists today - my copy of Transitions by Regie Routman (1988) remains one of my most prized possessions. I loved learning about teaching and learning.

After graduating from college I was fortunate to get a teaching job almost immediately. My world was turned upside down when I was handed sets of teachers’ manuals for everything from math to spelling. There were three different basal readers from which I was supposed to teach “for on level, below level and above level,” my principal told me. This, after I had invested so much money in trade books for my classroom? Hadn’t she read Transitions too? My confusion must have been obvious to one of my new colleagues who invited me to come to a TAWL (Teachers Applying Whole Language) group meeting that was held at the other elementary school across
town. Here I found a group with whom I could learn to question my practices, listen to ways that other people were teaching, and share what I was experiencing in my own classroom. Thus I learned the importance of a supportive community as well as the value and power of inquiry into my own teaching practices.

Eleven years and two degree programs later I became the principal at Lakeside Elementary School, a school for students in preschool through second grade. By this point in my career my “professional library” could barely fit in my house, much less my new “office.” I just knew that I was going to connect with my faculty because I was one of “them”: I was a teacher. It was a short honeymoon. There are many reasons for this, but foremost the reality that not every teacher thought thinking through, and about, his or her practices was necessary, let alone fun and exciting. In addition, I had to face the reality that there was a good deal of “bad teaching” happening in classrooms. Each room was a model of “sit, spit, and get.” What had I gotten myself into? It was really the first time that I realized I needed to be a teacher of teachers.

The nine and a half years I served as principal were not easy, but they certainly were exciting and educative. I learned that I needed to learn with my faculty; I learned to be a facilitator rather than a “teacher.” There was a transition from a focus on what Lieberman (2000) would call “one size fits all” professional learning solutions to the creation of professional learning spaces that Lieberman might describe as sensitive to “individual and collective development” (p. 221). This transition led me to become a doctoral student, which helped me to identify my position within the educational
community as well as recognize that what I had been talking about and doing for the past twenty years was inquiry.

While the seed of this practitioner action research study may have been planted over twenty years ago, it really sprouted into something real about four years ago, as I was working on a project for a doctoral course entitled, “The Practice of Teacher Education and Teacher Development.” During this course, I read Stigler’s and Hiebert’s (1999) book *The teaching gap: Best ideas from the world’s teachers for improving education in the classroom*. This book was a game changer for me, by helping me understand how school cultures and school structures inhibited the type of professional learning that I believed was so impactful. As I worked on the final project for this course, a paper I called, “Using Time and Space to Foster Professional Learning: Listening to Three Voices from Within a K-8 School District,” the thought occurred to me that while I was talking about the importance of teacher choice in relationship to professional learning, I was not really doing anything to change the structures that support this type of learning within my own school. Thus, the topic-specific faculty meeting was born.

The topic-specific faculty meeting was, in theory, supposed to be my answer to challenging the school structures that Stigler and Hiebert (1999) noted inhibit teacher development. I would try to get a consensus on some topics, and then during set times of the year, teachers themselves would select the meetings they would attend. I was so proud of myself, until I shared the concept with my advisor Monica. “Who sets the agenda?” she asked. “I do,” was my reply. “What if they don’t like the topics?” she asked. “Well…” I tried to come up with something. “You know, this really isn’t inquiry,”
Monica said. I was devastated, but she was right. While this was a step in the right
direction, it was not the leap needed to empower the faculty and help them engage in
 scholarly inquiry about their practices.

In a way, I feel as if I have been involved in action research on teacher
development and professional learning structures since my first day on the job as an
elementary school principal. However, this study focuses on a new faculty meeting
structure I created and introduced to the faculty in June of 2013 called “Design Your
Own Learning.” Using a Google Doc to facilitate whole group collaboration, I
encouraged the teachers to identify possible areas of inquiry and others who might share
those interests. This allowed teachers to make their questions public and helped to create
what Lieberman (2000) might call networks of interest within the faculty. This set the
stage for what would become a series of teacher-designed meetings that would replace
“typical” faculty meetings during the 2013-2014 school year. These meetings, for some
of the groups, essentially became mini action research projects based upon the common
interests and inquiry of the participants.

Taking the time to investigate the Design Your Own Learning structure employed
at Lakeside Elementary School helped me to reflect on and improve the ways in which I
worked with teachers and ensured that the Design Your Own Learning structure provided
the faculty and other groups of teachers with meaningful and authentic learning
experiences as part of their daily work. With this practitioner action research I worked to
analyze, understand, and improve the Design Your Own Learning structure and what it
did to promote inquiry, reflection, and professional learning related to daily teaching. I
have gained insights into ways that I can better foster teacher development and inquiry through the use of such a structure as well as suggest ways that other school administrators and schools may learn to implement a professional learning structure focused on inquiry and action research.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. This first chapter gives a broad introduction to the study and research questions, situating this study within the context of what is known about meaningful professional learning and the current state of professional learning in today’s public schools. Chapter two provides an overview of my conceptual framework focused on the collaborative interactions that promote professional inquiry, as well as a thorough review of the literature that helps to frame and support this research. In chapter three, I explain the methodology I used to complete my practitioner action research, including an overview of the context, participants, data collection, and data analysis. Chapters four and five present the main findings from this study. I use chapter four as a vehicle to describe what I learned about myself as the principal and practitioner involved in this research. Chapter five presents findings synthesized by looking across all data sources collected and identifying key themes that represent new learning. Finally, in chapter six I provide a summary of my data analysis in relationship to the research questions, and I conclude with implications for further research suggested by my findings.
Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework and Review of the Literature

Due to the fixed nature of school cultures and structures, as well as the dominant existence of high stakes testing, professional learning for teachers tends to be determined by policy decisions, program implementation, or administrators working in isolation from classroom practitioners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Elmore, 2004; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Often the professional development offered is facilitated by those who are not typically part of the school community and relies on pre-packaged programs or scripts that "teach" best practices to resolve classroom issues and improve test performance (Elmore, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Talbert, 2010; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). In these scenarios, teachers are typically treated more like performers than professionals with a deep understanding of their work with students (Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). This leaves teachers feeling as if professional learning opportunities within their schools are random and disconnected from their needs as practitioners (Lieberman & Mace, 2008). Much has been written and suggested about the changes that should take place in schools in order to promote professional learning; however, the professional culture of schools has remained static.

With this practitioner action research study, I hope to dig deeper into ways new types of professional learning structures can impact a school and its professional culture. Authentic inquiry provides teachers with vehicles to strengthen their understanding of their students, to intellectualize their teaching and, ideally, to develop new and better practices (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1997;
Lieberman, 1986, 1992). It encourages teachers to problematize their teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Dewey, 1904) and positions teachers as dynamic and continuous learners who reflect upon their daily work with students and colleagues (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Grossman, et. al. 2009, Opfer, & Pedder, 2011). This is what inspired me to develop an inquiry-based series of faculty meetings called “Design Your Own Learning” in which teachers were responsible for planning and implementing professional learning based upon their own inquiry into their daily practices with their students. I seek to add to the research related to the ways inquiry is presented and used as a professional learning structure within schools by examining the way I, an elementary school principal, established and implemented Design Your Own Learning. My research is guided by the overarching question: What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure (Design Your Own Learning) in my school?

I believe that professional learning describes the learning that occurs as a result of personal or collective inquiry and supports practitioners in problematizing their knowledge and understanding of teaching, learning, and students (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Dewey, 1904; Giroux, 1988; Shulman, 1998). It is a thoughtful and collaborative process in which all involved share responsibility for learning as well as allowing colleagues to make teaching practices and reflection on those practices public (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Talbert, 2010). Thus, I frame my work through the lens of the interactions that occur through an inquiry stance toward professional learning.
in schools. This chapter begins with a description of my conceptual framework and provides an explanation of the interactions and forces that work together to create and support professional learning through inquiry. I conclude this chapter with a review of the literature that grounds this study in works that help to frame the ways that inquiry has been used as a vehicle for professional learning within schools.

**Inquiry and Professional Learning**

Professional learning as inquiry into practice is not a new concept; it can be traced back to Dewey’s (1904, 1910, 1916, 1929, 1938) writings on inquiry and reflective thinking. In his work, Dewey (1910) notes the importance of problematizing practices and concepts in order to make learning experiences intellectually effective. For Dewey (1910), “problematizing” describes the process of reflective thought whereby an individual actively questions any belief or knowledge in relation to known facts and circumstances. As mentioned earlier, professional learning is defined here as the problematization of practices and understandings that occurs as teachers and administrators engage together in inquiry and reflective thinking related to their daily work in schools. This process of inquiry allows teachers to form meaningful ideas and theories about their practices (Dewey, 1938). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) illustrate this, noting “inquiry as stance is grounded in the problems and contexts of practice in the first place and in the ways practitioners collaboratively theorize, study and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning and life chances of students and their communities” (p. 123). Schools supporting inquiry encourage practitioners to assess and identify needs for their students and themselves and develop questions that will help them
research and intellectualize their daily work with children (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Giroux, 1988). This conception has its roots firmly in Dewey’s (1904) emphasis on the need for professionals to intellectualize the work of teaching rather than to master a practice.

Quite simply, inquiry involves an individual’s attempt to come to know more about a particular topic or concept by questioning, thinking about, and processing information or situations related to the topic (Dewey, 1910). In relation to this study, a teacher engages in thoughtful action that allows him or her to carefully consider a topic from a variety of perspectives, which enables him or her to develop a deeper understanding and new knowledge about the concept (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1910, 1938; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). The focus of inquiry is typically “prompted by a sense of uncertainty” that causes individuals to pause and “analyze their experiences” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 9). This is an iterative process that involves reflection and observation that supports an individual as he or she constructs a theory or idea related to his or her inquiry (Dewey, 1910, 1938).

Schools as Communities of Inquiry

Inquiry and reflective thinking alone are not sufficient to produce meaningful professional learning for educators. Schulman (1998) expounds on this by explaining that Dewey (1904) views this type of professional learning as a laboratory that allows professionals to experiment with new practices, concepts, and understandings. Inquiry, in this sense, centers and reinforces professional learning within the school and provides all stakeholders with an opportunity to “talk back” to traditional practices, school
bureaucracy, and educational policies (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Teachers and administrators must engage in inquiry that is situated within the context of a variety of experiences that promote interaction between internal and external conditions related to their practices and school environment (Dewey, 1938; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For example, teachers engaged in inquiry look beyond test scores or “what works” and seek to work together to question their own assumptions about teaching, learning, and the role of the school within their own school context and community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). I explore this in relation to the Design Your Own Learning structure as part of this research.

Dewey (1938) notes that quality interactive experiences serve as moving forces: they arouse curiosity, strengthen initiative, and set desires and purposes to carry a person into the future in a different way. Schön (1983, 1987) enables us to build usefully on this by means of his concepts of “reflection in action” and “reflection on action,” which encourages practitioners to engage in reflection that focuses on the parts of and outcomes of practices, both during and after their work with students. Practitioners, according to Schön (1983), define and construct the problems within the context of their daily practices. As teachers engage in the process of reflection, they must also be open to exploring various viewpoints and possibilities related to their inquiry, which may often challenge the validity of personal beliefs and philosophies as well as what is essential in relationship to a particular inquiry (Dewey, 1910, 1938; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This becomes a meaningful and interactive process that supports and challenges educators to
expand and construct professional knowledge that is directly related to their contexts and students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Schulman, 1998).

Professional learning occurs as teachers engage with each other in inquiry that provides them with opportunities to transform and theorize information from their environment (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lawton, Saunders, & Muhs, 1980). Learning through communal engagement is framed by the work of such sociocultural theorists as Vygotsky (1978), Wells, (2001) and Engeström (1987). As teachers work together in inquiry communities, they engage in Vygotsky’s (in McCaslin, 2004) claim that in order to develop deeper levels of knowledge, individuals must go beyond themselves and develop social relations with their external world, using language as a mediating and knowledge building tool (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Teachers in these communities are engaged in inquiry that is embedded in what Engeström (in Lave & Wenger, 1991) names “everyday actions.” These actions and interactions involve a transformation of roles and understanding between what Lave and Wenger (1991) call “newcomers and old-timers in the context of a changing shared practice” (p. 49). Learning is determined by an individual’s increased participation in a community of practice: a person taking on an active role in her or his world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) identify this as legitimate peripheral participation.

**Professional Interactions Frame and Support Inquiry Communities**

Vygotsky (1978) considered language an essential device in transforming individuals as well as communities. The interactive language experiences within a professional learning community provide teachers with opportunities to raise questions
about their practices, student needs, and school culture, all of which have an impact on classroom teaching (Giroux, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991). I believe that language, reflection, and action promote questioning about curriculum and pedagogy and create learning communities in which all members grow and learn in a continuous and iterative process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1910, 1938; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Building on this belief, I will refer to professional learning experiences within this study as those interactions that allow educators to develop and enhance professional knowledge and practices through collaborative inquiry opportunities.

Quality interactions and experiences help to construct a collaborative school inquiry network that is focused on its work with students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1938; Elmore, 2004; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). These networks provide opportunities to develop communities of practice, as described by Wenger (1998), where professionals work collaboratively to construct a shared professional identity and to enhance their professional knowledge. Wenger (1998) notes that interactions within these communities promote common understandings within the group, ultimately enabling all members of the community to be more effective in their workplace: “All of this takes place in a social world, dialectically constituted in social practices that are in the process of reproduction, transformation and change” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 123). Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the ongoing interactions that I believe must occur within a school community to support the definition of professional learning that frames
this research: ultimately, that which promotes meaningful and effective learning for teachers and students within a school.

Figure 1. Interactions and Pressures that Shape Professional Learning Through Inquiry

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) champion interactions in which educators are positioned as researchers, and are focused on and knowledgeable about, the needs, context, and culture of the school. It is my opinion that these types of interactions promote inquiry within a school community. Inquiry centers and reinforces professional learning within the school and provides all stakeholders with an opportunity to test hypotheses, challenge each other, and “talk back” to educational policies (Dewey, 1938; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991). I intend to use this study to explore ways that inquiry allows school faculty to research their practices and develop a
deeper understanding of how children in a school or classroom learn (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note, “inquiry as stance is the idea that educational practice is not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also and more importantly it is social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, who to get it done, who decides and whose interests are served” (p. 121). Significant changes can only be brought about in schools if those involved in the daily work of teaching and learning are actively involved in questioning, reflecting on, and changing their work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). This allows for a continual process of reconstruction that will best serve the needs of the students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1910; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). As school faculty members interact with each other, they may begin to derive greater meaning about their practices through interactions with students (Dewey, 1910). I use this framework as a means to define inquiry for this project as the many professional interactions within a school that promote processing and questioning of student and school needs, professional knowledge and understanding, and practices that open dialogue about ways to address and learn from each.

School inquiry communities are spaces where practitioners are viewed as-and believe they are-knowledge generators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1910; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). In these communities, agency and intelligence are distributed among the members and all participants are regarded as knowers, learners, and researchers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Cohen, 1988; Freire, 1998; Kennedy &
Kennedy, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Inquiry communities require a culture and community that support interactive and collaborative relationships between professionals (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Cohen, 1988; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). This is the lens through which I reviewed the data collected as part of this research and the literature I use to support a rationale for this study.

**Review of the Literature**

My lens on professional learning promotes a focus on inquiry. This view of professional learning casts teachers as active learners and encourages educators to take responsibility for their professional lives by reflecting upon and learning from the work they do with students and other teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Giroux, 1988; Grossman, et. al. 2009, Opfer, & Pedder, 2011). It requires the development of a culture of learning in which all members of the school community are engaged learners exploring and investigating their practices (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Eun, 2008; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2011; Lieberman, 1991; Lieberman & Mace 2008; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). These types of communities rest on the belief that professionals can learn from and with each other within a collaborative environment; this highlights the importance of collaborative discourse and promotes an understanding of the students’ and practitioners’ learning development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Dewey, 1904; Elmore, 2004; Giroux, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Shulman, 1998; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). In this section I present an analysis and discussion of the literature that I believe provides a
sufficient background to support this view of professional learning and inform the goals of this research. As Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest, I used this review of the literature to help establish a dialogue between the data collected and reviewed for this study and the findings others have reported about inquiry-based professional learning structures.

I explored four sets of literature related to inquiry and professional learning using the following categories: “inquiry, professional learning, professional development, and schools;” “professional learning communities;” “action research and professional learning in schools;” and “teachers questions about their practices.” The first category, “inquiry, professional learning, professional development, and schools,” was intentionally broad and best described what I was thinking and wondering about in relation to making changes in the way professional learning is structured in schools. While this review revealed substantial information about inquiry as professional learning in schools, it left me with more questions about a particular structure often used: professional learning communities. Thus, I needed to investigate the literature related to professional learning communities. After reviewing the literature in this category, I learned that while many schools used professional learning communities as vehicles to foster professional inquiry, this structure was not always used in this way. I continued to wonder about ways that teachers engaged in inquiry as professional learning; that led me to explore a corpus related to action research and professional learning. My personal experiences of working with action research groups informed this connection as well as the creation of the Design Your Own Learning Structure, which made a review of this
literature an important part of this research. Ultimately, after reflecting on the literature in all of the categories explored, I realized I was still wondering about teachers and their questions about their own practice. These questions are what drive personal professional inquiry; therefore the final category of literature I reviewed was the research related to “teachers’ questions about their practices.” It is important to note that I also wondered about the literature related to the principal and the principal’s role in fostering professional inquiry within a school, and while I did look for this research, there was none that applied to the focus of this study. This is one reason I believe this research study can add to the field. In sum, the literature reviewed from all of the categories best represents the type of information necessary to frame and conduct my research.

In order to make sense of the literature in relation to the research questions, I sought to identify broad themes that emerged within each group. While reading, I noted certain keywords or themes that emerged in relation to the findings of the study, practicing a form of basic open coding (Merriam, 2009). Initial codes were ideas and concepts that came to mind after I had completed an initial close read of each study. As I reviewed the corpus for each search category, I looked at the themes and codes that I had identified in total and used them to identify larger categories (See Appendix A for more detail) that cut across the codes for each search category (Merriam, 2009). I present this review by search category using the broad themes to present the literature related to each. Together the literature helps to frame an understanding of what is currently understood about inquiry and professional learning within schools and provides the background and understanding needed to support my work throughout the study.
Inquiry, Professional Learning, Professional Development, and Schools

Given the static nature of typical school cultures (Kennedy, 2005; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) and the known importance of actively involving teachers in intellectualizing their teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cohen, 1988; Giroux, 1988; What Matters Most, 1996), it is important to investigate literature related to the ways inquiry has been used to support professional learning in schools. Inquiry encourages teachers to problematize their work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1904; Giroux, 1988) by actively reflecting on and questioning student needs, teaching practices and instructional resources. Inquiry-based professional learning requires the development of a culture that engages all practitioners (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Eun, 2008; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2011; Lieberman, 1991; Lieberman & Mace 2008; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This places teachers and their work with students in the classroom at the center of professional learning opportunities. My analysis of the literature related to Inquiry, Professional Learning, Professional Development, and Schools is presented using three broad themes: community, conversations, and relationships; making teaching an intellectual practice; and balance of power.

Community, conversations, and relationships. “Community, Conversations and Relationships” emerged as the dominant theme across the literature: one that was evident in all but one of the studies in this set of literature (i.e., Austin & Harkins, 2008; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Crockett, 2002; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake & Oliver, 2008; Huffman & Moss, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, &
Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Wood, 2007). The literature in this category suggested that in order for inquiry to have an impact on professional learning, educators needed to develop a sense of trust and community that promoted an open relationship between all those involved. For example, Nelson and Slavit (2007) found that as collaborative inquiry groups met, the professional relationships they formed with one another was more conducive to individuals’ opening up their classroom practices to group examination. The importance of communal interaction suggests that interactions are supported best by meaningful dialogue among the members of the inquiry community.

Maintaining an inquiry stance as an educator requires the ability to question one’s own practices and understandings as well as to engage in an open dialogue with others about teaching and learning. Meaningful dialogues are the focused and interactive conversations practitioners have about their practices and interactions with students within their school contexts (Crockett, 2002; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Huffman & Moss, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Paugh, 2006; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Wood, 2007). Conversations provided teachers and administrators with opportunities to question and share ideas, opinions, and beliefs with one another related to their work with students (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Huffman & Moss, 2008; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Paugh, 2006; Smith-Maddox 1999). For example, Nelson and Slavit (2007) found the members of inquiry groups valued the opportunity to have focused conversations with colleagues
and noted that conversations supported explorations into specific relationships among teachers and their curricula. Likewise, Cuddapah and Clayton (2011) found that dialogues within a new teacher cohort allowed the teachers to identify and discuss understandings about themselves in relation to their teaching. These opportunities to share openly appeared to help teachers to move beyond the four walls of their classrooms by creating a space where a community built on professional relationships and a language of sharing could be established. This allowed for the creation of a space that was free from traditional roles and positions framing practitioners as producers of knowledge and understanding (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Huffman & Moss, 2008; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; Paugh, 2006; Smith-Maddox, 1999).

A number of studies’ findings suggest that dialogue also opened the participating school community up to questions and conflict related to teaching practices and student learning (Crockett, 2002; Nelson, 2008; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; Paugh, 2006). Conflict served as a catalyst for members of a community to question their practices and beliefs, face dilemmas, as well as challenge colleagues to explain concepts or ideas related to their work in schools (see especially Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006). Conflict in this sense provided a sense of disequilibrium for teachers, which, in turn, enabled them to challenge their thinking and practices (Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006). While conflict was not an objective of dialogue, an inquiry stance does promote a challenging dialogue within individuals and between teachers in order to effect change. Crockett (2002) does note that conflict alone does not prompt a teacher to reconsider his or her current thinking. Thus, it appears that current research suggests there is a need for the give and take of a
dialogue where one is defending or closely examining different positions and developing knowledge and working to cultivate understanding in order to bring about change (Crockett, 2002; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006).

The surveyed literature suggests there is a need to develop an understanding of norms and routines related to open dialogue (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011, Huffman & Moss, 2008; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Smith-Maddox, 1999). Schools, these studies suggest, must establish a culture that supports the type of trusting and honest atmosphere needed for inquiry groups to engage in an open dialogue about teaching and learning (Huffman & Moss, 2008; Smith-Maddox, 1999). Typical school cultures are seen to promote isolation between teachers. Structural changes that encourage and enable teachers to interact with each other, while seemingly positive for relationship building, can create a dissonance as teachers weigh this opportunity as another pull on their time (Smith-Maddox, 1999). For example, Smith-Maddox (1999) found that providing the time and space for inquiry discussions alleviated teachers’ guilt about taking time during the day to talk with colleagues, while also validating the importance of these types of professional conversations. The opportunity to talk with others, argues Norman and colleagues, also creates a situation in which teachers need to learn to pause, question, think, and listen to others as they seek to learn more about themselves as teachers (Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005). Time and space provided for dialogue is reported as enabling for a new type of forum that challenges established linguistic norms within schools, creating a stronger, more flexible dialogic community (Huffman & Moss, 2008; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Paugh, 2006).
As inquiry communities begin to form, norms and practices are not enough to spur meaningful interaction between professionals; it appears that communities must also foster relationships and common understandings between the individuals learning together (Nelson & Slavit, 2007; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Wood, 2007). The core of each community relationship is trust in one another, a trust that allows for erasing position and privileging an open and honest dialogue between all involved in the inquiry (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Oliver, 2008; Huffman & Moss, 2008; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Wood, 2007). The research surveyed suggests that time needs to be set aside simply to facilitate a dialogue that supports professionals’ need to simply get to know one another as educators and individuals (Nelson & Slavit, 2007). As inquiry communities develop, ideally a form of distributed leadership is created that respects and values the ideas, questions, and voices of all participants (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Oliver, 2008; Huffman & Moss, 2008; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Paugh, 2006; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013). Distributed leadership is best defined in this context as the uniting of all practitioners within a school context around common goals and beliefs, making all involved responsible partners in achieving these. In these cases there was a shared power that focused on student needs and practices that would support student learning.

Development of an inquiry community also appears to require a set of common understandings that supports the type of climate, structures, and relationships needed to
engage teachers in inquiry into their knowledge and daily practices (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Oliver, 2008; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Sribber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). O’Donnell-Allen (2001) notes the importance of creating an idioculture in which knowledge, customs, beliefs, and behaviors are shared with members of an inquiry community to guide interactions. Without defining the norms for this new type of community, concepts and understandings are vague and there is a risk of superficial implementation of inquiry within the school (Smith-Maddox, 1999; Wood, 2007). Communities require a supportive culture for professional learning in order to get teachers to invest in the inquiry process; they cannot be mandated to participate (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Wood, 2007). There must also be an understanding that all aspects of teaching and the school culture are open for inquiry, including the pressures of today’s testing culture, which can be challenged and questioned within the work of the inquiry community (Paugh, 2006; Wood, 2007).

**Making teaching an intellectual practice.** A second theme that emerged from the literature is something I will call “Making Teaching an Intellectual Practice.” Within this theme, the literature suggests that educators’ inquiry into their daily work could deepen their understandings about students, teaching, and learning as well as transform classroom and school practices (Crockett, 2002; Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Huffman & Moss, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Paugh, 2006; Sribber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Smith-Maddox,
1999; Wood, 2007). The research findings in this category suggested that inquiry communities within schools could support a stance that intellectualizes teaching and promotes deep thought about the work that occurs within schools. Intellectualization in these cases encouraged deep thought, questioning, researching, and sharing of thoughts ideas and practices.

The research suggests that as teachers begin to intellectualize their work, they must be able to formulate questions about their understandings of students, learning, school culture, and structures as well as their practices (Crockett, 2002; Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Smith-Maddox, 1999). A questioning stance was born from the development of educators’ abilities to step back, reflect on, and problematize their daily work (Crockett, 2002; Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Smith-Maddox, 1999). For example, Norman, Kalin, and Hooker (2005), in their exploration of a critical friends group within a professional development school, found that as teachers stopped talking and began listening to and questioning each other, they began to construct their own new understandings of this work. Here, teachers used the time and space to raise the questions that mattered to them—such as classroom management techniques and developing student responsibility—and sought the answers to these through their dialogue and work with the group (Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005).
While the studies suggest the importance of questioning to develop the intellectualization of teaching, several of the works surveyed note that a questioning stance is new to the professional culture of schools (Crockett, 2002; Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Smith-Maddox, 1999). Typical school structures and culture do not open time and space for, nor do they value, deep questions about students, teaching, and learning within schools (Crockett, 2002; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013). Slavit, Nelson, and Deuel (2013), for example, in their research on six teacher groups in middle schools, found that while teachers could spend time analyzing data, it was their stance toward the data that determined the nature of the depth of the inquiry. Specifically, they note that teachers need to approach student data through a stance of improvement and negotiation. The findings suggest that an inquiry or questioning stance enhances a group’s capacity to grow and stretch teachers’ understandings and knowledge (Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013).

The studies suggest that as educators become more open to reflecting on their work, they begin to develop questions that probe into areas that are puzzling, allowing the practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of their teaching (Crockett, 2002; Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Smith-Maddox, 1999). For example, when investigating a small group of middle school educators, Smith-Maddox (1999) found that teachers needed to build and rebuild spaces where they could raise questions
(e.g., What does it mean to be literate?), reflect on their work with students, and develop common understandings related to their inquiry (i.e., demystifying the “game” of schooling for students).

While examining the literature in relation to making teaching academic, I found that a surprising pattern emerged within some of the studies in this category: the importance of protocols in the development of a structure or dialogue that supported the problematization of teachers’ daily work (Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; 2005; Wood, 2007). As has been noted, opening up time and space for educators to engage in dialogue about and question their practices runs counter to the cultural norms that are prevalent within schools. Five of the studies reviewed addressed the role protocols played in enhancing an inquiry community’s ability to develop a trusting community as well as a questioning stance that allows them to begin to intellectualize their teaching (Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007).

Protocols are structures that provide frameworks for professional learning groups to use as they investigate their daily work with students (Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Nelson, & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). While practitioners may appreciate the time and space to intellectualize their practice, they often do not have the tools needed in order to look more closely at student work, student understanding, or their own understanding of their practices (Nelson & Slavit, 2007). For example, Wood (2007)
found that members of learning communities appreciated the ways that protocols helped frame and keep professional conversations focused, reflective, and productive. Norman, et al. (2005) highlight the connection between practitioners’ understanding of inquiry and protocols, having found that when teachers develop a sense of how important it is to examine their practice or student work more carefully, protocols provide them with opportunities for powerful learning about their students and practices.

**Balance of power.** A final theme that emerged while reviewing the literature in this set was “Balance of Power” (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Oliver, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). While each study addressed power and leadership in different ways, the theme emerged as one that supports the creation of an environment that is supportive of practitioner inquiry; provides for time, structures, and space to engage in communal inquiry into daily practices; and creates a balance of power between all participants within the inquiry community (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007).

The literature suggests that in order for inquiry groups to have any type of positive impact on daily practice, a culture of mutual support and collegial learning must be established within schools (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al.2008; Nelson, 2008; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). This culture promotes the types of critical interactions that must occur between practitioners in order for them to participate in meaningful investigations of their
understandings about themselves, their students, learning, and teaching practices (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Nelson, 2008; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). A positive school culture is described within the literature as something that is cultivated not only by the administrators, but also with school administrators, (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Nelson, 2008; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). Members of an inquiry community are responsible for the creation and maintenance of a supportive environment that promotes a culture of sharing, inquiry, and learning (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Nelson, 2008; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007).

A balance of power was also represented in relation to the role of school structures and norms in moving a school toward becoming an inquiry community (Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Wood, 2007). The culture of schools is supported by a variety of structures that promote the social and intellectual norms within the school. The actions of school leaders can help to support and develop these or stifle them, thus propagating a system that supports the status quo (Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Wood, 2007). The literature suggests that “leaders” in these cases do not necessarily mean “administrators;” a leader could be any practitioner who could exert influence over the work of a professional group (Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Wood, 2007). Nelson (2008), for example, found that teachers working within a professional learning community found it difficult to overcome traditional
professional norms associated with collegial relationships, expertise, and the isolation of classroom practices.

Leadership is typically equated with power, and within the literature surveyed, power is an important factor in the success of teacher inquiry (Austin, & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). While power within a school may most often be associated in a school with an administrator, such as a supervisor, principal, or superintendent, the literature suggests that power does not necessarily reside solely within these positions (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). Power within these studies was implied to mean a voice and choice in the ways in which practitioners were working together to help students succeed. For example, Hipp, et al. (2008) found that the power of the whole is built on the teamwork involving shared responsibility among all stakeholders within a professional learning community. In this sense power is related to the ability to effect changes in teaching and learning outside of a single classroom (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Power also emerged as a form of pressure within the literature (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). The power of pressure could be a supportive positive, resulting in a change of stance and moving toward breaking down the typical hierarchical walls and ideology of schools, or the pressure forces could be working to sustain typical power structures and beliefs (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Paugh, 2006; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013;
Wood, 2007). For example, Wood (2007) found that school administrators felt a great deal of pressure to change and improve on many fronts, which stemmed from an increase in state scrutiny on student performance that obfuscated the possible learning opportunities from the creation of teacher learning communities within a school. Paugh’s (2006) research of four novice teachers working in urban districts and participating in a collaborative inquiry group, found that power and pressure of test scores and student performance had a greater impact on instructional practices, forcing teachers to abdicate their own professional knowledge. Collectively, this evidence suggests that the power exerted by a leader or practitioner can either support or stifle the development of inquiry opportunities within a school.

A review of the literature focused on inquiry, professional learning, and professional development in schools provided insights into the ways that inquiry can help teachers intellectualize their practices within the context of a collaborative inquiry community (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Oliver, 2008; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Sribers, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). Very often schools have used the professional learning community structure as a way to foster professional inquiry. However, the literature in this category did not provide solid information about the relationship between professional learning communities and inquiry-based professional learning, which left me with additional questions. This caused me to investigate the literature related to professional learning communities, inquiry, and professional learning. In the following section I discuss what this literature revealed.
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Inquiry, and Professional Learning

Inquiry requires the development of school structures and a culture of learning that engages all members of the school community, and it is based on the work teachers do with their students within their school contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Eun, 2008; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2011). These types of communities are based on the idea that professionals can learn from and with each other within an environment of true collaboration; this orientation underscores the importance of talk and fosters a commitment from practitioners to promote an understanding of the students’ and practitioners’ learning development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Dewey, 1904; Elmore, 2004; Giroux, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Shulman, 1998). Kennedy and Kennedy (2011), for example, note that the varied assemblage of ideas in a community of inquiry can influence, and be influenced, through dialogue, which helps individuals build on each other’s ideas, suggesting that professional learning is more focused on learning and understanding.

One structure that has been embraced by many schools and school districts is the professional learning community (PLC). DuFour (2004) notes that in a professional learning community, there is a focus more on learning than teaching; there is a sense that colleagues must engage in ongoing exploration that fosters a systematic process in which all professionals in a school work together to analyze and enhance their classroom practices. However, many schools and school districts have applied the PLC label to existing structures or school practices and not focused on continuous and engaged inquiry (DuFour, 2007). In a true professional learning community, teachers and teacher leaders
focus on “learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively” (Harris, 2003, p. 314). I present my review of the literature related to professional learning communities using the following themes: a focus on learning, school structures and culture, and going public with professional learning.

A focus on learning. DuFour (2004) notes that a professional learning community is a “powerful new way of working together that profoundly affects the practices of schooling,” which requires school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching and hold themselves accountable for the results of their work (p. 11). Continuous reflection on the relationship between curriculum, teaching, and student performance creates a community focused on constant instructional improvement (Berry et. al., 2005; Dunne et. al., 2000; DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007, 2011; Hollins et. al. 2004; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008). For example, Vescio et al. (2008) in their review of the literature identified that “participation in learning communities impacts teaching practice as teachers become more student centered” (p. 88).

Focusing on student and teacher learning helps foster a sense of ownership among practitioners for their own professional growth as well as for the performance of their students. Participating in a professional learning community helps teachers focus on the relationship between their teaching and their students’ learning (Dunne et. al. 2000; Phillips, 2003). For example, Dunne et al. (2000), reported that teachers who participated in a PLC called a critical friends group “were encouraged to experiment with their teaching, and that teachers in their schools were continually learning and seeking new
ideas” (p. 4). The literature suggests that ownership of and commitment to the improvement process help to empower teachers as critical members of the decision making process (Bezzina, 2006; Englert, 1995; Hollins et. al. 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Vescio et. al., 2008). This helps to foster a culture of collaboration within schools where the knowledge and experience of teachers are honored and respected (Eaker & Keating, 2009; Garrett, 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008). As McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) note, “impact on teachers and teaching has little to do with hierarchical structure and controls and everything to do with the norms, expectations and values that shape the district professional community” (p. 114).

Teachers who focus their work on learning rather than teaching practices appear to engage in research that helps them to sustain improvement and engage in continuous self-reflection. As teachers learn to engage in personal professional research as part of a professional learning community, they develop their capacities to meet their students’ learning needs (Dunne et. al., 2000; Bezzina, 2006; Eaker & Keating, 2009; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Vescio et. al., 2008). For example Englert and Tarrant (1995) found that “changes in teaching practice are much more likely when teachers are genuinely interested in the research questions or are personally motivated to participate in a project rather than being told to participate” (p. 329). The literature also notes the importance of helping teachers to engage in professional research by asking meaningful questions about their students and practices, engaging in open professional dialogue, and being open to
honest feedback and data about the effectiveness of their work with students (Hollins et. al., 2004; Nelson et. al., 2010; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Vescio et. al., 2008).

**School structures and culture.** American schools’ cultural norms typically promote a sense of individualism and isolation among practitioners. In schools where this has been the case, individual and collective reflection or inquiry is unlikely to occur (Bezzina, 2006) unless school structures promote inquiry, and teachers and principals work to strengthen relationships among faculty and create a culture of collaboration (Berry et. al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2007, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Eaker & Keating, 2009; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; Hollins et. al., 2004; Nelson et. al., 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). Englert and Tarrant (1995) suggest that in order to make this happen, emphasis must be placed on the importance of “involving teachers as informed agents, problem solvers and collaborators in the educational change process” (p. 325).

The literature suggests that schools must become places of sustained learning for students and for adults (Berry et. al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Eaker & Keating, 2009; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; Hollins et. al., 2004; Nelson et. al., 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). This begins with the creation of time and space for teachers and administrators to plan together, as well as time for practitioners to question and evaluate the effectiveness of their practices (Berry et. al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2011; O’Donovan, 2007;

While teachers may and do create the time and space needed to engage in professional inquiry, school administrators must be supportive of providing time and supports to all faculty in order to create a school culture that can be reflective and engage in collaborative professional learning (Berry et. al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Eaker & Keating, 2009; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; Hollins et. al., 2004; Nelson et. al. 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). As administrators work to change structures, they are also working to cultivate a belief in the value of collaboration, reflection, and inquiry; and helping to foster capacity in the community (Bezzina, 2006; Dunne et. al., 2000; Eaker & Keating, 2009; O’Donovan, 2007; Supovitz, 2002; Talbert, 2010; Wood, 2007). For example, Supovitz (2002) notes that for communities to focus on instructional improvement there is a need for “organizational structures, cultures of instructional exploration, and ongoing professional learning opportunities that can support sustained inquiry into improved teaching and learning” (p. 1591).

As schools develop into learning communities, they begin to focus more on learning rather than teaching, working on issues related to learning and holding themselves accountable for results that support improvement (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004; Dunne et. al., 2000; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Talbert, 2010). For example,
Strahan (2003) found that once school communities had focused on goals and priorities, “teachers and administrators at these schools used data from formal and informal assessments to target areas for improving teaching” (p. 134). The literature suggests that when schools truly function as professional learning communities, teachers and administrators use “data” as a vehicle to talk about practice and student learning, not simply to identify ways that practitioners can raise scores (Berry et. al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Eaker & Keating, 2009; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Hollins et. al. 2004; Nelson et. al. 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Wood, 2007).

Engaging in honest conversations about student learning, performance, and one’s own practice requires a school culture that is supportive, encouraging, and nurturing for all faculty (Bezzina, 2006). Forging these types of relationships is new for most school faculty and can present a real challenge, as this is in direct opposition to the typical culture of isolation in most schools (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2011; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Nelson et. al., 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010). Faculty often need coaching on ways to work in such collaborative environments, learn to reflect on their own work, engage in professional dialogue, and listen to feedback and give feedback to others (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Hollins et. al., 2004; Nelson et. al. 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010). For example, O’Donovan (2007) notes “Collaboration is more than collegiality. It is hard work, as tough questions must be confronted” (p. 95).
Communities that are focused on learning and instructional improvement bring teachers out of their typically isolated classrooms and encourage them to engage in meaningful and impactful ways with their colleagues (Supovitz & Christman, 2003). The literature is clear that these types of professional communities do not simply appear; they take hard work and solid, effective leadership (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et. al., 2010; Talbert, 2010). A strong and purposeful leader can help to implement and sustain school improvement efforts (Bezzina, 2006). This can be most helpful in trying to create structures that support collaborative work, as well as in providing resources for practitioners to use as they engage in their professional inquiry (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et. al., 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Talbert, 2010). However, leadership is not only limited to those in administrative roles. A commitment to collaboration, teacher engagement, and empowerment increases the opportunities for teachers to see themselves as and to act as, teacher leaders (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et. al., 2010; Talbert, 2010). For example, Garrett (2010) explains, “members of a learning community need to be strong, persuasive leaders who can elicit cooperation from staff” (p. 8). The emphasis then, is placed on ensuring that schools are places where everyone, students and adults, are learning (Eaker & Keating, 2009).
**Going public with professional learning.** As teachers and administrators cultivate professional learning communities within their schools, there must be opportunities for practitioners to go public with their questions, work, and learning (Berry et. al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2007, 2011; Eaker & Keating, 2009; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; Hollins et. al., 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et. al., 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). DuFour (2004) notes, “collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private – goals, strategies, materials, pacing questions, concerns and results” (p. 10). The opportunities for sharing and conversation help to support individual and collective improvement to classroom instructional practices and ultimately student learning (DuFour, 2004, 2007; Nelson et. al., 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007).

Going public begins with the development of a culture that supports the idea that each practitioner’s voice is an important and needed contribution to the collaborative learning process (Berry et. al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004 2007, 2011; Garrett, 2010; Hollins et. al., 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et. al., 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). This is necessary in order to support teachers as they share opinions, ideas, and learn to give and receive constructive criticism in new and challenging relationships that are not the norm for most public schools (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2007, 2011; Garrett, 2010; Hollins et. al., 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et. al., 2010;
O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Talbert, 2010; Wood, 2007). Garrett (2010), for example, points out that lone teachers, even when very capable, may languish in isolation while the support of “colleagues in the learning community create a team even more resilient than the strengths of its individual experts” (p. 6). This allows for the community to share information honestly and to focus decisions based on knowledge of their particular contexts, goals, student needs, as well as their existing and newly learned professional knowledge (Vescio et. al., 2008).

The literature suggests that teachers become more comfortable going public with their questions about curriculum and pedagogy, concerns for student performance, and their wonderings related to their classroom practices when practitioners view themselves as having ownership of, and a say in, the professional learning process (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2007, 2011; Garrett, 2010; Hollins et. al., 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et. al., 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). This must develop as members of the community come to recognize that learning to teach is a “continuous process that requires reflection on one’s own practice, dialogue and collaboration with colleagues and the acquisition and production of new knowledge concerning the multidimensional process of teaching” (Hollins et. al., 2004, p. 247). In their study, Hollins et al. (2004) found that dialogue during study group meetings progressed from focusing on daily challenges and defending practices to seeking more insight from literature, sharing ideas and suggestions, and focusing on developing new approaches to teaching that would best meet the needs of their students. This suggests that as
practitioners’ voices are valued, and their goals, ideas, and needs are heard, they recognize their growing role and responsibility in shaping professional learning that will help them to best support the needs of students within their classrooms and schools (Berry et al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2007, 2011; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; Hollins et al., 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et al., 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008; Wood, 2007).

Professional learning communities provide schools with opportunities to change their professional learning structures. They allow for teachers to talk with one another and share ideas about their practices and student needs. However, professional learning communities must be fostered and structured carefully to avoid a very contrived and controlled view of inquiry created in the name of school improvement (Berry et al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2011; Dunne et al., 2000; Eaker & Keating, 2009; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Hollins et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2010; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Wood, 2007). When a professional learning community functions authentically, it can appear as if teachers are involved in mini action research projects based upon their own work with students. I began to wonder if there was indeed some connection between what researchers had found about action research and professional learning, prompting me to search for literature using this category. I summarize my analysis of this literature in the next section.
Action Research and Professional Learning in Schools

Authentic professional learning happens continuously through practice and experience (Lieberman & Mace, 2008). It occurs daily as teachers engage with each other in inquiry and provides them with opportunities to transform and theorize about information from their environment (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lawton, Saunders, & Muhs, 1980). In a sense, teachers are engaging in a form of practical inquiry that has a greater likelihood of leading to immediate classroom change (Lieberman, 1986; Richardson, 1994). This can occur in both formal and informal settings (Lieberman & Mace, 2008, 2009) and is based on the teachers’ practical firsthand knowledge of what is needed to promote and support student learning in their settings (Dozier, 2007). Action research is one, more formal way practitioners can engage in professional inquiry.

Action research involves inquiry into “one’s own practice,” (McNiff, 2001, p. 5) influencing the quality of education. It requires that teachers collect evidence related to their daily work with students that can help them evaluate the effectiveness of their practices (McNiff, 2001). Action research is one way in which teachers can engage in a process of professional inquiry that enhances professional learning and classroom practices (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Lieberman, 1992; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009).

There is a complex nature of interactions, relationships, and intellectual stances needed to support action research within school settings (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Lieberman, 1992; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). Inquiry is a powerful form of professional development that can encourage meaningful, collegial interactions within schools (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Lieberman, 1986;
Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). Teachers who engage in inquiry through action research develop close relationships that foster mutual learning (Harris, 2003). This, in turn, helps teachers make sense of teaching and learning within their own settings (Lieberman, 1986; Richardson, 1994). They demonstrate an interest in scholarly activity that improves their practices, as well as a willingness to make their learning and practices public to support professional growth (Blase & Blase, 2009; Lieberman, 1992, Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009, Zeichner, 2003). A review of the literature related to action research and professional learning is presented through the lens of three overarching themes: capacity, culture, and structures; empowering teachers; and continuous professional learning.

**Capacity, culture, and structures.** Action research provides teachers with opportunities to challenge typical school social and professional structures (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Lieberman, 1986; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). Schools generally have well established lines of demarcation for roles and responsibilities among faculty that tend to present a barrier to creating the types of professional cultures and structures necessary to support action research (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). In order to improve student achievement, changes must be made to schools' capacities to promote teacher learning which will in turn require enhancement to schools' professional cultures, as well as to the structures that commonly define professional learning (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). As Harris (2003) notes, “attention must be paid to building an infrastructure to support
collaboration and creating the internal conditions for mutual learning” (p. 321). Professional learning has to be built into the typical “work lives” of all educators in order to promote meaningful and ongoing research into teaching practices (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003).

The literature suggests that, in order to enhance a school's capacity to support teacher learning, professionals who work within the school must develop a sense of agency (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). For example, Zeichner (2003), reporting on the nature and impact of teacher research, notes that being part of a research group helped teachers to recognize the importance of collaborative work, which increased the level and the quality of conversations between professionals within the building. This helps to establish a sense of professional interdependence among faculty members: the sharing of roles and responsibility to help improve teaching and learning at the school (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003). Professional interdependence involves an evolving concept of leadership within schools that can help to establish norms and structures that eradicate the professional isolation typically experienced by practitioners in the United States (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009). Developing agency can help build more positive professional relationships between faculty and can create situations in which colleagues need to challenge entrenched norms within a school culture (Blase & Blase, 2000; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). As Harris (2003) writes, “Schools need to build a climate of collaboration premised upon communication, sharing and opportunities for teachers to work together” (p. 321).
Empowering teachers. Engaging in action research as professional learning can empower teachers to develop a greater sense of confidence and ownership in their knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). The literature suggests that when teachers have a greater role in their own professional learning, the opportunity is created to positively transform school cultures and diminish teacher isolation (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2003). Teachers begin to construct an evolving sense of leadership in which practitioners are focused on making meaning out of their daily practices (Harris, 2003). As Blase and Blase (2000) note, this helps to support a shift toward the conception of teacher as a constructor of knowledge and meaning rather than simply a consumer of practical ideas. When teachers are empowered to “own” their professional learning, they are encouraged to reflect on their practices, experiences, the needs of their students, and their own professional needs in order to form new understandings based upon their work (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003).

In order to empower teachers to engage in action research as professional learning, the literature suggests, school communities must make changes that promote a sense of collaboration and allow each practitioner a meaningful voice in ongoing professional conversations (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). Zeichner (2003) reports that when teachers engage in action research, the influence of the
experience can have both positive and challenging effects on the school community. Spaces for greater communication about teaching and learning within a school tend to open when teachers engage in meaningful, intellectual work with their colleagues (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). Conversely, active engagement and collaboration create a direct challenge to the traditional roles of teachers, colleagues and administrators widely accepted by most school staff (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). In order to best face the challenge to school cultures and structures, teachers need to be supported in the creation of professional learning communities that foster open dialogue, that is, being helped to mediate, generate, and process ideas, while staying focused on the common purpose for the school community (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). This requires a commitment to creating structures that allow regular time for conversations and inquiry into teaching and learning as part of each educator's workday (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003).

**Continuous professional learning.** As schools employ action research as a form of professional development, school faculty are engaged in continuous professional learning. This sets the stage for the development of a “new professionalism” among practitioners within a school culture that emphasizes inquiry into teaching and learning (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). Research into daily practice provides a very personal and classroom-focused lens on teaching and learning; it also occurs within the context of the
collaborative learning community of the school (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). This is a shift for most practitioners who typically are not afforded the time, space, and encouragement to share and problematize their practices (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). When all teachers learn together, as Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) found in their report on teacher development, all of the students within the setting benefit.

Establishing a focus on continuous professional learning encourages a change in school cultures and structures that customarily do not afford school faculty the opportunity to engage in meaningful and ongoing professional development (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). The literature suggests that school faculty must reconceptualize their view of leadership within a school or school district (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003). A broader view of leadership helps to foster a sense of collective responsibility and power, as well as a commitment to shared learning (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003). This helps to promote structures such as: time to observe colleagues, built in opportunities to engage in professional inquiry within the school day, and control over the professional development process (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). Teacher knowledge and input are valued and considered significant in schools that have embraced continuous professional learning (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). The literature suggests that the time spent
investing in a collaborative learning community will yield a culture that embraces thoughtful dialogue and increased reflection on daily work with students (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Richardson, 1994; Zeichner, 2003).

Teachers who engage in continuous professional learning should begin to conceptualize themselves as teacher researchers. Zeichner (2003) notes that engaging in ongoing and intensive inquiry and reflection helps teachers generate meaningful knowledge about their settings, confidence in their teaching, and confidence in their abilities to influence the circumstances in which they teach. As teachers participate in action research, they have opportunities to problematize their setting, their practices, and their understandings of teaching, learning, and students’ needs (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). In their study of effective instructional leadership, Blase and Blase (2000) found that the iterative cycle of inquiry and action research helped teachers to build “repertoires of flexible alternatives rather than collecting rigid teaching procedures and methods” (p. 132).

As teachers engage in action research, they are empowered to engage in a meaningful and continuous cycle of professional learning. The literature also describes this as a collaborative experience that requires teachers and schools to develop the capacity to engage in the action research process. The literature reviewed to this point revealed a great deal about what researchers have found about developing capacity within the school community; however, I found little about teachers’ capacities to ask meaningful questions that would drive their inquiry. Ironically, this seems to also be a
focal point of this study, which makes it critical to investigate. In the final section, I present my review of the literature related to teachers’ questions about their practices.

**Teachers’ Questions About Their Practices**

When looking at any types of initiatives that would support changes in classroom practices, one must consider the varied needs of teachers, placing them at the center of any change (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). This requires a knowledge of how teachers learn and develop as they work with students in their schools (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Cobb, McClain, deSilva Lamberg, & Dean, 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, Cochran-Smith, McDonald, & Zeichner, 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Teachers’ decisions and actions help transform ideas into reality: they help transform learning and visions into actions in the classroom (Brookfield, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). For example, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) note that while teachers are asked to teach in ways different from their past practices, success “depends on how teachers are able to learn the new skills and un-learn previous beliefs and practices” (p.2).

In order to help support and promote meaningful changes in their practices, teachers need to develop the ability to reflect on and question their current practices.
(Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb, McClain, deSilva Lamberg, & Dean, 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). However, the individualistic culture of teaching and schools often can stifle teachers’ abilities to think critically about their practices as part of a larger professional culture (Richardsion, 2003). Therefore practitioners, school administrators, and others involved with professional learning opportunities for teachers need to foster teachers’ abilities to become reflective practitioners within a professional community (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). I present the literature related to teachers’ questions about their practices using the themes: teaching as a profession, schools as professional communities, and teacher learning and development.

**Teaching as a profession.** As teachers engage in reflection on their practices, they develop a sense of themselves as teachers, as well as a conception of what it means to be a reflective practitioner (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb, McClain, deSilva Lamberg, & Dean, 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998;
Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Teachers begin to identify the need to break out of the isolation of their classrooms and work as a colleague with other professionals within the building to help enhance their understandings of their practices (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). For example, Hammerness et al (2005) share, “teachers also need to understand how to work with others in the school and community to become leaders who can collaborate to change system constraints when they seem clearly less than ideal” (p. 365).

While all teachers need to be ready to teach, an important component of being a teacher is being able to engage in intelligent and adaptive action (Shulman & Shulman, 2004). While teachers have some understanding of practices and knowledge of content, teachers must continue to question and develop their expertise in these areas throughout their careers (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). In fact, as Brookfield (1995) notes, “without this habit (reflective) we run the continual risk of making poor decisions and bad judgments” (p. 3). This suggests that length of experience will not always lead to greater insight and wisdom without a good deal of critical analysis on one’s knowledge and practices (Brookfield,
Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) note that “Being a professional involves not simply ‘knowing the answers’ but also having the skills and the will to evaluate one’s practice and search for new answers when needed, at both the classroom level and the school level” (p. 116).

The literature suggests that teaching is a complex profession that requires the integration of many areas of knowledge (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). In order to do this effectively, teachers must engage in reflection on their practices and the varied needs of their students (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). However, this requires a shift in individual beliefs about the teaching profession as well as the ways that schools support teachers as they engage in professional learning and reflection (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). As Darling-Hammond and Baratz-
Snowden (2007) note, “It also means finding ways for teachers to learn about practice in practice” (p. 115).

As teachers develop a conception of themselves as reflective practitioners, they challenge traditional views of the teaching profession (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Larrivee (2000) shares that, “critical reflection involves examination of personal and professional belief systems, as well as the deliberate consideration of the ethical implications and impact of practices” (p. 294). This does not happen to the individual alone; it is part of practitioners engaging with each other in a professional community (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). For example, Costa and Kalilick (1993) found that “you need another person to continually change your focus, pushing you to look through multiple lenses in order to find that ‘just right’ fit for you the ultimate owner of the glasses” (p. 49).

**Schools as professional learning communities.** Schools that support and establish a solid and vibrant professional learning community help to support teachers as they engage in the practice of self-reflection and questioning of their practices
(Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). The literature demonstrates that in these types of schools, the culture is supportive of professional inquiry and dialogue (Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). This is in stark contrast to the typically individualistic culture of most schools and the teaching profession in general (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). As Richardson (2003) notes:

If once in a while we feel it is necessary to adjust these individualistic norms toward a more collective sense of teaching, we must first acknowledge their pervasiveness and then work to create an environment and the supporting structures to encourage the operation of voluntary collectivities with communal goals and actions around important topics in instruction. (p. 403)

In order to establish a culture in which educators can engage in open and honest dialogue and reflection about their practices, school administrator and teachers need to
establish the rituals and expectations that support these practices (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

Ongoing opportunities for collaborative work provide teachers with the opportunity to learn about, experiment with, and reflect on new practices within their context and share knowledge and expertise (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Learning to engage in collegial work helps to promote and support the understanding of the value of making professional experience and knowledge public in order to enhance teaching practices (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

Teachers working in professional communities learn the value of discussion as well as the importance of examining professional practices and understandings (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Brookfield (1995) highlights this, saying, “By openly questioning
our own ideas and assumptions - even as we explain why we believe in them so passionately - we create an emotional climate in which accepting change and risking failure are valued” (p. 19). As teachers develop the ability to be critically reflective, they are challenging typical hegemonic school values and learning to negotiate feelings of frustration, rejection and insecurity (Larrivee, 2000). The literature suggests that schools that have evolved as professional learning communities have established a culture in which professional development is a fully integrated system that supports school goals as well as teacher and student learning (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

Schools that have developed as professional communities provide the resources needed to develop and sustain these communities (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). The literature is clear that the necessary resources come in the form of time, structures, opportunity, materials and human resources (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001;
Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Shulman and Shulman (2004) refer to this as “capital”, distinguishing between “venture capital, which represents the provision of financial incentives and supplies, curricular capital, cultural or moral capital and technical capital” (p. 267).

This literature makes evident that of all resources, time and opportunity are the most critical in order to create a school culture that views itself as a professional community (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) refer to these as systems that provide teachers with the time and strategies necessary in order to work collaboratively. Whole schools and faculty must challenge typical school cultures in order to reimagine the ways in which schools budget, plan for, and use time for professional learning (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). This includes the ways both schools as a collective and individual practitioners make time for critical inquiry into their teaching (Larrivee, 2000).
Providing time alone does not necessarily help school faculty use that time to reflect on the impact and effectiveness of their practices; schools must also help teachers learn to develop the skills necessary to have an inquiry stance toward their teaching (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). For example Hammerness et al. (2005) note, “teachers also need to understand how to work with others in the school and community and to become leaders who can collaborate to change system constraints” (p. 365). Richardson (1998) suggests that this work helps to create an ecology of thinking that supports teachers as they question their work and try new ideas. Skilled coaching in collaborative peer groups helps teachers to develop, strengthen, and refine teaching skills together (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007).

As school communities furnish the resources necessary to support professional learning, they help to promote a new way of thinking about teaching practices, professional interactions and professional development (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). This is in line with the reform agenda cornerstones that promote a career long conception of teacher learning.
and a learner centered view of teaching (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Additionally, schools that develop as professional learning communities create a coordinated plan for professional development that focuses on the needs of the students and classroom and school environments (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). As Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) note, this helps “teachers to learn about practice in practice, so that concrete applications can be made and problems of practice can be raised, analyzed and addressed” (p. 115).

**Teacher learning and development.** As teachers engage in the process of questioning their daily practices, they must develop a stance toward the ways that teachers learn and the best ways to develop their knowledge about teaching (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). This requires practitioners to come to terms with typical conceptions of teachers and teaching, and adopt an improvement orientation that challenges teachers to redefine their roles and understanding of teaching, students, and learning (Brookfield, 1995; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond
& McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Richardson, 2003). As Brookfield (1995) notes, “The most distinctive feature of the reflective process is its focus on hunting assumptions” (p. 2). The literature shows that in order to do this, schools need to adopt a culture in which teaching and teaching practices are made public and shared within the school (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

Teachers who question their practices come to recognize the importance of a supportive and collaborative school community (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). The professionals in these schools help to create a culture with a supportive emotional climate that accepts change and values risking failure as part of the inquiry process (Brookfield, 1995). Garet et al. (2001) found that “teachers who work together are more likely to have the opportunity to discuss concepts, skills and problems that arise during their professional development experiences” (p. 922). The literature notes the role of school or district administrators in helping to cultivate and support this type of environment, suggesting
that administrators must also learn to reflect on and rethink their practices (Brookfield, 1995; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 2003). For example, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) said, “Evaluation of leadership must take account of whether administrators have been effective in establishing and supporting a culture of learning and enquiry” (p. 4).

As teachers become more aware of their needs as learners, they begin to focus more on their practices as a means to best meet the varied needs of every student (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). This places teachers’ daily work at the center of professional development opportunities, and makes them a coherent part of school improvement (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). As Hammerness et al. (2005) note, “In schools, ‘appropriate’ is defined by both professional and community standards and by the needs of particular students” (p. 365). The literature suggests that practitioners then have more say and power in selecting, planning, adapting and directing professional learning opportunities.
The literature notes that in order for teachers to engage in collaborative professional learning, they must become focused on their own learning and identify ways they can learn from practice, as well as the ways they can become adaptive experts through collaborative reflection (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). This allows for differentiated professional development opportunities that can best meet the specific needs of practitioners (Brookfield, 1995; Cobb et al., 2003; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Teachers must become accustomed to making use of resources to support their learning, recognizing that there are no quick fixes or cure-alls that will address any problem of practice (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001;
Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Additionally, the literature suggests that practitioners need to develop a mindset that recognizes the ongoing nature of meaningful professional learning (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et al., 2003; Cobb et al., 2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004).

**Summary**

With this practitioner action research study, I seek to learn about the ways new types of professional learning structures can impact a school and its professional culture. Authentic inquiry encourages teachers to problematize their daily work, providing practitioners with an opportunity to strengthen their understanding of their students and intellectualize their teaching (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Dewey, 1904; Lieberman, 1986, 1992). Through this lens, teachers are viewed as dynamic and continuous learners who actively reflect upon their practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Grossman, et. al. 2009, Opfer, & Pedder, 2011).

I began this chapter by sharing my conceptual framework, describing the many interactions and pressures that work together to create an environment that promotes and supports inquiry. This frame describes professional learning as a result of personal or collective inquiry, supporting practitioners in problematizing their knowledge and understanding of teaching, learning, and students (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007;
Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Dewey, 1904; Giroux, 1988; Shulman, 1998). This framework views inquiry-based professional learning as a responsive, continuous, thoughtful and collaborative experience in which all involved share responsibility for learning as well allowing colleagues to make teaching practices and reflection on practices public (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Talbert, 2010). I concluded the chapter with a thorough review of the literature related to inquiry-based professional learning in schools. This was presented by various search categories including: “inquiry, professional learning, professional development, and schools;” “professional learning communities;” “action research and professional learning in schools;” and “teachers’ questions about their practices.” A review of the literature from the initial category focused on inquiry, professional learning, professional development, and schools and led me toward a review of additional literature from the subsequent categories. I concluded my review with literature related to teachers’ questions about their practices, a category that plays a large part in informing this research. In sum, the whole collection of literature helps to provide a background in ways inquiry has been used as a vehicle for professional learning within schools and what has been learned from these endeavours.
Chapter Four: Methodology

We might think of freedom as an opening of spaces as well as perspectives, with everything depending on the actions we undertake in the course of our quest, the praxis we learn to devise. (Greene, 1988, p. 5)

I begin this discussion of the methodology with an explanation of my beliefs and stance in relation to the context and content of this study. As a teacher and administrator, I have always sought to make learning meaningful for myself and for my students. I believe that I am responsible for my learning, often rebuffing imposed ideas or suggestions that I do not believe are connected to my work with students. After more than twenty years in education, as an elementary school teacher, an elementary school principal and district administrator, this belief has not changed. What has changed, as a direct result of my doctoral studies, is a growing understanding of the need for all practitioners within schools to engage in personal professional learning as members of a collaborative inquiry-based learning community.

As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note, engaging in collaborative professional inquiry helps practitioners to expand their conceptions of teaching and learning. I believe that this has been necessary for me, both as a teacher and an administrator. I believe that professional educators are those who are capable of and responsible for knowing curriculum and pedagogy, while also possessing the ability to identify, pose, and investigate solutions to challenges and problems that arise in everyday practice (Cochran-Smith et al.; 2009, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; McNiff, 2001; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This helps school
practitioners to live the concept of *lifelong learning*, and promote a professional culture in which practitioners “raise questions and continuously learn how to teach by research and reflecting on practice across the professional life span” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 17). As a building principal, I was in a position in which I could create a structure that provided time and space for my faculty to engage in true collaborative inquiry, with the hope of promoting a professional stance that encourages practitioners to recognize the ways that they can learn from their students and teaching practices everyday (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This greatly influenced my decision to engage in practitioner action research in order to take a close and honest look at the professional learning structure and practices I initiated at Lakeside Elementary School.

**Practitioner Action Research**

Taking the time to investigate the Design Your Own Learning structure helps me to reflect on and improve the ways in which I work with teachers as well as to ensure that the Design Your Own Learning structure provided the faculty with meaningful and authentic learning experiences as part of their daily work. Since my goal was to analyze, understand, and improve the Design Your Own Learning structure and what it does to promote inquiry, reflection, and professional learning related to daily teaching, it made sense to engage in practitioner action research (Anderson et. al., 2007; Coghlan, 2007; Gibbon, 2002; Kuhne & Weirauch, 2001; Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008; Rearick & Feldman, 1999). Practitioner research is focused on generating knowledge and producing action driven by practical outcomes (Park, 1999).
Anderson et al. (2007) define action research in education as:

“insider” research done by practitioners using their own site (classroom, institution, school district, community) as the focus of their study. It is a reflective process but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions. (p. 2)

The concept of Design Your Own Learning was born of my daily interactions with faculty, my questioning of school structures, and the way I employed them to help develop teachers’ knowledge and understanding of their practices; this process of asking and living the questions, and making continuous revisions and improvements is the whole focus of action research (Battaglia, 1995; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Newton & Burgess, 2008). During my tenure as principal of Lakeside Elementary School, the faculty often expressed a desire to have a greater voice and control over their professional learning at work, making an inquiry into the Design Your Own Learning Structure significant to ensure that it served as a vehicle to provide teachers with that meaningful voice and control. Practitioner action research views the participants as collaborators, assuming that all who participate are invested in developing meaningful knowledge and enhancements to their daily practice (Anderson et. al., 2007; Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Newton & Burgess, 2008; Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008).

Given my role as principal of the building for almost ten years, I was deeply connected to and passionate about this study. As a building insider and an administrator, I was in a unique position to help work toward a change that would address the faculty’s
desire to have a voice in professional learning within the school. My position was complex since I was all at once the researcher and the researched, observing and reflecting on myself and the process as it evolved (Hase, 2000; Phelps & Hase, 2002). This research was a living process that changed the school, the Design Your Own Learning structure, and me (Anderson et. al., 2007). Participating in action research afforded me the opportunity to engage in self-reflective problem solving alone and with the faculty, as well as the chance to theorize my practices (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1998; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; McNiff, 2001). This, in turn, led to opportunities to generate practical knowledge about inquiry-based professional learning structures that helped to promote development within Lakeside Elementary School and would possibly transfer to other similar school settings. As Anderson et al. (2007) note, "researchers are using data in such a way as to inform their own actions as well as contribute to knowledge production in education" (p. 158).

Practitioner action research also allows me to challenge dominant traditional research stances by viewing my work and the work of the teachers in my school as credible opportunities to create professional knowledge and develop educational theory (Anderson et. al., 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Coghlan, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff, 2001; Trodsen & Sandaunet, 2009). Anderson et al. (2007) note, "in this age of mandating evidence-based practices, who better than school insiders to produce evidence about what works" (p. 14). I have chosen practitioner action research because I feel it is important for me to position myself inside the research and focus on my work in relation to the creation and implementation of the Design Your Own Learning Structure.
as well as the way in which the structure itself provides a vehicle for teachers to engage in professional inquiry. In a sense I was in a unique position to challenge established norms within the school and produce some ‘noise’ that promoted disequilibrium in the setting and within myself (Phelps & Hase, 2002).

Design Your Own Learning came about as a result of my initial implementation of topic-specific “drop in” faculty meetings. The topic-specific faculty meeting was, in theory, supposed to be my answer to challenging the school structures that Stigler and Hiebert (1999) noted inhibit teacher development. As noted earlier, this was a step in the right direction; however, it was not the leap needed to empower the faculty and help them engage in scholarly inquiry about their practices. It was this wondering and wandering that led me to implement Design Your Own Learning with the faculty during the 2013-2014 school year. Design Your Own Learning was a series of teacher-designed meetings that replaced “typical” faculty meetings. In a sense, simply questioning the way structures were employed to support professional learning and implementing these ideas was a start to the action research process (Anderson & Herr, 2015). It afforded a space to focus more on what I was learning about and from Design Your Learning and how the inquiry process helped to transform our conceptions about school structures, professional learning, and roles within the school (Coghlan, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2001)

The Design Your Own Learning structure required a teacher or groups of teachers to identify a topic of interest for their inquiry, as well as questions that would guide their inquiry during the year. The teachers would then meet several “official” times during the school year. For some of the groups, these meetings essentially became mini action
research projects in which they formalized research, collected data, and sought to come to real conclusions to their questions. During the first year of implementation, I systematically collected data in the form of feedback surveys, critical incident and reflection memos, and artifacts from meeting agendas and group learning plans. I viewed myself as a “participant outsider” since I was interested in seeing what would happen with the structure itself, and I wanted to give my faculty a true “emancipatory research” (Newton & Burgess, 2008) opportunity. It was also a way of tacitly acknowledging the complexity related to my role as building principal. During this first year I reviewed the data for basal information that would help me support the work of each inquiry group. I looked more closely and systematically at the first year data after the end of the first year of implementation. While I reviewed the data during the year, which included faculty input and feedback, I was committed to running the structure for the year as it was planned. To make drastic changes mid-year or to intrude in a heavy-handed way on the teachers’ inquiry might, I felt, jeopardize the faculty’s willingness and opportunity to engage in the inquiry process. I believe that this also assured the faculty that I was not trying to control or micromanage their professional learning. The truth being constructed was in the inquiry process itself, not a specific choice or action (Dickens & Watkins, 1999).

Therefore, with this study I purposefully bridge one complete action cycle - plan, act, observe, reflect (Lewin, 1948) - and the start of a second cycle related to the Design Your Own Learning structure. Using data from the 2013-2014 school year, I identified any challenges as well as suggested revisions to the structure. I collected new data from
September 2014 through February 2015 in order to systematically analyze and problematize the implementation of an inquiry-based professional learning structure such as Design Your Own Learning (see Figure 2). I feel the research has increased my ability to be a reflective practitioner, foster a professional learning culture for faculty, and find ways I can enhance my daily work with teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Coghlan, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Newton & Burgess, 2008; Schön, 1983). In addition I believe that this work generates meaningful and practical professional knowledge that can be shared with other practitioners (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2.** A review of the data collected and processed as part of this action research

**Research Questions**

My research was guided by the following questions:
What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure (Design Your Own Learning) in my school?

- How did teachers describe their emerging practice of inquiry?
- How did what they were learning affect their professional practices?
- What did I, as the principal, learn about implementing an inquiry-based form of professional development?

**Context and Participants**

I completed my study at the small suburban PreK-2 elementary school where I was the principal from January 2005 through September 2014. Lakeside Elementary School is one of three elementary schools that comprise this K-8 school district of about 900 students located just miles outside a major Northeast city. This study includes data collected from June 2013 through February 2015, the bulk of the data resulting from "normal educational practices" (Anderson et. al., 2007, p. 137) related to the Design Your Own Learning structure. This time span includes the initial introduction of Design Your Own Learning, the first year of implementation, and the first half of the second year of implementation after revisions suggested by the first year data and collaboration with the faculty had been made and implemented to the structure.

Lakeside Elementary School houses all of the preschool, kindergarten, and first and second grade students from this primarily working class town. There are approximately 330 students who attend the school, including special education students in self-contained learning sections in these grades. As principal, I supervised 32 full time teachers who were participants in the Design Your Own Learning structure during the
course of the study. The faculty is comprised of 16 regular education homeroom teachers and 6 special educators who provide resource support for classified students and basic skills for general education students. In addition there are four related arts (physical education, art, music and media) teachers, three special educators who teach self-contained special education classes, one school nurse, and two speech pathologists. All are certificated staff members and each comprises the “faculty” that participated in Design Your Own Learning at Lakeside Elementary School. As part of the structure, faculty members grouped themselves based upon common research interests; therefore, there were no assigned groupings or topics.

I introduced the Design Your Own Learning structure in June 2013, using a faculty meeting as an opportunity to talk about the structure, goals, and "inquiry" in general (see Appendices 2-4). At the start of the 2013-2014 school year teachers named their inquiry goals, identified colleagues who had similar research interests, and formed collaborative learning groups for their Design Your Own Learning meetings during the year (see Appendix E and Appendix F). Inquiry, as we defined it collectively, (See Appendix C) involved asking questions to guide professional development that allowed teachers to learn from and with each other through meaningful dialogue and research. Design Your Own Learning took the place of typical monthly faculty meetings throughout the school year, providing the teachers with five designated meetings during that school year. Each team needed to submit a learning proposal for the year (see Appendix F) as well as an agenda for each of the "official" meetings. While the teams were asked to share their plans and agendas with me, I did not “approve” or comment on
them. In fact, I consciously did not follow up with two groups who did not provide specific agendas for two meetings, as I was hoping to send the message that the learning was more important than the bureaucracy. I used the information from learning plans and agendas to help each group identify and locate resources that might support its research.

In addition all participants were invited to complete anonymous feedback surveys (see Appendix G1 and Appendix G2) related to their Design Your Own Learning experiences at three points during the year. These surveys were similar to other feedback surveys used by the school and district to get information about programs and professional development opportunities from the faculty. Notes, meeting agendas, and feedback surveys are part of normal educational practices at Lakeside Elementary School.

**Addressing My Positioning as Practitioner, Researcher, and Principal**

As the principal of the building, I was a practitioner who was keenly aware of my position in relation to the teachers. I became principal at Lakeside Elementary School after working for 11 years as an elementary school teacher (teaching mostly first and second grade) in a wealthy suburban K-12 district and six months as an assistant principal in a large elementary school (750 students) that was part of an extremely large and diverse K-12 school district. While principal of Lakeside Elementary School, I worked to help cultivate a culture of collegiality and collaboration at the school. I am mindful of the fact that at times I was viewed as and acted as "the principal." That means that while I wanted to act and be viewed as a colleague, I was still a supervisor with "formal" power built into my role. This is critical when you consider that I hired or had been involved in the hiring process for all but 5 teachers in the building. This added a layer of complexity
ENCOURAGING TEACHERS


to the research. In one sense I was imposing Design Your Own Learning on the faculty, while also wanting to foster organic professional inquiry with this structure. Yes, I was an insider, but an insider whose role placed me in a position of power over my teachers. I was aware that in order to conduct trustworthy research, I had to conduct this study with my faculty in good faith and with mutual trust (Park, 1999). My position changed in September 2014 when I left Lakeside Elementary School to become the Director of Curriculum and Instruction in a different K-12 school district.

During part of this study I was a practitioner, an insider researcher, as well as the principal of the building. As such, this created some specific dilemmas that must be addressed in relation to this research. Faculty participation in Design Your Own Learning was not specifically by choice; the structure took the place of typical monthly faculty meetings that all teachers were required to attend. While formally an "administrator," my insider status allowed me to have an understanding of what faculty members had been talking about in relation to professional development and professional learning. I implemented this structure with a keen awareness of the political and social realities in my school (Coghlan, 2007), understanding that there was a desire by the faculty to have a greater voice and control over professional learning. This came from feedback from the school-based Professional Development Committee, now officially called the School Improvement Committee. In this sense I was able to use my formal "power" and "position" to create a professional learning structure that supported what the faculty wanted. While I used my position to help create and initiate this structure, I was conscious not to use my role to dictate or micromanage how the groups carried out their
inquiry. This study allows me to critically examine the development and use of this new type of professional learning structure in a school and ways that I can learn how to refine this type of structure in order to provide teachers with the best and most meaningful opportunities to grow and develop their knowledge and practices through professional inquiry. Additionally I believe that taking time to reflect on and learn from my role during the first year of Design Your Own Learning helped me to gain a better understanding of myself and to inform the new role a building leader must play in order to support and sustain professional inquiry in another public school.

I believe that the whole design and structure of Design Your Own Learning provided an insight into the way I viewed my position within the school. Brown and Jones (2001) note, “Presently, practitioners have a tendency to expect the research task to tell them ‘how it is’ so they can plan new strategies for the creation of new outcomes” (p. 169). However, this is not the case with Design Your Own Learning: the teachers were co-creating their research questions and procedures based upon common needs, interests, and questions that were born in their classrooms. Today, professional learning communities (Dufour & Eaker, 1998) are used in many schools as research tools that are focused on specific performance standards. I do not see this as inquiry that empowers teachers to question, reflect on, or learn about this practice. I agree with Newton’s and Burgess’ (2008) view of professional learning communities, which suggests that “purposes of research under the guise of school improvement are not emancipatory; rather they might very well serve to reinforce a dominant discourse in educational policy” (p. 21).
My research took a close look at the Design Your Own Learning structure, not specific individuals other than myself, in relation to introducing, changing, and refining this as a tool for teacher development. As a result of this study I wanted to see if Design Your Own Learning could promote teachers to engage in inquiry through action research that “offers teachers a means of discovering new and improved practical strategies or solutions to classroom dilemmas through more systematic observation than is possible through intuitive ways of thinking” (Burns, 1998, p. 3). As an insider, I was able to combine research knowledge and local knowledge to best interpret the results (Brydon-Miller, 2003). To eliminate any concerns about coercion during the study, I decided to use data collected as part of our normal daily practices, specifically artifacts such as meeting agendas, presentations I used with the faculty, and meeting notes and information from anonymous feedback surveys. These types of data were collected and used regularly in other faculty, grade level, and curriculum meetings at Lakeside Elementary School. This was in line with what Kuhne and Weirauch (2001) say about practitioner researchers gathering “actual, current statistics or information regarding the problem to allow for better analysis and outcomes” (p. 4). In addition, as I was no longer an administrator in this setting, I conducted two focus group meetings with some faculty after I left Lakeside Elementary School.

As a researcher, I must generate “solid evidence to show the legitimacy” (McNiff, 2001) of my claims. In practitioner action research, this requires that all practitioners have an opportunity to be heard and included as part of the research (Angelides et al., 2004; Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1998; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Coghlan, 2007;
Herr & Anderson, 2005; Newton & Burgess, 2008; Rooney, 2005). As part of the implementation of Design Your Own Learning, I sought input from individual faculty members through the use of anonymous open-ended online surveys using Google Forms (see Appendix G1 and Appendix G2). These were not mandatory to complete and were positioned as providing honest feedback that would help to improve each practitioner’s professional learning experience as part of the Design Your Own Learning structure. Participation in these surveys grew during the first year as I changed the directions, making them more specific so that individuals could provide feedback rather than “needing” to respond as a team. In addition I had the faculty members, in small groups during the September 2014 faculty meeting, check my synthesis of the end of the year survey data to ensure trustworthiness of the data. While this was an important part of ensuring “good research,” I also feel that welcoming all participants into the research process helped challenge the traditional divisions of power and position (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1998; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008). Additional data was obtained during two focus groups I conducted during January 2015, four months after leaving my position as principal of the school. The first focus group was conducted on January 21, 2015, and it had seven participants. The second was conducted on January 25, 2015 and included of 4 participants. Participants were recruited via an email I sent to all faculty who participated in Design Your Own Learning during the 2013-2014 school year (see Appendix H).
Data Collection

This practitioner action research study focused on exploring ways that the Design Your Own Learning structure provided teachers with time and space to engage in meaningful professional inquiry, allowing them to problematize their daily practices and develop new knowledge about their students, curriculum, and pedagogy. I viewed data collection with the understanding that the research spiral related to action research required openness to an evolving methodology (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The chart in Appendix I provides a detailed account of the data collected during Year 1 and Year 2. Figure 2 shows the ways in which all data were processed. The data for this study can be broken into two general groups: Observational and Non-Observational data (Burns, 1998). Burns (1998) notes that observational methods involve documentation of behaviors and interactions while non-observational techniques involve employing tools for gathering data that are reflections of peoples' perspectives. Table 1 outlines the grouping of data sources that I propose for this research.

Table 1

Observational and Non-Observational Data Used for this Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observational Data</th>
<th>Non-Observational Data</th>
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<tr>
<td>● Reflection Memos</td>
<td>● Artifacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Critical Incident Memos</td>
<td>● Open-ended Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Observation and Observation Notes</td>
<td>● Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Member-check discussions</td>
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</table>
Analytic reflection and critical incident memos. It was critical that I kept track of my thoughts, role, emerging questions, and ideas as part of practitioner action research. Herr and Anderson (2005) note that writing about your work during the research helps the researcher to make sense of a complex reality in which the researcher must keep track of his decisions, questions, feelings, ethical dilemmas, and new understandings throughout the study. I used “reflexive writing exercises” (Luttrell, 2009) or what I am calling Reflection Memos, as a way to have a deeper conversation with myself after events or experiences that strike me as particularly significant during the study (See Appendix J). For example, during Year 1 I composed a memo after meeting with a teacher during a post observation conference. During the conference the teacher stated, “[at the beginning of the year] I didn't even know what group I should join” which caused me to think about the introduction of Design Your Own Learning as well the readiness for all faculty members to engage in personal professional inquiry without providing specific goals for or teaching about inquiry/action research. The contents of this memo helped lead to one revision I made to guide Design Your Own Learning structure during Year 2. I used my reflection memos as a way to memorialize decisions made as well as significant incidents during the course of the research cycle (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Additionally these memos helped me to recreate a narrative of my learning and experiences while implementing Design Your Own Learning.
Artifacts. The artifacts collected for review all came from the typical types of documents that are produced and collected as part of the normal work of a public elementary school. Documents such as faculty meeting agendas (see Appendix E), DYOL meeting plans (see Appendix K), and meeting presentations all are ready-made sources of data that are pertinent to this study (Merriam, 2009). While each presents slightly different information related to Design Your Own Learning and the inquiry process, each helps to paint a picture of what happens during the small group inquiry meetings. For example, initial meeting agendas I prepared provide insight into what types of goals, expectations, and information I am providing to the faculty. The group “Learning Proposal” (see Appendix F) helped to identify each group’s research question as well as its inquiry goals. Each also provided an opportunity to check for meaning and understanding, as they may provide insights into certain decisions, understandings, or misunderstandings. All are typical requirements for participation in professional learning at Lakeside Elementary School.

Open-ended feedback surveys. During my time as a principal, I used various types of surveys regularly to get more information about school programs, professional development offerings, and faculty needs. These became a regular part of our practice at Lakeside Elementary School. During the summer of 2013, the school district switched to a Google platform, giving all teachers access to Google Drive tools, specifically Google Forms (see Appendix G1 and Appendix G2). This provided us with easy and free access to an electronic survey tool. Open-ended surveys provide all participants with a welcome and safe opportunity to add their voice to the research (Angelides et al., 2004; Baskerville

I began using Google Forms to administer open-ended surveys during the 2013-2014 school year. During the first year of implementation of Design Your Own Learning, I sent out three surveys related to our Design Your Own Learning meetings. These surveys asked respondents to note what they had worked on during their meeting and if they felt this was a useful and meaningful use of their time, and welcomed faculty to provide any additional comments or suggestions related to Design Your Own Learning. In addition, I included a feedback question on a survey presented to our School Improvement Panel (a state mandated building level committee) toward the end of the 2013-2014 school year. This garnered much open discussion among meeting participants about the possibility of having shorter-term research goals as well as more opportunities to share information about the status of the inquiry between groups. All surveys were open, optional, and "blind." That means I invited all faculty members to complete the survey but did not compel anyone to complete them, nor did I collect names or identifying data related to those who completed the surveys.

**Focus groups.** In September 2014 I left my position as Principal of Lakeside Elementary. While I left the setting, my commitment to learning about inquiry-based professional learning did not change. In fact, this change in position provided me with an opportunity to gather groups of willing faculty together to conduct focus groups related to their perceptions about Design Your Own Learning, their emerging practice of inquiry, and the effect they feel inquiry-based professional learning has had on their daily
practices. Reason and Bradbury (2001) identify participants in action research as collaborators who are committed to the process and generate much information and understanding through social accounts. Merriam (2009) notes that the interaction within a focus group generates socially constructed data in an atmosphere that encourages others to “consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Patton, 2002, p. 386 in Merriam, 2009). The focus groups provided my former colleagues and me the opportunity to listen carefully to each other with a “capacity to go beyond the words and hear the unspoken messages” (McNiff, 2001, p. 12). During the focus group, I used semi-structured, open-ended questions to prompt a discussion with the group (see Appendix L). I believe that the focus groups provided an opportunity for me to check my reflections from Year 1 as well as develop a new understanding of my teachers, Design Your Own Learning, and myself in a way that would not have been possible while I was still the principal of the school.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data collection and analysis process was recursive and dynamic, reflecting the iterative nature of action research (Burns, 1998; Gibbon, 2002; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Throughout the study as well as the data analysis period, I was engaged in a spiral of “planning acting, observing and reflecting” (Anderson et. al., 2007, p.145). I understand that any action research is a continuous process; however, due to the reality of specific timelines related to the dissertation process, I focused on the snapshot of time from June 2013 to January 2015, pulling from data collected during Year 1 and the start of Year 2 of Design Your Own Learning as well as the Focus Groups held in January.
Given the variety of qualitative data collected for this study, I coded the data, looking for patterns and themes that emerged within and across the set. Merriam (2009) reminds us, "qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative" (p. 175). I used the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as I evaluated the various codes, looking for patterns or categories that emerged (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). All initial codes related to a specific data source were considered tentative. Figures 4, 5, and 6 show samples of the way that the data were coded.
Figure 4. Coding Design Your Own Learning Meeting Agendas from November 2013

Figure 5. Coding Survey Data from the Year 1 Reflections on Design Your Own Learning Survey
The various data sources for this study allowed for me to use triangulation, in reviewing the various data sources, to evaluate the credibility of my data analysis (Anderson et. al., 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Anderson et al. (2007) note, "Triangulation or the inclusion of multiple perspectives guards against viewing events in a simplistic or biased way" (p. 162). Appendix M shows the final themes derived from all codes across the data in relation to the research questions.

All of this work helped to contribute to my ability to conduct "good" research: research that can be considered meaningful and trustworthy. As noted earlier, I employed triangulation to ensure that I had data that represented "varying angles on the research question" (Anderson et. al., 2007, p. 152). As Kuhne and Weirauch (2001) write: “Such multiple sources of data allow better evaluation of results and will cause the results of action research to be more meaningful to both the practitioner and the field” (p. 4). The chart in Appendix 13 shows ways that I looked across all data to identify major themes. In addition I used reflexive writing to enable me to keep track of the research
process as well as the decisions I made during the study (Anderson et. al., 2007). I am a practitioner researcher, and I agree with Trodsen and Sandaunet (2009) who believe that “the active involvement of the researcher should therefore not necessarily be considered as a ‘threat’ to the validity of the research conducted, but also as a dimension that can produce more insight” (p. 18). It is my belief that my efforts to ensure that this study and its results are trustworthy helped me to contribute new knowledge to the literature related to inquiry and professional learning in schools.
Chapter 4: I Implement Design Your Own Learning: My Findings and Analysis

It’s much less dreadful than knowing (laughter), okay it’s Monday and we have a faculty meeting and I gotta sit there and listen . . . (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

The purpose of this practitioner action research was to examine the way I, an elementary school principal, created and established an inquiry-based series of faculty meetings I called “Design Your Own Learning” in which teachers were responsible for planning and carrying out professional learning based upon their own inquiry into their daily practices with students at Lakeside Elementary School. For this study I define inquiry as an individual’s attempt to come to know more about a particular topic or concept by questioning, thinking about, and processing information or situations related to the topic (Dewey, 1910). Design Your Own Learning allowed my teachers the time and space to engage in inquiry: to process and evaluate their daily work in order to become “students of their own practice” (Lieberman & Mace, 2010, p. 78). Practitioner action research provided me with a space to deliberately and systematically review the data collected as well as the process of implementing Design Your Own Learning (Anderson et. al., 2007).

With this study I wanted to make my experiences with Design Your Own Learning public: to describe the way I worked with my teachers to implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure. I hope that others can learn from my school’s experiences with trying to foster meaningful changes within professional school cultures. I wanted to add to the research related to the ways inquiry is used as a professional
learning structure within schools by examining the way I, an elementary school principal, established an inquiry-based series of faculty meetings called Design Your Own Learning in which teachers were responsible for planning and carrying out professional learning based upon their own inquiry into their daily practices with students in an elementary school and see if or how teachers experienced learning within this structure.

This chapter focuses on describing my learning journey while engaging in practitioner action research as well as what I learned about myself as a teacher, principal, and teacher educator. I present the chapter in two parts. In the first part I present a reflection on the action research process and describe the way I was making meaning from emerging findings as well as what I learned about my role through the frame of an action research cycle. I define action research as a systematic process that involves a specific cycle of fact finding, planning, acting, observing the action, and reflecting on the action (Anderson et. al., 2007; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). In this section I highlight the events, data, and findings from the first year of Design Your Own Learning, using the data collected as part of our normal daily practices while implementing this initiative, specifically artifacts such as meeting agendas, presentations I used with the faculty, meeting notes, information from anonymous feedback surveys, and my own reflections from the period. Additionally I use the data from the focus groups held in January 2015 as a device to “member check” my narrative. I am aware that these data do not reflect what the teachers were thinking or feeling at the time of the experience; however, the focus groups served as an additional reflective lens, providing insight into their experiences as they looked back on their first year of Design Your Own Learning at
Lakeside Elementary School. In sum, these data provide a guide for the narrative of the action research cycle that captures the past and the present.

Any action research is a continuous process; however, due to the reality of specific timelines related to the dissertation process I focus on the window of time from June 2013 to January 2015, pulling from data collected during Year 1 and the start of Year 2 of Design Your Own Learning as well as the focus groups held in January 2015. Figure 7 illustrates my experience during the action research cycle for the first year of Design Your Own Learning and highlights significant data that were collected as part of each phase. This work began as I was wondering about how to facilitate inquiry-based professional development with my teachers. I was reflecting on my knowledge, experience, beliefs, and the emerging conception I was constructing about professional learning within public schools. I took a close look at the existing state of professional learning at Lakeside Elementary School, trying to identify ways that professional learning experiences could involve teachers in inquiry and provide more meaningful and practical learning. Clearly my prior experience with creating a selection of topic-based faculty meetings helped inform this work. The “planning” phase allowed me to reflect on current professional learning structures: to evaluate the ways these structures provided teachers with opportunities for professional inquiry and use knowledge gained through my experience as a co-facilitator for action research groups for the Network for Educational Renewal to craft a new structure that eventually became Design Your Own Learning. The “acting” phase began in June 2013 when I first introduced the faculty to Design Your Own Learning, implementing it as a professional learning structure at
Lakeside Elementary. From June 2013 to June 2014 I was able to “observe our actions” as teachers planned for and engaged in their own professional inquiry as part of Design Your Own Learning. “Reflecting on our actions” was a continuous part of implementing Design Your Own Learning; however, a summary survey given to faculty at the end of Year 1, along with a member checking session related to the findings of this survey, provided the faculty with an opportunity to share insights on this professional learning structure.

Figure 7. The action research cycle used to evaluate Year 1 of Design Your Own Learning
Throughout this narrative, I have embedded findings related to data collected during the different phases of implementation. The data collection and analysis were recursive and dynamic, reflecting the iterative nature of action research (Burns, 1998; Gibbon, 2002; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam, 2009). To do this I looked across data and reflection memos from Year 1 in relation to the responses and discussions from the focus groups to look for connections and patterns across the whole data set. In addition, data collected during Year 1 as well as part of typical school operations (meeting agendas, feedback forms, etc.) helped to inform some of the questions asked during the focus group. This was critical to ensure the validity of the findings given my active presence as part of this practitioner action research.

The second part of the chapter describes the start of Year 2 with Design Your Own Learning and returns to the main research question: What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure (Design Your Own Learning) in my school? I identify findings synthesized during the summary review of the data related to this overarching question as well as the sub question: What did I, as the principal, learn about implementing an inquiry-based form of professional development? I present and discuss my findings using the overarching theme of Principal as Teacher Educator. The theme Principal as Teacher Educator represents what I learned about myself, the former principal of Lakeside Elementary School; what I learned about ways I could support and guide my former teachers’ inquiries; the structures that supported inquiry-based professional learning; and not surprisingly what I
learned about the principal’s role as a teacher educator fostering an inquiry-based learning structure like Design Your Own Learning in a public school.

My Practitioner Action Research

Getting Started: Taking Stock of Professional Learning at Lakeside Elementary School

Like most American public schools, Lakeside Elementary School’s professional learning structures focused around monthly faculty meetings, professional development days scattered throughout the school year, and some random opportunities for teachers to interact with an educational consultant or perhaps attend a workshop. As with most school districts, the terms of faculty meetings or other after school professional learning opportunities were outlined in the teachers’ contract with the Board of Education. We could hold only one 45 minute faculty meeting per month. I found this very frustrating, as I wondered, “What kind of meaningful and sustained learning could we do once a month for 45 minutes?” As a leader and learner I found it very difficult to dig deeply into any topic. Harris (2003) might suggest that this is evidence of the way the school’s professional infrastructure did not support professional learning and collaboration. I think it was this constraint that got me to thinking about an “outside the box” solution to professional learning at the school. This was the start of constructing a culture and infrastructure that created spaces for mutual learning within the school (Harris, 2003).

Ironically, part of the solution was found by looking closely at the teacher contract again. In addition to the faculty meetings, all teachers were required to participate in up to 20 hours of “committee” work. During my first few years as principal,
I learned that these 20 hours could be used effectively to gather teachers together for additional professional learning opportunities, giving me the gift of more time to work with my teachers. As with all faculty meetings, I directed the agenda and facilitated these meetings and while teachers attended, the meeting goals were driven by what I felt was needed to help improve school programs. It was a start, but after a while, as I matured as a principal and began to develop a stance and understanding about professional learning, I began to wonder if these additional meetings really were helping to move teachers and help them grow as professionals. This was highlighted in the second Focus Group when a teacher said, “Going to a faculty meeting even though we get the agenda, you’re not as well prepared because you don’t necessarily know what or if you’re going to have to do anything” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

Typical school cultures create scripts for the way things “should be,” and a change in beliefs is required to promote a change in practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2005; Lieberman, 1992; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Like most public schools, Lakeside’s culture perpetuated typical hierarchical power structures that promoted a traditional view of how professional learning opportunities are developed and implemented (Brookfield, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Richardson, 1998, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). However, as schools like Lakeside develop as centers of inquiry where practitioners are encouraged to place their practices and student needs at the center of their professional learning, these constructs begin to change. This was a difference I wanted to foster with
Design Your Own Learning: to give teachers responsibility and control of their learning in a way the topic-based meetings never allowed. Teachers also recognized this when comparing Design Your Own Learning meetings with typical faculty meetings.

The administrator in a faculty meeting, they have to come up with the idea. I mean, we did get the agenda but I think that this (Design Your Own Learning) lends itself for people to come more prepared, to go to the faculty meeting because you already know what, what it is you’re studying and looking up and you know who you’re going to be with. (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

A group of teachers also recognized this during our member checking session in September 2014, writing, “We agree that everyone found it to be a good use of learning time because of how it met the interests and needs of participants” (Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). In this sense teachers recognized that Design Your Own Learning provided them with a sense of responsibility for their learning by allowing them to identify their personal professional needs, which may not have happened in a regular faculty meeting. Lakeside Elementary School experienced this transition moving from traditional professional learning structures toward an inquiry-based construct that put practitioners in charge of their professional learning. The shift in practices at our school demonstrates how my faculty and I attempted to re-conceptualize and embrace new professional learning structures. Looking across data sources, one can see ways in which the teachers noted benefits from the changes spurred by Design Your Own Learning. One teacher put it simply,
A lot of times the school faculty meeting the school administrator needs to choose something that he thinks maybe a whole bunch of people need to look at or hear about and it’s nice to get into that small group and to think about what you need... or what you would like to research... Or what you like to learn more to help your teaching in your own classroom. (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

Another teacher noted a social benefit: “You know, it almost like created new relationships, I think, I mean [it] kind of like made people become more friendly with each other” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). As teachers engaged in Design Your Own Learning, they were able to not only push social learning boundaries within the school culture by talking with colleagues across grade levels and disciplines but also learn to use inquiry to help them make sense of teaching and learning within their own settings (Lieberman, 1986; Richardson, 1994).

**Planning: Testing New Ideas and Structures**

During the 2011-2012 school year, as a result of my doctoral studies and burgeoning interest in professional inquiry, I made a drastic change to the faculty meeting structure at Lakeside Elementary School. As part of my research, I realized that some of my previous work did little to change structures in order to promote teacher choice and reflection as an integral part of professional learning. I needed to learn with my faculty, not simply lead them; I needed to be a facilitator rather than a “teacher.” Additionally, after reading Stigler’s and Hiebert’s (1999) book *The teaching gap: Best ideas from the world’s teachers for improving education in the classroom*, I came to learn about and understand the ways that school cultures and school structures inhibit the type of
professional learning that I believed was so impactful. This led me to set aside meeting
time during the year focused on topics “of need.” Teachers could select a meeting to
attend (or could attend multiple meetings). During the first Focus Group, I talked about
how I put faculty meetings together, “structuring the faculty meeting as a teaching
opportunity as a teacher . . . as a teacher of teachers, it’s my responsibility to try and
make sure that whatever we’re doing fits programmatically” (Michael Ryan, Focus
Group 1, January 21, 2015). I had realized that my faculty had reached a point where
there was not much that I needed to teach everyone. While there might have been things
that I still needed to teach individuals or small groups, it did not seem fair or useful for
me to put the whole faculty in a room to listen to me. Ironically I was still imposing my
thoughts and beliefs on my faculty with this change. When I was asked specifically
about the creation of Design Your Own Learning at the first Focus Group, I noted how I
came to understand this, saying, “I thought I was doing a great thing by having the topic-
based meetings and my advisor looked at me and said . . . that’s not inquiry. And I
remember being so hurt and thinking, ‘Oh my gosh’” (Michael Ryan, Focus Group 1,
January 21, 2015). This was a hard truth to accept, but I did acknowledge that while the
topic- based meetings represented a change in our typical school structure, teachers did
not own the agenda, nor did they have a say in the topics. In this case I created a
structure that offered “controlled” choices. The topics were selected and promoted only
by me as the principal. Teachers were still treated more like actors performing a script
rather than professionals with a deep understanding of their work with students
(Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009) since they had no control or say over the topics selected.

Lakeside School District did not have a very large budget for external professional development, which limited opportunities to work with consultants or attend specific workshops. We did participate in the Network for Educational Renewal at a local state university, which gave us access to some professional assistance as well as a variety of mini workshops and grant opportunities. This network offers local districts an opportunity to partner with each other and the university to help support professional learning needs as well as curriculum development. It was developed by the university as a model for linking teacher preparation and development, allowing for a continuous cycle of professional renewal. Throughout my time as principal, a few groups of teachers took advantage of these teacher study group mini grants. These groups gathered and explored a topic, presenting their learning at the network’s annual conference in June. My advisor invited me to work with her to facilitate the Network’s action research groups as part of my internship for my doctoral program, and ironically a group of teachers from Lakeside Elementary School submitted and was awarded one of the action research group grants. This experience as a teacher educator, especially working with a group of my own teachers, helped to give birth to the concept of Design Your Own Learning. Working with these teacher researchers gave me a first-hand look at the power of collaborative inquiry and the passion teachers demonstrate for their profession. It also provided insight into the depth of learning that occurs as teachers engaged in meaningful inquiry. As I noted during the first Focus Group, “I really do believe that at a certain point you have to
drive your learning as a professional. My job is to give you the space and the time to do that” (Michael Ryan, Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). I believe this is a positive way a school principal can use his or her power and position to try to foster a change in traditional school professional cultures. In this case I was able use the time we allotted for topic-based meetings in order to create a more authentic professional learning meeting structure for the faculty.

Acting: Introducing and Implementing Design Your Own Learning

The whole point is that our learning continues . . . you have power in your knowledge and knowledge to share. So to answer your question, Design Your Own Learning was born out of an opportunity to say, okay, I have to have a faculty meeting, and we have all these other hours and all this other stuff, and we have things to do, but a lot of it as you said, is, um, minutia that you can get from reading the bulletin. . . . I know there are some things we can discuss, but that’s really how it was born, and Year 1 was me creating a structure that gave you the time and the space to do that. (Michael Ryan, Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Personal struggles with challenging school structures. The nine and a half years I served as principal were not easy, but they certainly were exciting and educative. Walking into the building in 2005, I believed that I had a great deal to show my teachers, including helping them to learn about “best practices” in order to improve their teaching. I felt like I needed to teach them how to be better teachers. Over time, I learned that I needed to learn with my faculty; I learned to be a facilitator rather than a “teacher.” There was a transition from a focus on what Lieberman (2000) would call “one size fits
all” professional learning solutions to creating professional learning spaces where Lieberman would note that the learning is sensitive to “individual and collective development” (p. 221). Design Your Own Learning was my answer to challenging the school structures that Stigler and Hiebert (1999) noted inhibit teacher development, as it allows a teachers to select their own professional learning topics and their learning teams and provides them with the time and the responsibility for engaging in their own professional inquiry.

In June of 2013 I presented the concept of Design Your Own Learning to the Lakeside Elementary faculty. This meeting was not as focused as I would have liked since I also decided to use this meeting as a way to introduce my faculty to the collaborative nature of Google Docs. In hindsight, it really did not start well at all as I was trying to get the faculty used to and logged on to Google Docs, which should have been a meeting unto itself. I recall some teachers crowded around the small tables in our media center while others were standing and leaning against the book stacks. Looking back, I am not certain I actually gave teachers the time and space to engage in professional inquiry during this meeting. It suggests that rather than being proud of getting this started, I was concerned about how it was going to work and about getting things started and accomplished. It was the start of an interesting struggle I noted in my ongoing reflections related to my changing role as principal and the new expectations I had for myself. While working to try and establish new norms related to professional learning, I was challenged with identifying my role as principal in this new type of learning structure. As teachers interacted with each other, I could not identify a space for
myself as an integral part of the teachers’ questions and conversations. When reviewing my reflection data from Year 1, it was clear that I had not fully established nor embraced my role as part of Design Your Own Learning. I was struggling with my role as an inquiry-focused, school-based teacher educator.

They were friendly and relaxed as they completed this task while I was nervous and uncomfortable. I was trying to ensure that I was not putting my stamp onto their conceptions of inquiry. I was very aware of my position and that the way I reacted and/or the way I responded would put a certain value on one idea over another. (6-13 What is Professional Inquiry Processed)

Figure 8 provides a visual representation of my challenge with finding a role in the interactions between the teachers as they engaged with Design Your Own Learning.

Figure 8. Questioning My Role in Interactions that Promote Teachers’ Professional Inquiry
Throughout the first year of implementation, I was conflicted about my role and how to orchestrate change with my teachers.

While it is possible for people to inquire every day, it does not mean they are engaging in inquiry. And while I feel that the Design Your Own Learning structure provides a great step toward fostering authentic inquiry, I am not certain I provided a scaffold to help the teachers develop an understanding of what it means to question your practices in meaningful ways. It seems as if there was some structure and “teaching” that I needed to do to foster this – I’m even wondering if there was some sort of introductory model that would help to support this type of understanding. (9-16-13 DYOL Meeting Agenda Data Memo)

Throughout the first year in my reflection or data memos, I noted how uncomfortable I was in trying to figure out my role as a facilitator of professional inquiry. In November 2013 I wrote, “While I did read each agenda that was shared with me, I opted against making any comments or suggestions. I wonder if this gets perceived as not wanting to do any work, or if there is a true understanding that I want to try and create this personal learning space for the faculty” (Reflection Memo 11-11-13). My reflection in May 2014 shows how these conflicting feelings did not change over time:

I need to pay closer attention to my role as a teacher of teachers. While I did provide an introduction of sorts to the faculty last June, I really do not think that I provided any kind of scaffolding for the faculty or thought about any kind of teaching or supports that I should have provided during the year. I never even asked the faculty during the year, "Is there anything confusing about this
process?” I was so proud of my true inquiry stance that I did not really provide any structural supports for those who were not really making meaning of the Design Your Own Learning structure. (Data Reflection Memo 5-7-14)

I had this extreme view of inquiry floating through my mind, one in which the teachers were selecting a topic, planning for their learning, and running their own experience. To me, inquiry was an individual’s attempt to come to know more about a particular topic or concept by questioning, thinking about, and processing information or situations related to the topic (Dewey, 1910). I believed I should not impose myself in any way on the groups, which highlights an isolating dynamic that gets established within the typical power structure of a school because it seemed very difficult to ask my faculty about what I could be doing better to support their work. While I was indeed breaking with typical school cultural and structural norms, I was also ensconced by traditional school roles and expectations. This was a complex new role for me; I was still the “boss,” yet I very much wanted to be seen as a facilitator, supporter, and co-learner with my teachers. In a way I knew that the teachers needed a facilitator to help support their work: to provide feedback and a mirror that might help them dig deeper into their topic. However, I was not sure how I could do this without being perceived as “the principal” providing a directive to the group. As a teacher of teachers, I needed to learn more about what my faculty needed in order to find ways to “teach into” some groups, just as I facilitated the action research groups from other schools for the Network for Educational Renewal. However, there I was, a true outsider, and it was easier for me to be a facilitator. It seems as if my way of addressing this was by assuming that adults, professional adults, would
know how to engage in inquiry and by allowing myself to be completely distanced from
the process. My distance certainly eliminated some of my “authority over”
their work, and since I was no longer directing the learning, this was rather easy to do.
However, some teachers did need greater support to better understand their work, and the
inquiry process and I continuously struggled to provide that for them.

**Why are we doing this? Defining the concept and goals.** Once everyone was
“signed into” Google Drive we began getting to the heart of that first meeting,
introducing the concept of Design Your Own Learning. The goal was to help teachers
recognize that this was a new type of structure, in which they would have responsibility
and say over the direction of their professional learning. I wanted the teachers to see that
Design Your Own Learning allowed them to make their professional questions public and
helped to create what Lieberman (2000) might call “networks of interest” within the
faculty. Teachers were able to find other teachers within the school who had similar
questions, concerns, or needs. It allowed for groups that crossed grade level lines as well
as content areas, thus encouraging different groups of faculty to interact with each other.
This is not always possible in schools, given the structure of a typical elementary school
schedule. Appendix B shows how I introduced the program to the teachers at our faculty
meeting. I consciously introduced this before the start of a new school year to capture
ideas and, hopefully, excitement about this change. I felt that giving the teachers more
time would also help them to better understand the structural changes being suggested.
In my reflection memo about this meeting I noted, “I placed a great deal of responsibility
upon the teachers, while also trying to assert myself as more of a facilitator rather than
organizing and planning every part of professional learning within the building.” (Professional Inquiry Processed Data, June 2013). All I felt I could do was tell them about this concept and ask them to have faith in its value and, ultimately, in my ability to make this happen.

I don’t really know what your specific reasons for kind of starting it, but I remember leading up to that a lot of people kind of complaining—well maybe not to you—and complaining about, not faculty meetings, but more of like our in-service days were. . . like we are doing a lot of the different things. . . jumping around. . . . It almost seemed like, like a lot of it was a waste of time. And some of the things we got something out of, and some of the things maybe we didn’t get anything out of it. And it was like, what are we, are we using our time wisely type thing? Maybe people were also complaining about like not having time to do the things that they wanted to do and then you kind of like, that’s where I thought you came up with the idea I wasn’t really sure. I was like, where did this come from? But I thought that’s got to be something along the lines of people don’t really think we’re using your time wisely. There’s also a lot of things if they want to do that they’re not getting a chance to do. Why not do this? (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

This is an interesting insight into the ways that practitioners view traditional school professional learning structures and supports the way the literature described these as being focused on trainings that seemed divorced from daily practices or classroom needs. Clearly this suggests that despite my best efforts, teachers at Lakeside did not feel
existing professional learning opportunities helped to focus goals, gain investment from them as practitioners, or promote the problematizing of practices within our school (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Lieberman and Mace (2008) might see this as teachers feeling as if the typical professional learning opportunities within Lakeside Elementary School were random and disconnected to their needs as practitioners. Faculty meetings are a traditional staple for professional gatherings within schools, representing one of the few times that the teachers are gathered together to meet and share ideas. However, more often than not teachers are mandated to attend and often lack choice, control, and voice in their own professional development.

In contrast, looking at my reflections reveals that I worried that teachers would not understand why we were doing this, but also that I was not sure I could “teach” the faculty (or force them) to develop an inquiry stance toward their teaching. This too seems ironic since the teachers had no choice but to participate in the Design Your Own Learning structure. “I wonder if the faculty was truly prepared to provide answers to these questions (see Figure 1). I also am wondering if I should have provided more direction to help them. This is the struggle I have when thinking about providing a space for true inquiry” (Professional Inquiry Processed Data, June 2013). In this sense I found myself wondering how to teach teachers about ways to engage in inquiry, which they were required to do, without telling them what to investigate and how to do so. It was a continuation of my struggle with a new role as well as the desire to provide an authentic space for the teachers to engage in professional inquiry. I could tell that I needed to be
doing more to help make this clear to my teachers- this is where a true facilitator would have stepped in- but at that time, in that moment, I did not allow myself to act or engage. In a sense I was keeping myself from actively participating in the action research.

**Learning to learn together: Identifying inquiry topics and establishing teams.**

During the introduction I engaged the teachers in a collaborative brainstorming session about the meaning of professional inquiry and some possible areas of interest using Google Docs. I projected the shared Google Doc where all teachers could see it in our media center as we worked to construct our own definition of inquiry. Appendix C shows the running list of words and phrases we created to create a working definition of professional inquiry at Lakeside School. It was my hope that this activity would help teachers begin to see the way Design Your Own Learning was something that we would be constructing together, something focused on their professional needs.

Again the technology overshadowed the task as some people were confused by the act of writing collaboratively in a Google Doc. And I too was a bit overwhelmed as to what I should be doing as the faculty began to add ideas to the sheet. Should I call them out? Should I comment? As people started to share more and more ideas, I could hear other faculty members saying things like “you took mine” or “I was thinking that.” They were friendly and relaxed as they completed this task while I was nervous and uncomfortable. I was trying to ensure that I was not putting my stamp onto their conceptions of inquiry. I was very aware of my position and that the way I reacted and or the way I responded
would put a certain value on one idea over another. I was already doing this by presenting this concept. (What is Professional Inquiry Processed, June 2013)

Interestingly, when processing the list (see Appendix C) as “data”, I noticed how it could have been used at the start of each group’s work session or throughout the first year to help groups establish norms for collaborative inquiry. Additionally, this list may have helped me to support or refocus groups when members felt or it appeared that their group was getting off task. My concerns about implementing the new program as well as identifying my new “role” limited my ability to recognize an opportunity for me to grow as a teacher educator. When looking across the whole data set for this research, I note the importance of recognizing and using teachable moments while guiding and coaching teachers.

The most interesting part of the introduction meeting was the topic brainstorming session. During this segment I asked teachers to identify, again using Google Docs, possible topics they would want to explore. Other teachers were then able to also note their interest in the topic as well. Table 2 shows the initial topic list from June 2013.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generating Topics and Groups for Design Your Own Learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What do you want to explore that will help you support your students learning and development?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing math understanding... How can I better focus on students specific needs in math as I can in reading?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math core curriculum standards website ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided reading/small group instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding what health topics are covered in the classroom so I can build on those during PE class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding preschool ccs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Differentiation in phonics instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I make sure that students’ carryover their speech and language skills into the classroom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual math conferences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Differentiated instruction in math</td>
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<td>Mimio help!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reinforcing classroom spelling words each week into PE activities for interdisciplinary lessons.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading/writing conferencing</td>
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Teachers recalled this activity during the focus groups with some enthusiasm and passion. One teacher noted, “I remember the first day we were . . . signing up for different groups and seeing, live in the form, how people were creating groups and you were able to just join in groups when something kind of sparked your attention that you wanted to work on” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Another added, “Then once I realized, okay like this is our opportunity to, to kind of explore what we’re interested in learning about it was almost like, okay what are we doing? Doing right now that we don’t have time to do. That we kind of brush to the side because we have all these other things to do. Now here’s an opportunity to focus on one of those things that we never get done that we want, want to do” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). The teachers realized that this process placed value and importance on their daily work as well as stressed the need for teachers to investigate and explore their practices.

Observing the Action: Design Your Own Learning – Implementing Year 1

Inviting the faculty to engage in inquiry. “I can’t teach you what you need because everybody needed or wanted something different, I mean you even said this before, this is the burning question inside you–How could I accomplish that within one meeting” (Michael Ryan, Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)? In September 2013, Design Your Own Learning officially began as a new structure for professional learning at Lakeside Elementary School. I had created the time and space for inquiry by devoting five of our faculty meetings during the school year, not counting the year opening meeting, to Design Your Own Learning, culminating with a “sharing” session scheduled
for June 2014. Using the same topic chart we began in June 2013 I challenged the faculty to “find someone who” shared their interests to form their Design Your Own Learning group. Gathered in the school’s cafeteria, teachers were able to use the Google Doc to form and find a group. By the end of the meeting 8 groups of 3 to 6 members each emerged. As teachers expressed, “You get to choose your own topic and research something you’re actually interested in” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). The teachers added, “Before we said it was something we were interested in and then you were seeing like other people that teach basically your same age group, not exactly, but that we’re doing things that you could adapt into your classrooms” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). This suggests that even though teachers may not have fully understood the structure that I imposed on the school at first, they came to recognize that the Design Your Own Learning structure placed value on their thoughts and ideas about what was critical to their professional learning. When reflecting on the experience during the focus groups, teachers recognized that they had the time, opportunity, and responsibility to identify their needs in order to best to support their work in their classrooms. In retrospect, the teachers realized what the literature says about the power of providing teachers with meaningful opportunities to direct their own professional learning.

Reflecting on the introduction of this structure, I noted, “While I feel that the Design Your Own Learning structure provides a great step toward fostering authentic inquiry, I am not certain I provided a scaffold to help the teachers develop an understanding of what it means to question your practices in meaningful ways” (9-16-13...
DYOL Meeting Agenda Data Memo). This was a continuation of the conflict I noted earlier: a struggle with being an inquiry-based teacher educator. I worried that the teachers just might not understand the structure or why it was important. Looking across all data sources, I see now that the struggle was connected mostly with giving up power and control. While I believe that I did recognize that my role had to change from principal with “power over” the teachers, I never really allowed myself to construct a role in which I shared “power with” the faculty. As I have noted before, this struggle prevented me from acting and truly allowing myself to be an active participant in the action research. Viewing it today, I can see that providing a scaffold is part of the role of a facilitator of inquiry. Since there is scant literature on ways principals have worked to create these kind of structures, it should come as no surprise that I had no real model to look to as an example. Essentially I, the principal, was creating, testing, and modifying this new role throughout the first year of implementation.

**Struggling to spark and support inquiry: What’s my role as the principal?**

On September 16, 2013 we held our first official Design Your Own Learning Meeting at Lakeside Elementary School. Teachers recognized the shift this presented: “It is something that you are interested in. It is not something that’s being recommended for you to research or look at, it more comes from within you” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). Teachers used time during this first meeting to establish their inquiry proposals, a guide I created to help support each group’s inquiry during the year. Figure 9 shows the template for the Design Your Own Professional Learning Proposal sheet.
In thinking about ways to structure Design Your Own Learning, I did feel there had to be some parameters that would help the teachers to focus and guide their work. This suggests another way I was playing with my new role as a teacher educator: trying to facilitate inquiry with my teachers. Drawing on my experience working with the action research groups through the Network for Educational Renewal, I knew how important it was for the teachers to talk with each other and identify some specific goals for their inquiry. It was clear to me that there needed to be some sort of guide for Lakeside
teachers as they engaged in their inquiry. When working with action research groups through the Network for Educational Renewal, teachers had to submit a proposal for their research project. This helped frame and focus their work. The group proposal, in my view, was a plan that would help guide each group’s inquiry. Additionally, I can see this provided the teachers and me with a level of accountability for this new learning structure. In this sense the teachers would be accountable to their colleagues, and the principal could ensure that the Design Your Own Learning time was being used for its intended purpose.

However, I question the role I played during this initial meeting as a facilitator of inquiry. While I did take time to meet with each group and talk with them about their work, I found myself mostly listening. In my reflection on this meeting I note, “I have no evidence that I provided teachers with any kind of scaffolding or clear direction. I did provide several links to helpful tools, but there was no clear directive that would ensure that teachers did in fact look at these” (9-16-13 DYOL Meeting Agenda Data Memo). However, this reflection did not cause me to make a change. I continued to struggle as I interacted with my faculty not only as a principal and a fellow teacher, but also as an emerging teacher educator. I questioned whether being only a listener was enough of a role during these meetings. My struggle was also related to my own emerging understanding of inquiry as professional learning and how I would teach and use this with practitioners. This is something I reflected on: “In essence I was trying to keep authenticity by not really providing any or much guidance as to how one begins to engage in what might amount to an action research project” (9-16-13 DYOL Meeting
Agenda Data Memo). Looking across my data memos from the first year of implementation, I mention this struggle frequently, a struggle that was neither directly defined, nor one that spurred me to make changes to the way I acted. I believed in Design Your Own Learning and the way it allowed teachers to make decisions about their professional learning; however, I could not identify how I would support teachers as they engaged in their inquiry. It seems like creating and running the structure was easier for me to do than identifying the specific things that I would do to help teachers as they were learning. This may have been more about the emergent inquiry of the Design Your Own Learning structure and the way inviting my teachers to direct their own learning limited my control and power in contrast to more traditional guidance.

I explored these themes of struggle using the data from the focus groups, which provided interesting an insight into the ways that the faculty perceived my role as part of Design Your Own Learning. Ironically, for me, was the presence the teachers noted that I did play as part of their inquiry. “I was thinking about how you would also be involved because you visited each group and give suggestions or little hints, or whatever. If the administrator’s not going to put in the time, then it won’t work in a school – I mean there has to be some sort of guidelines from the person in charge” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). It is interesting to note the difference between their perceptions and my perceptions of my role as principal in Design Your Own Learning. According to the focus groups, the teachers saw me as supporting and promoting their work. I, however, viewed my role as being very passive, too passive. It involved a struggle I had with being a researcher and also being a subject of the research or the researched myself. I did
not fully embrace or comprehend my role as a facilitator and researcher. I resisted giving up the control that is typical in school hierarchy, and I struggled with trusting my faculty to do great work without major intervention from me. I questioned their ability to do valuable and meaningful work without my “guidance,” again suggesting a need and want to be in control. While teachers saw my presence and support in terms of resources to help them to engage in inquiry, I continued to maintain a more traditional view of myself as the “principal,” the leader who should be directing the work of the faculty. In this sense it seems like I needed to find a place for myself in this self-driven learning environment.

The teachers also noted the importance of my role as principal in providing the time and opportunity to engage in this type of professional inquiry. “Well I think you provided us with a lot of time that we might not normally have put aside. Time that we were focusing on that specific, you know, goal” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). “And as far as I know I haven’t heard of anybody, you or [the new principal of Lakeside School] or anybody telling any of the groups that they couldn’t research a certain topic. I mean I don’t know if there was, but it seems like very open to the point where whatever it was you wanted to do, you could do. So, that was definitely important” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). I could see that this supports what the literature suggests about teachers’ capacity to engage in meaningful learning. I also believe that this can serve as a model for other principals, allowing them to see what might happen when they try to introduce this type of structure at a school as I did.
The focus groups provided important insights into ways that I did help to facilitate inquiry and learning during the first year of Design Your Own Learning. They specifically referenced the Design Your Own Learning shared resources folder I had created on Google Drive in which I put articles and other links or resources related to each group’s inquiry. “And when you were there and still . . . running it, having of articles that came out and just keeping up to up-to-date on, on what it was that we were looking for” (Focus Group 2, January 28, 2015). This helps to shed some light on the ways in which I could support the group’s work as part of an inquiry-based professional learning structure.

**Managing and supporting teachers engaged in inquiry: Tensions between being principal and facilitator.** At the end of that first meeting all groups submitted their learning proposals. Teachers recognized that, “you have the choice to choose what you want to research and want to learn more about. So in that way, it’s relevant to what you want to improve upon as a teacher” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). Appendix N provides an overview of each group’s plan. I felt it was important, and interesting, to review and reflect on these initial plans, even though I was not quite sure what I would do if the plan did not fit what “I thought” would make for meaningful inquiry. Looking across those original plans, 4 of the groups overtly mention students in relationship to why their topic was critical to explore, 2 others talked specifically about the importance of a skill or content, and one did not state why their inquiry was critical. Considering that I believed that inquiry would have the teachers grappling with a question related to practice and that practice should be student focused, I wondered if the locus of each
group’s inquiry was focused on student needs or perceived curricular expectations in this new age of micro accountability. Six groups sought to explore a way to enhance their current classroom practices (e.g., differentiating in math, enhancing phonics instruction, or conferencing with students to better inform small group instruction), while one group, the preschool group, seemed to be investigating the value of the program’s curriculum itself. This was interesting in that this group never identified what “was not working” with the current curriculum. Even though I had strong thoughts and feelings about each group’s work, I never provided feedback on each group’s proposal, nor did I tell a group that they could not explore the topic identified. There were two main reasons for doing this: my continued struggle to ensure that I provided teachers with the time and space to engage in professional inquiry and a true desire to see what each group would make of its inquiry. I felt my comments on teachers’ plans might sway their work by placing value on some questions and concepts. In this sense I was aware of my position and the way it might impact their work, but at the same time unable to identify a way to be a principal and facilitator at the same time.

I was very interested in seeing how the teachers made meaning of this new structure as well. I reflected on this during the first focus group meeting:

I could never have imagined . . . this evening even just hearing about how the Google thing [form for assessment conferences] has exploded, or where you and [teacher’s name] went, and it’s really so interesting for me to hear and I feel proud for you . . . you exuded a confidence in your teaching and what your ability is . . . and like you even said it tonight which is this idea of . . . I felt good, I felt like I
had something to share . . . and that’s the whole point. (Michael Ryan, Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

In order to support teachers during the first year of Design Your Own Learning, I provided the faculty with “reference resources,” such as journal articles, opportunities to attend workshops or links to web based supports, all related to their inquiry topics. It was one way that I was making sense of my new role.

I reviewed each group's plan and began a shared resources folder including various articles and studies obtained from professional organizations . . . I felt that as a facilitator my role was to help connect the teachers with resources and to serve as a guide during discussions—trying to help clarify meaning when a group's discussion appeared to be unclear to the members of the group.

(Reflection Memo 11-11-13)

I was comfortable giving each group resources and references to support their work but not as comfortable jumping into the group discussions. Resources seemed like a form of support, whereas I viewed my active participation in a discussion as imposing myself on the group’s study. This is ironic since I essentially imposed Design Your Own Learning on the faculty. I was clearly positioning myself as an observer during the meetings and a practitioner in supporting the structure. During Year 1 the faculty reflected that they needed help locating and reviewing these resources in relation to their practices and identifying ways these could be used to inform their inquiry. Additionally, teachers did not initially realize that engaging in inquiry of their practices was something that could be of benefit to their daily work in the classroom. I think they may have been skeptical at
first, not thinking that this was something that was really going to be a sustained learning opportunity: “I thought it was going to be more of thinking that we were maybe just researching this topic instead of going at [it] as, okay let’s look to see if there’s something that we can really implement, you know, in the classroom . . . because the research, you’re going to take it and use whatever you learned” (Focus Group 2, January 28, 2015). Clearly Design Your Own Learning was very different from the typical school structures to which the teachers and I were accustomed. I had to accept and come to understand that some teachers needed sustained time to engage in personal professional inquiry before fully accepting the possibilities of this learning opportunity.

During the remainder of the first year, the groups held three more “formal” meetings before the June sharing session. A formal meeting was a mandated meeting that was part of the Design Your Own Learning outline presented to the faculty in September 2013. Each group created an agenda for their meeting time based upon their learning plan. This was part of the structure I imposed on the teachers. Figure 10 shows the template for the Design Your Own Learning meetings.
I asked the groups to share their agendas with me, but again I did not comment on their work. This was conscious, as I wanted to give the faculty an opportunity to engage in inquiry without being overtly influenced by my thoughts or suggestions. I was very aware that my position could skew the teachers’ work in a way that my comments or suggestions did not when I was working with inquiry groups from the Network for Educational Renewal. Once again I struggled to figure out how to create a space as a co-learner and facilitator with my faculty, not as the “teacher” in these situations.
This structure was certainly a challenge to typical school cultural expectations. As noted earlier, teachers thought the Design Your Own Learning might be a one-time opportunity or possibly not really allow them to truly explore a topic of interest. Lieberman and Mace (2008) might say that Lakeside teachers were feeling a little skeptical due to the way typical professional learning opportunities within schools are often random and disconnected to their needs as practitioners. Additionally, it highlights that I may have needed to be more explicit about my framework for professional learning as inquiry. My lack of participation in group discussions and meetings needed more explanation.

I didn’t realize it would be across the scope of a year. I thought it would be, you know, just for that session or maybe the next faculty meeting. I didn’t realize that, you know, it would be something that we would continue to work on continue to build on . . . (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

Teachers questioned this new structure, which suggests that while they recognized the possible benefit of Design Your Own Learning, they may not have believed that it would actually run as initially described. They had to have faith in the structure and me; I had to have faith in Design Your Own Learning as well as faith and trust in my teachers’ willingness and ability to do this. In a sense, this structure not only changed the method of professional learning, but also involved development of our school culture. These first few meetings were opportunities for us all to establish a culture that supports the type of trusting and honest atmosphere needed in order for inquiry groups to engage in an open dialogue about teaching and learning (Huffman & Moss, 2008; Smith-Maddox, 1999).
As one teacher noted, “I mean, this set up is a lot more on the teacher than it is on the administrator, so, you know, you . . . have to have some buy in, you know, of the teachers involved because they need to know that they’re going to be the ones facilitating these meetings” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). I had to learn to find my role in these meetings, supporting teachers’ inquiry rather than directing their learning. I had to think about how my faculty and I would work together differently when they had ownership of their professional learning.

Yeah, it was kind of weird not having you [the principal/Michael Ryan] to meet with your group. I think there were some days where you would say, like, oh you would meet with us, you will come around and then some days where you’d be like, oh update what you did. I also think there’re some days where we just kind of had a discussion amongst ourselves and then you know we just kind of set our goal for next time . . . So it was like, sometimes it was documented more than other times it was just like a good discussion. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Clearly Design Your Own Learning presented a change to our typical faculty meetings and forced the teachers and me to explore new roles.

**Learning to differentiate expectations for different groups.** After each of these work meetings, I looked across the agendas reflecting on the teachers’ work. Looking across the agendas from November 2013 through April 2014, I noticed a subtle change in the way a majority of the groups talked about their inquiry goals for each meeting.
I noticed a pattern related to the identification of student goals or needs [learning and instructional]. The groups did not always overtly name students or student learning in their agendas; however, there were references to instruction, meeting goals [district and personal] and identifying resources that were accessible to the students as well as useful to the teachers. (DYOL November Agenda Overview Processed, November 2013)

Examining this reflection now is interesting for two reasons: first, it suggests that the teachers ultimately focused their work on the needs of their students, and second, there is a hint of my preconceived notion of what the teachers’ should be doing as they engaged in inquiry. I assumed that teachers might identify a “problem” of practice, something that was really challenging them to best support their students’ learning. However, I noticed that some of the groups did not investigate topics or spend time investigating what I considered to be a challenging problem. This was one way I realized I was placing value on some groups’ work over other groups, which supported my struggle with carving out a more neutral role as a facilitator.

**Action research within action research.** During that first year as each group’s inquiry became more classroom and student focused, many groups appeared to include the reflection and an “action cycle” of the action research process during their meetings. I did not suggest this, require this, or plan on this. It appears to have happened organically within certain groups and supports what the literature says about the ways that engaging in inquiry empowers teachers to develop a greater sense of confidence and ownership over their professional interactions (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond
et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). Some teachers recognized the power of their work, seeing how results from certain trials or ideas led them to further questions and more research. Additionally teachers from other groups were recognizing the work of their colleagues, and this too provided a boost of confidence as well as a sense of pride in the work they were doing. I facilitated this informally by trying to link faculty members with others who had been addressing a like need or had been working on something related to a question I was asked. After a review of the February agendas, I noted, “Several groups specifically made a point of creating a space in their agendas to allow for time to talk about and share things that were working or not working with their inquiry” (DYOL February Agenda Overview Processed). The teachers were creating their own space within Design Your Own Learning to engage in professional reflection as well as the beginnings of action research.

The interaction between teachers and the relationship of the topics to their classrooms appear to have supported this organic action research. One teacher said, “It wasn’t like the typical meeting where you’re like, okay see you next week. It was, you were excited about it, so you may have gone home and researched that idea or you know, or made up a form or whatever to bring back” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Members of the conferencing group seemed to be most explicit about the action research cycle in their work. One member noted,

Each time we went we had the tool (online conferencing form), which kind of sparked our conversation. So we created this tool, we use that, we came back and
talked. How is it working? So we could tweak it. Change it. Each time you know, make it what we wanted. To make sure we get what we wanted to get from it. And then from there, you know, okay, how can we go further? (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

By implementing Design Your Own Learning, I was asking the Lakeside Elementary School faculty to engage in personal and practical professional inquiry. In this sense Design Your Own Learning gave teachers an opportunity to identify needs specific to their students and classrooms and allowed them to dive into questions and problems related to their practices. As a teacher noted, “Having the time to work with something you need right then in your classroom rather than just like a general thing for the whole school, I think, was beneficial to the teachers and the students” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Additionally some groups seemed to blur the line between inquiry and practitioner action research. “Research” in this sense does not necessarily mean that all faculty members were reviewing databases or professional journals and trying to triangulate data to help further their work; however, that did appear to happen in some of the groups.

The original research, I guess, we were talking about, was coming from our past practice, what we were using at the time in our classroom. And then from there we started looking at like online resources just to see how other teachers have used [it] or been able to, seeing how other things have been used. And then once we got into using the Google Docs I feel like all our research just came from learning through . . . using it, you know? When we were designing it (online
conferencing form) we didn’t really know anything about it. So once we started to use it all the research just came with just doing. (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

Even without specific directions from me, teachers began to see the value of reflecting on the interaction of their practices, student performance, expectations for students, and their own understanding of curriculum and pedagogy. I could observe this in ongoing conversations that continued outside of the formal Design Your Own Learning meetings in grade level conversations, informal meetings with teachers, and in those ongoing conversations that took place in the hallways of the school. As a teacher expressed, “But I feel like each time we met we came back with information we have used in our classrooms and with our kids, during the course of the day . . . And then brought that information back with the group” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

Smith-Maddox (1999) might say that teachers who engaged in Design Your Own Learning were building and rebuilding spaces where they could question their work with students and develop common understandings about their practices making their work academic. For this study I use the term intellectualize to describe the way I envision how teachers engage in open inquiry: by processing and evaluating their daily work in order to become “students of their own practice” (Lieberman & Mace, 2010, p. 78). As teachers participated in Design Your Own Learning, their inquiry became a way of intellectualizing their practices. Observing the groups and looking across the data, I could see a cycle of inquiry in which one question led to a discussion, which led to an action, which then led to another question that expanded the focus of the initial inquiry.
A few groups did begin to engage in this organic form of action research. With Design Your Own Learning, I could offer teachers the dedicated time and opportunity necessary to experience the powerful organic nature of inquiry and the inquiry process. Teachers in some groups capitalized on the responsibility they had to themselves and their groups to engage in professional inquiry.

**Monitoring implementation and struggling to find a purpose.** In addition to looking at the meeting agendas, I used a Google Form to survey each group related to the work they accomplished during the meetings (see Appendix G1 and G2). As part of this survey I sought to get some information about the faculty’s perceptions of Design Your Own Learning and some ideas about each group’s “next steps” prior to the next meeting. The initial survey was problematic since I did not make it very clear who should complete the survey. Individuals would complete typical school surveys; this initial survey was really directed at the group, causing confusion about how it should be completed. This was a concrete byproduct of the ongoing struggle I experienced with my evolving role during implementation. I struggled with giving the groups many directions in the beginning, not recognizing the difference between a structural need rather than an act of control. I associated asserting direction with my conceptions of power within the school where the principal was “in charge” of the school. With Design Your Own Learning, I was trying to establish a shared sense of responsibility for and power over professional learning at Lakeside Elementary School. Ultimately, only two groups ended up completing this first survey.
A survey was prepared for the February Meeting, but because of several weather delays related to the actual meeting date and other conflicting school deadlines (ex. benchmark assessment due dates and the end of a marking period), I decided not to have the groups complete the survey at that time. A final survey was given to groups after the March meeting. This time I gave specific instructions for the groups to complete the survey together, and this time all 8 groups provided feedback. It was the only real example I could find of my changing the way I interacted with the groups during the first year. While I struggled with the concept of group speak as opposed to individual opinions, I felt that the only way to focus on Design Your Own Learning as a structure was to have the group respond. I created this professional development model to foster a community that was focused on learning and instructional improvement, bringing teachers out of their typically isolated classrooms, and encouraging them to engage in meaningful and impactful ways with their colleagues (Supovitz & Christman, 2003). I was hoping that working together would foster an open dialogue with groups about their work as well as Design Your Own Learning. This was another instance when I recognized some uncertainty about my role and choices as a teacher educator.

Appendices B and B1 show the surveys used after each meeting during the 2013-2014 school year. Results from the final meeting survey suggest that a majority of the groups felt that their meetings were focused, a good use of time, and meaningful. A teacher highlighted how Design Your Own Learning meetings helped to promote this saying,

You’re [Principal/Michael Ryan] setting it [a faculty meeting] up thinking that you can you can come up with an idea that is good for everyone but when you
have your faculty meeting you have like [the nurse], what [the nurse] needs and you know what [the music teacher] needs and what I need. They’re all completely different so you know when you’re setting up one thing for everybody it’s got to be hard to think, you know, how can everybody use this? In design your own learning you can use it because you’re taking whatever you want to do.

(Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

One teacher noted how this works for her group, “When we came together it was after when we looked at something or read something and sometimes we brought student work, I think, too and we all kind of looked at that as well. It was different each week, and sometimes we just had conversations about what was going on in our classroom” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). The teachers were at ease identifying what was needed to support their group’s inquiry during the year. This is also evident when another teacher was talking about how her group’s inquiry changed and focused more on an emergent need in the classroom:

We realized that a lot of . . . your small math groups, whether you were pulling them back during your lesson, you know re-teaching them something, that maybe a group of kids didn’t get, that you really were doing that already. That maybe you were doing it your own way that fit into our classroom and our math program. So we were kind of like okay we need to stick with what we are doing there. How can we help the other students? So we kind of switched from one to the other. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)
These teachers reflected on what they were learning and what was happening in their classrooms, which helped them to develop a clearer focus for their inquiry. They recognized the things they know about their students and their teaching, identifying the particular needs in their classrooms. I see this as a way that teachers did intellectualize their work, taking responsibility for questioning their teaching and identifying the particular needs that would best support their work in the classroom (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cohen, 1988; Giroux, 1988; Lieberman, 1991; What Matters Most, 1996). In retrospect, teachers viewed Design Your Own Learning as an opportunity for differentiated, targeted, and meaningful professional learning that supported their work with their students in their classrooms. I do not think this is something I could have orchestrated had I planned out the topics and agendas for each meeting during the school year as was typical in the past. Design Your Own Learning required me to have a level of trust and faith in my teachers as professionals that challenged my understanding of the role of “principal” of an elementary school.

Coming to the end of the first action cycle: Inviting my teachers to make their learning public.

I feel like every group kind of benefited everyone in some sort of a way, for the most part because like, I think, instead of just like one hour for what you did, you actually kind of got six times that because you got a little bit from everybody’s group which is interesting. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

When I first conceived of Design Your Own Learning, I knew that there had to be some way for the teachers to make their learning public. This was the greatest lesson I
learned from my work with other action research groups, that making our professional learning public was liberating and empowering and it validates the intellectual work of teachers. Going public with professional learning helps to support individual and collective improvement while also countering the traditional cultural scripts (DuFour, 2004, 2007; Nelson et. al., 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). On June 9, 2014 we held our final Design Your Own Learning meeting for Year 1. I described it in the meeting agenda as a “Show and Tell” opportunity. Appendix O shows the full agenda I sent to groups outlining ways they could share their work. It seemed to be the best way to introduce this shift in school culture, from one of keeping most ideas and learning private toward one of being open and brave with our thoughts and practices. Making their work public by learning from and with each other is a critical part of engaging in professional inquiry as well as challenging established school cultures and norms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Typically teachers might share ideas with a close friend or perhaps a colleague who worked at the same grade level or in the same department. I felt that by going public with their inquiries and learning the faculty would start to recognize their own talents as well as the many talents of their colleagues. Additionally I felt that sharing would help teachers solidify the learning that took place during the year. I was trying to help teachers make sense of their learning to date, understanding that they may have more to explore or that they may have some things to share that perhaps did not meet their originally stated goals. In reflecting on preparing for that meeting I
commented on the difference between the type of sharing this meeting represented and the type of typical sharing that happens at Lakeside Elementary School daily,

I am struggling to not use the word “share” in relationship to the show and tell meeting. I note this as a distinction because I do not think that the faculty, in general, have an aversion to sharing, in fact I think a great deal of sharing of ideas and practices happened at all of the Design Your Own Learning meetings. What I think sort of freaks some people out is talking in front of a group of peers. It is interesting that how some teachers who are really wonderful with children do not feel as if they have anything worth telling a group of teachers. (6-9-14 DYOL Meeting Agenda Processed)

And this was the biggest concern teachers shared with me about this meeting at the time. I got several questions from teachers about this meeting, more questions than I had received about any other Design Your Own Learning Meeting that year. Most teachers wanted to know what I expected; they had difficulty making this part their own (see Appendix O). It is another indication that some traditional school views were alive at the school. Additionally it suggests that even as educators we hold onto concepts of “presentations” and “sharing” when they are tied to learning. I held fast to telling the groups that they should present in a way that would help their colleagues learn about their work during the year. Ultimately some groups came to the “Show and Tell” meeting with formal presentations to share. Others brought or demonstrated samples of their work (ex. math enrichment folder, Google Form for Conference Recording). One group
shared a list of “worthwhile” iPad apps they created based upon their work during Design Your Own Learning.

During the focus groups many teachers commented on the benefits of having an opportunity to make their learning public. One teacher described it as a way for teachers to open their ideas and practices to each other, “As soon as we share, you know what everybody else is talking about. You know what they have found. Without the share you’re kind of in the dark with what everyone else is doing” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). Another teacher commented on ways in which the share promoted an opportunity for teachers to learn from and with each other: “We didn’t even necessarily need to join the group to use it. You know? Like, that day when everyone shared together, like, I know, like, [another teacher is] not in our group but she uses the Google forms” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). The opportunities for sharing and conversation appear to have helped to support individual and collective enhancements to classroom instructional practices and ultimately student learning (DuFour, 2004, 2007; Nelson et. al., 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). The “Show and Tell” meeting also presented an opportunity for new learning to move beyond the members of a particular Design Your Own Learning Group. I tried to help make connections between individuals and groups, but the sharing experience was much more powerful. One teacher summed up the importance of making learning public: “So once you knew what the groups were talking about, what they were accomplishing, then you could go and be like, can you go and tell me how you did that? But without the share, that kind of falls apart because you don’t really know” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).
Reflecting on the Action: Looking Back on Design Your Own Learning 2013-2014

It might be something you’ve been talking about, that’s how my group formed. I mean, we might say, “Oh yeah we should really do that,” but you never really get around to doing it. So, it [Design Your Own Learning] gives you the chance to put that time aside. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

The end of the 2013-2014 school year provided an opportunity to reflect on the first year of Design Your Own Learning and identify some changes for the program’s second year. While some small actions were taken to enhance Design Your Own Learning, I was hesitant to make large changes that might interrupt each group’s work. A cursory look at the data collected during the first year of implementation as well as incidental conversations with faculty suggested that Design Your Own Learning was a success. Success, for me, equated to a positive “buzz” among the teachers about their work and Design Your Own Learning. This included teachers spontaneously mentioning where they were hoping to take their current inquiries or ideas for new inquiries noted during informal conversations or formal meetings and conferences. I took time to review and process the data collected during Year 1 in the summer of 2014 to suggest some changes to the Design Your Own Learning program during Year 2. Once again data from the focus groups were used to provide support for these findings and serve as a means to check for understanding.

Asking teachers: What happened? What should change? Why? Suggesting and implementing actionable changes to Design Your Own Learning during the 2014-2015 school year required more than just reviewing the emerging findings from the first
year. Those themes and reflections, while important, were my interpretations of the program. While the artifacts certainly told the story of a successful first year, they did not give insight into changes teachers might want to see enacted, nor did they explicitly tell me if the faculty thought this was a worthwhile use of their time. In order to capture this information, I asked the faculty to complete a survey entitled, “Reflections on Design Your Own Learning 2013-2014.”

The faculty survey was simple and designed to gain input on their thoughts about Design Your Own Learning and the types of enhancements that could be made to the program. I was interested in understanding their perceptions of the structure and the way it was used to replace “typical” faculty meetings. This survey also provided a learning opportunity for my faculty, as I intended to use its results as a “member checking” opportunity at the start of the next school year. This would not only continue to challenge the power hierarchy related to professional learning, but also support what the literature suggests about the importance of making professional learning a school-wide endeavor. In some ways this idea was one of the first actions I took to enhance the Design Your Own Learning program.

I gave the faculty a month during the summer of 2014 to complete the 5-question survey. Figure 11 lists the questions from the survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflections on Design Your Own Learning 2013-2014 Survey Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What did you learn as a result of participating in Design Your Own Learning this year?</td>
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</table>
2. Explain why you do or do not feel this is a good way to use professional learning time at school.

3. What were the best parts of participating in Design Your Own Learning?

4. What suggestions do you have to improve the Design Your Own Learning format?

5. What is one word you would use to describe Design Your Own Learning to someone at another school?

Figure 11. Reflections on Design Your Own Learning 2013-2014 Survey Questions (June 2014)

After closing the survey, I looked at all of the results and created a summary response for each of the questions. Figure 12 shows the summary responses from the faculty survey.

Reflections on Design Your Own Learning 2013-2014 Summary Responses

1. What did you learn as a result of participating in Design Your Own Learning this year? Participating in DYOL provided opportunities for faculty to learn more about a topic of interest or need with other colleagues who had the same interests or questions. In addition participants recognized an importance in working with colleagues to process ideas as they were also implementing new ideas and strategies in their classrooms.
2. **Explain why you do or do not feel this is a good way to use professional learning time at school.** Overall the faculty noted that participation in Design Your Own Learning was a good use of professional learning time. In general, time to be involved in a project that was considered a (personal) need and interest and getting to see it through from beginning to end was a benefit. DYOL provided opportunities to work with colleagues as well as build some new professional (and personal) relationships.

3. **What were the best parts of participating in Design Your Own Learning?** Having the time and opportunity to make the choices necessary to pursue a topic(s) of interest along with colleagues were strengths of participating in DYOL. Themes related to the importance of “collaboration” (the ability to learn with/from as well as push each other) as well as “voice/choice” (have some control and say in the direction of professional learning or meeting structure) were noted in the comments.

4. **What suggestions do you have to improve the Design Your Own Learning format?** Based upon the responses, we should continue with the DYOL structure during the 2014-2015 school year with some slight modifications. Some of the suggested changes were: having opportunities for groups to “share as we go,” having the
opportunity to design either long term or multiple short term inquiries, and trying to find a way to have different faculty members work with each other during the course of the year or inquiry project.

5. What is one word you would use to describe Design Your Own Learning to someone at another school? Design Your Own Learning is a collaborative professional learning structure that is effective and worthwhile, providing teams of teachers the opportunity to work on expanding their knowledge of topics and questions that are relevant to their work with students.

Figure 12. Summary of responses to the Reflections on Design Your Own Learning 2013-2014 Survey (September 2014)

The summary of the results from the survey, along with my reflections from the first year of Design Your Own Learning, suggested a few changes to enact during the second year of Design Your Own Learning. One change involved my working to better define my role as a teacher educator and providing some more specific information about professional inquiry. The other changes required some tweaks to Design Your Own Learning that would allow for an increased number of Design Your Own Learning meetings during the year, multiple set “sharing” points during the year, and an opportunity to establish a short form Design Your Own Learning plan that might allow faculty to engage in multiple inquiries during the school year. I would bring these suggestions, along with the data from the Reflections on Design Your Own Learning
2013-2014 survey, to the faculty at our first meeting in September. This would allow them to member check my synthesis of the data as well as share input on the suggested changes to the program for its second year.

**Member checking: My attempt at making the learning and change process open to the faculty.** A large chunk of time during the first faculty meeting in September 2014 was devoted to member checking the results from the Reflections on Design Your Own Learning 2013-2014 survey. This was a bold step for me in terms of understanding the process and challenging typical school power structures. Here I was, inviting everyone to share in the decision making power related to professional learning at Lakeside Elementary School.

While I believed in the concept of "member checking" and how this would help me to gather authentic information about how we could plan for enhancements to DYOL, I was concerned. I had used consensus activities with the faculty, seeking to get their ideas and opinions, but this was the first time I was asking them to see if I really understood what they were saying. I wondered more about the reaction I would get, if I would get honest feedback, critical feedback or if I would just get a rubber stamp. (Data Reflection Memo - Member Checking 9214 Processed)

Nobody said a word as I explained the directions for the member checking exercise. I had the faculty work in 6 small groups to compare the data summary I created from the raw survey data. Groups were given the data summary as well as the raw survey data. “It was a slow start. . . . As the groups began getting themselves settled it was interesting to see how they approached the task” (Data Reflection Memo - Member
All teachers interacted with the data in one way or another. Some groups seemed to take stretches of time to read through everything while others held discussions about the summary. What I did not know was if they really understood what I was asking them to do.

Finally in one group a person called me [Michael Ryan] over and asked if I could help them. They expressed some confusion over the task. I was not really sure how to respond, not wanting to tell them to disagree with me or to agree with me. I explained it as checking my understanding of the feedback. Finally one teacher turned to me and said, “So you mean you want us to grade you?” I paused briefly and said, “Exactly.” (Data Reflection Memo - Member Checking 9214 Processed)

While “grading” may be an extreme word, it made sense to this group of teachers, helping them to see that I wanted them to check my comprehension and synthesis of the feedback data. The concept of member-checking and engaging teachers as equal partners was still a struggle for some members of the faculty. A principal needs to think about ways that he or she must support and scaffold these types of shifts when engaging in collective inquiry with a school faculty. Additionally I see this as a way I was creating a shift in hierarchical power and typical roles, by asking them to check me as opposed to my evaluating the faculty. As the literature suggests, these types of actions help to promote new cultural norms needed to support changes in school structures.

During the member checking session, the teachers confirmed the changes I had noted during my initial review of the data. However, the groups also helped to highlight and clarify the value the teachers placed in some of the changes, specifically the desire
for increased sharing opportunities. One group noted, “Through our discussion we thought it would be helpful to have more time to share our findings to learn from each other and know who to go to as a resource” (Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). There was a sense of communal learning that transcended beyond group membership. One teacher described this exactly, “So I think that everything is starting to come out of the group that it started in, and people are seeing things and using things and asking questions” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). This demonstrates the power a principal can have in shaping or reshaping a learning community by supporting teachers as they make their knowledge and learning public.

**Where do we go from here? New actions suggested.** The member checking groups confirmed the need to devote more time to the Design Your Own Learning meetings and to create additional sharing opportunities as well as opportunities for shorter-term inquiry projects. Devoting additional meeting time during the year would be relatively easy during the new school year. During Year 1, I scheduled 5 of the 10 faculty meetings as Design Your Own Learning meetings; this left room for other meetings during the year and did not begin to touch the “committee hours” that could also be used for meeting time. Scheduling this time was very important to the teachers. “I feel like sometimes you just need to be seated and you need to have a set date to get down and get it done. And I think it’s good to have that day, because you know you have to do it. I know for me, I need that structure” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). “So what was beneficial was meeting once a month or every two months” (Focus Group 2,
January 28, 2015). Teachers appeared comfortable suggesting changes in structures, implying a growing capacity for professional learning and growth.

Probably the largest structural change suggested for Year 2 was the ability to engage in a shorter-term inquiry or the ability to switch groups altogether. At its inception, I had modeled Design Your Own Learning on a scaled down version of the action research projects from the Network for Educational Renewal; therefore, I had envisioned a long-term inquiry. The feedback from the Reflections on Design Your Own Learning 2013-2014 survey suggested to me and to the member checking groups that the faculty wanted the “flexibility to switch into another group” (Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). This represents a developing and expanding conception of inquiry, the recognition that some inquiries might require varied amounts of time to pursue, while others may not be worth the time and effort to continue. It gives a window into the ways that teachers come to develop an understanding of what it means to intellectualize their daily work.

During the focus groups, teachers talked a great deal about the importance of the opportunity to complete multiple inquiries or change their groups. One teacher noted, “I think it helps because then you still have another half of the year to try things that you thought were interesting” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Another reflected on the way that having the opportunity to switch groups has impacted colleagues during Year 2:

This year there’s more of that like already. There’s groups that, that are looking to move to different groups. I think they realize that the scope, they may not need to stick with their topic for the whole year, and the scope can change just over a
period of a couple of months. So it seems like in that way more groups, well maybe more teachers will utilize different groups throughout the course of the year rather than just stick with the one group. (Focus Group 2, January 28, 2015).

Responses from the focus groups also suggest that the ability to switch groups helped to further enhance each individual teachers’ learning.

I was in the group that failed this year. We tried to start a group and . . . we only set aside a few weeks and it just never came to fruition, the things we were trying to do. But, I learned a lot. I was able to work with some of the special area teachers and get some tips from them. I brought something away from it. It didn’t exactly succeed as we had planned, but I did learn some ideas. So I think it was still beneficial. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Learning became key to the teachers, which suggested that teachers started to become more critical of their own work as well as the goals they identified for their inquiry. Clearly teachers recognized that learning could be perceived as successful or not; however the opportunity to engage in the learning was paramount. In a sense the opportunity to share with varied colleagues was almost as important as an inquiry that “works out.”

Additionally, as the literature suggests, having a choice and voice in professional learning opens a space to develop stronger professional communities among the whole faculty. It seems that practitioners began to see themselves as students and active learners. I would need to identify ways to support some of these changes and possibly coach groups who thought their inquiry was not “working.” My teachers developed an
open perspective to learning that allowed them to engage in the inquiry process and learn from so-called failures. One teacher summarized this nicely, “I mean you learn from your mistakes. I mean I shouldn’t say mistakes; it’s not a mistake. It’s just, you learn like, this is not giving me enough information that I need” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015).

This section allowed me to present the findings related to the first full action research cycle leading to the start of the second year. I used the data to help tell the story of my process as a principal implementing a new inquiry-based professional learning structure within my school. The first section began with a description of the circumstances and events that led to the implementation of Design Your Own Learning and concluded with a description of initial findings and the changes these suggested for the second year of this structure. As part of the reflection, I addressed the struggles I faced and the ways in which I reflected on my (the principal’s) role as an inquiry facilitator and emerging teacher educator.

In the next section I share findings related to the start of a second research cycle, allowing myself to look across all data sources collected and return to the main research question, What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure (Design Your Own Learning) in my school? I focus on identifying findings synthesized during a summary review of the data related to this overarching question as well as the sub question, What did I, as the principal, learn about implementing an inquiry-based form of professional development? I present and discuss my findings that represent new learning in relationship to the literature using the
overarching theme, Principal as Teacher Educator. This theme represents what I learned about myself, the former principal of Lakeside Elementary School; what I learned about supporting my teachers’ in their learning processes; what I learned about the structures I imposed to promote inquiry- based professional learning; and not surprisingly, what I learned about the principal’s role as a teacher educator fostering an inquiry-based learning structure like Design Your Own Learning in a public school.

**Principal as Teacher Educator**

It’s very different when you are teacher of teachers because your goals are different. Other than specific teaching goals, which we can address in other ways. In this realm you were really interested in assessment, which means that, in my opinion, you were going to do it. If I made [teacher’s name] do that she might do it, but I don’t know that the goal would’ve been the same. That’s where . . . ultimately that’s where you are, you all stepped in at different places. The burning question last year for you guys is what you addressed… and even when the group doesn’t work out you started out with something and realized, this isn’t a question really that’s meaty enough . . . we are not doing the learning, we are wanting to be doing . . . (Michael Ryan, Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015).

Significant changes can only be brought about in schools if those involved in the day–to- day work of teaching and learning, and in particular the school principal, are actively involved in questioning, reflecting on, and changing their work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). For example, Supovitz (2002) notes that for communities to focus on instructional improvement, there is a need
for “organizational structures, cultures of instructional exploration, and ongoing professional learning opportunities that can support sustained inquiry into improved teaching and learning” (p. 1591). The building principal is able to promote and support such changes in a school. As the former principal of Lakeside Elementary School I learned a great deal about my former teachers’ learning processes, the structures that supported inquiry-based professional learning, and not surprisingly, a great deal about the principal’s role in fostering a structure like Design Your Own Learning in a public school. While thinking about the changes to the role of the principal, new conceptions of power, and the way I worked with teachers as they engaged in inquiry, I discovered that a theme emerged from the data, one that I call Principal as Teacher Educator.

Professional interdependence involves an evolving concept of leadership within schools that can help to establish norms and structures that eradicate the professional isolation typically experienced by practitioners in the United States (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009). While I had anticipated learning something about myself and the ways principals promote professional learning, implementing Design Your Own Learning caused me to reimagine my role as an educational leader in the school and challenge my own traditional conceptions of power as a principal of a public school. Power in this sense means the ways that building administrators typically are “in charge” of professional learning in a school building.

Catalysts for these shifts included starting to see myself as a teacher educator, recognizing my role in fostering teacher development by identifying the varied needs of teachers as learners, and discovering the most effective ways to help support teachers as
they worked to expand their knowledge about their students, curriculum, and pedagogy. The type of professional interdependence required to support Design Your Own Learning involves an evolving concept of leadership within schools that can help to establish norms and structures that eradicate the professional isolation typically experienced by practitioners in the United States (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009). Design Your Own Learning presented a challenge to long established lines of demarcation and roles in typical American schools (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). With this model I created the time and space for teachers to interact with each other to lead their own professional learning, rather than prescribed the learning goals for my faculty and made presentations to them. Figure 1 shows the types of interactions and pressures I believe helped to foster professional learning through inquiry.
Coming Full Circle: Design Your Own Learning 2.0

New school years are filled with anticipation and promise. The start of the 2014-2015 school year was exciting for the Design Your Own Learning program as well as for me personally. September 2014 brought about an opportunity for the faculty to have a say in shaping the direction of Design Your Own Learning and for me to try my new role as a teacher educator with the teachers of Lakeside Elementary School. It was this latter change that would be the most short-lived since I announced in August of 2014 that I would be leaving my post as Principal after 9 ½ years to be the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for a larger K-12 school district a few towns away.
**Becoming a teacher educator.** Pending changes notwithstanding, I used the first faculty meeting of the new school year to better define my role as a principal and a teacher educator who fosters inquiry-based professional learning within his school. I knew I would be starting the year by providing the faculty with a bit more information about inquiry and the inquiry process. The meeting was designed to provide the faculty with an overview of the inquiry process as well as to have them engage in the member checking process related to changes to Design Your Own Learning in Year 2. While all of the groups did meaningful work during Year 1, only a few groups naturally engaged in a full inquiry process that included a specific cycle involving fact finding, planning, acting, observing the action, and reflecting on the action (Anderson et. al., 2007; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). Looking across the data collected as well as my reflections on the meetings, I felt it was important to provide some more specifics about inquiry with everyone.

**“Teaching” my teachers about inquiry and research.** Design Your Own Learning challenged teachers to engage in inquiry, and for some that turned into practical action research about their practices. However, I did not provide much instruction on the inquiry process or “research” during the first year: “I missed an opportunity to learn more about what the faculty knew, thought and understood about inquiry prior to fully implementing DYOL” (Data Reflection Memo 4-11-14). It also seems as if I often blurred the lines between inquiry and “action research” with my teachers in relation to expectations for their participation in Design Your Own Learning. This did not help to foster a clear understanding of the concepts with the teachers. For example, during one
reflection I note, “While talking with teachers at the end of the [first] year, I noticed that some were even able to communicate that they really did not ‘understand’ what it meant to engage in professional inquiry” (Data Reflection Memo - So This Is Inquiry 9214). “I forgot to be a teacher” (Data Reflection Memo - So This Is Inquiry 9214). It was clear that part of supporting this type of program meant helping teachers to develop a better understanding of inquiry and how it could be used to enhance their work with students in the classroom.

Teaching teachers about inquiry is the subject of graduate courses. School principals do not have the luxury of such time to spend on one concept when working with their faculty members. Additionally, it could be said that most building administrators may not have the background knowledge or experience to teach teachers about professional inquiry. Teachers needed to learn something more about inquiry and the inquiry process: “It seems as if being able to think more deeply about one's practices seems to be a personal quality rather than something that all new teachers are equipped to do” (Data Reflection Memo 5-7-14 Processed). This created another challenge for me as a teacher educator and facilitator, requiring that I present direct and concise information about inquiry to my faculty.

Given limitations on time, I was trying to be specific about inquiry, hoping to fill in the gap in understanding that presented itself during the first year. However, as I sit to write this reflection I am seriously wondering how “direct instruction” regarding inquiry would help my faculty “come to know or understand” the meaning of inquiry. (Data Reflection Memo - So This Is Inquiry 9214).
During this first meeting, I got more specific with the faculty about the meaning of inquiry (as I saw it) and how that would help inform their work as part of Design Your Own Learning. Figure 13 shows how I presented the inquiry process to the faculty.

Figure 13. Engaging in Professional Inquiry (September 2014)

Based upon my reflections and observations from Year 1, I knew that I wanted (and possibly needed) to “help tie the process together, with something that might represent the continuous nature of inquiry and how the process was deep and meaningful” (Data Reflection Memo - So This is Inquiry 9214). While I think all found their work to be meaningful, in my opinion, the depth of the inquiry for some groups was lacking, and I was hoping that the teachers would come to understand and become comfortable with the concept of professional learning as a deep, continuous, and iterative process. Clearly I was biased toward inquiry related to thinking about ways to engage students with
thinking and learning, rather than simply activities of things we might have students “do” during a lesson. For example, one group struggled to find a goal, ultimately deciding to explore iPad apps to add to the school’s iPads, but without really identifying how these would be integrated into daily instruction. This allowed me to highlight the work of some of the groups from Year 1 and promote greater focus for all of the groups. In addition, I spent more time talking about the ways teachers could begin to think about their own inquiry project in terms of wonderings about their practices. This was one way that I was working to define the role of teacher educator that had caused me such conflict during Year 1. Figure 14 and Figure 15 show how I presented this to the faculty.

![What is your wondering?](image)

Figure 14. What is your wondering? Explaining ways to come to an inquiry question (September 2014)
The changes I made to the way I presented Design Your Own Learning during this meeting were not revolutionary; however, I felt as if they addressed some of the gaps in understanding about Design Your Own Learning and inquiry I identified while observing the groups and their work during Year 1. Additionally while reflecting on the data from Year 1, I was able to shape a new role for myself in this new school structure. Frankly, it occurred to me during the summer that I did know how to define this role. “I borrowed heavily from my work with the Network for Educational Renewal action research groups as well as resources that we used to help coach these groups during the action research process” (Data Reflection Memo - So This is Inquiry 9214). Supovitz (2002) notes that for inquiry communities to focus on instructional improvement there is
a need for “organizational structures, cultures of instructional exploration, and ongoing professional learning opportunities that can support sustained inquiry into improved teaching and learning” (p. 1591). In this case I recognized the need to provide some type of intellectual support for the faculty.

Just a small change seemed to provide a benefit to the inquiries in Year 2. I noticed a substantial difference between the inquiry ideas after the additional supports were provided. Table 3 shows a comparison between Year 1 brainstorming topics and those of Year 2. Looking at the inquiry brainstorming sessions across the two years suggests that the faculty responded to being given more specifics about inquiry and the inquiry process. In addition, one might infer that the faculty gained a level of experience from a year of working with Design Your Own Learning and appeared to apply this knowledge while thinking about their goals for Year 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Instruction</td>
<td>I wonder if this would be a good opportunity to flesh out our science and social studies curriculums? What resources might we find?</td>
<td>How can we use technology to enhance student communication and communication with families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided reading/small group instruction</td>
<td>How can we use technology to enhance student communication and communication with families?</td>
<td>How can we use technology to enhance student communication and communication with families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding what health topics are covered in the classroom so I can build on those during PE class</td>
<td>I wonder if there are mini activities/lessons that will help foster more independence with students. For example: asking for help when needed, &amp; being aware of their surroundings to look for clues to aide with self-regulation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>I wonder if we could look into designing some activities that would reinforce our FUNDATIONS units/skills. How can we encourage the students to use the skills that they are learning in everyday spelling and writing?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding preschool CCS and preschool curriculum</td>
<td>I wonder how I can organize my classroom library to better suit my students who take them home and check books in and out?? Something with classroom library</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation in phonics instruction</td>
<td>I wonder how I can use Google Apps to structure collaboration among students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated instruction in math</td>
<td>Researching more appropriate apps for special education and inclusion</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mimio help!</td>
<td>Exploring iPad apps to enhance small group instruction and to optimize independent iPad use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading/writing conferencing</td>
<td>How can we use our Google Docs to better communicate student progress with resource/BSI teachers in order to develop lesson plans and/or in class support groupings?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More useful apps</td>
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**I develop a better understanding of “inquiry” while attempting to “teach”**

**teachers about professional inquiry.** While teaching teachers about inquiry in
preparation for Design Your Own Learning 2.0, I was in fact teaching the faculty about action research. As noted earlier, I had fused the concepts of inquiry and action research together. This in turn suggests not only a recognition of a misconception on my part, but also a truth that notes a value I placed in the action research process as a vehicle for powerful professional learning and development.

It hit me, I had presented a modified form of this graphic (see Figure 12), calling it “professional inquiry,” when in fact I was presenting the faculty with a path toward engaging in action research. I am feeling so conflicted about this realization since in essence I have provided the faculty with a system to use that really might stifle the learning and work process of the individual. I think that what I did was create a learning moment, but not a teachable moment. (Data Reflection Memo - So This Is Inquiry 9214)

I think this had a great deal to do with my concerns about making the learning prescribed. I have seen this in action with the advent of the professional learning community (PLC) movement. Many schools and school districts have applied the PLC label to existing structures or school practices, without focusing on continuous and engaged inquiry (DuFour, 2007). I had envisioned the need to create a continuous and organic space for inquiry as a model for professional learning within public schools. In my opinion, forcing action research as the model for inquiry would place value on this methodology and limit the voice and choice of the teacher.

Ironically, the way I was teaching about inquiry was not necessarily representative of inquiry-based teaching. “During the first year I had been so careful to
try and remove myself from the work that the groups were doing and in my effort to help shape Year 2 I find myself being more of ‘sage on the stage’ and not the ‘guide on the side’” (Data Reflection Memo - So This Is Inquiry 9214). I was still learning to be and evolving as an inquiry-based teacher educator.

**Learning to foster and support differentiated professional learning.** The struggles to come to terms with the role of facilitator may have helped me to develop a better understanding of ways I could use Design Your Own as a vehicle for differentiated teacher development. While it would be easy to select a topic for everyone to explore, my experience with topic-based meetings showed me that I still was not tapping into something meaningful for everyone. “I think that what I saw was that we had reached a point as a faculty overall – and this goes to your point in terms of differentiating, that there wasn’t much that I needed to teach everyone” (Michael Ryan, Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). I believed that inquiry would allow teachers to identify topics or questions that would help them each grow professionally. However, as stated earlier I embraced this concept but did not fully find my way to, in my view of my actions, fully support the teachers as they engaged in inquiry. Was this an excuse I used to not address the continuous conflict I was having with my conception of being a building-based teacher educator? Interestingly, teachers saw me, the principal, as someone who was taking time to “know” his teachers as learners. “So I think that the administrator or the facilitator knows the teachers and what they do in their classroom and believes in them” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). The literature might suggest this was a way in which I, the principal, worked to support and develop new social and intellectual norms within
Lakeside School forcing a change to the status quo (Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Wood, 2007). Ironically this also forced me to face my own conceptions about the role of the principal and about supporting teachers, which is something that needs further exploration in order to support other principals as they try to implement inquiry-based professional learning structures in their schools.

Looking across the data gave me the opportunity to identify ways I did try to support the groups with their varied goals. For example, I established a shared resource folder on Google Drive where I posted links, articles, and other resources related to each group’s inquiry focus. I encouraged teachers to post their resources here as well. On this support, teachers commented, “and when you were there and still and kind running it, having articles that came out and just keeping up to up-to-date on, on what it was that we were looking for. I enjoyed it” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). However, those types of resources are similar to the kinds of supports I would provide as part of a traditional school meeting. While I feel the resources did help the teachers learn about or explore their topics, I do not think they helped teachers engage in inquiry. They gave them information. Teachers needed to fully engage in the process. “It’s nice to get into that small group and to think about what you need to or what you would like to research. Or what you like to learn more to help your teaching in your own classroom” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). The question remains, what is the role for the principal in these situations?
Constructing a New Role for the Principal: Grappling with Hierarchy and Power.

Implementing Design Your Own Learning created an opportunity for me to think critically about the way I, as an administrator, teach teachers and what is important for teacher learning. It also presented my faculty with exposure to this new model of leadership and professional coaching. During typical faculty meetings or professional development sessions, an administrator or outside “expert” is typically imparting some sort of knowledge that he or she is expecting teachers to enact in the classroom (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). In this case, the principal or “expert” would be providing a one size fits all “lesson” for all teachers. The teachers at Lakeside understood this very well: “So, you know, when you’re setting up one thing for everybody it’s got to be hard to think, you know, how can everybody use this” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)?

Prior to implementing Design Your Own Learning, I would create an agenda for each meeting in an attempt to meet everybody’s needs all with one meeting. In this sense I was identifying the “need” for everyone, raising the level of importance of a topic to be addressed or discussed often without an explanation or connection to demonstrate the actual “need.” I was perpetuating the typical role of the building administrator. During the second focus group a teacher noted, “I think it’s also nice to research something you’re interested in. A lot of times the school faculty meeting, the school administrator needs to choose something that he thinks maybe a whole bunch of people need to look at or hear about” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). Teachers looked upon learning during typical faculty meetings as very passive experiences, even as I thought I was creating
engaging workshop experiences. As the discussion continued during the second focus group, a teacher stated, “Going to a faculty meeting, even though we get the agenda, you’re not as well-prepared because you don’t necessarily know if you’re going to have to do anything.” While it is not surprising, no matter how the meetings were designed previously at Lakeside Elementary School, it appears teachers viewed the concept of the faculty meeting through a negative lens and as void of useful professional learning opportunities. Lieberman and Mace (2008) might see this as a way the typical school structures leave teachers feeling as if professional learning opportunities within their schools are random and disconnected to their needs as practitioners. Design Your Own Learning signaled a change in the way the faculty experienced professional learning, causing me to think critically about how I, as the principal, would develop my teachers as inquirers. Both of these shifts are not well addressed in the literature.

Creating the Design Your Own Learning structure was the easy part; learning to support teachers as they engaged in inquiry-based professional learning appeared to be more challenging for me. While the literature talks about the importance of creating the time and the space to give teachers an active role in their professional learning (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003), it does not address the evolving role of the principal as a facilitator who supports teachers as they are engaging in their inquiry. This was a huge struggle that emerged in the data.

As I was observing the meetings and the inquiries of each group, it became obvious that some of the groups were really asking interesting and deep questions,
while other groups were seeking what I might call “really good ideas.” To a degree, while this was frustrating based upon what I might have wanted to happen, I had to be okay with this in order to try and ensure that I was allowing the teachers in each group to direct their own inquiries and ultimately their own learning. (Data Reflection Memo - So This Is Inquiry 9214)

When looking at the data and how I addressed this struggle, I realized that I became an observer to their work rather than a facilitator, in an effort to allow teachers to have control and ownership over this process. This challenged my ability to help guide and support the work in each group.

While Design Your Own Learning, as a structure, had tools to frame my teachers’ work (e.g. the group’s learning plan, meeting agenda forms, meeting summary surveys, etc.) and teachers even saw them as “guidelines,” I struggled with identifying any “teaching” I did to support the faculty. Upon reflection I realize teaching in this sense was a very traditional view, one where the “teacher” was at the center of the teaching and learning. For example, in order to try and facilitate some thought in planning, I allotted some time toward the end of a half professional day to have the groups meet to establish some goals using the planning sheet. The challenge with this became identifying my role in establishing or commenting on the goals they set for the meeting. Clearly there was a disconnect between what I “understood” and “believed” about being a principal or educational leader and my emerging conception of the principal as an inquiry-based teacher educator. It also highlights my personal struggle with fostering teachers’ abilities to become reflective practitioners (Brookfield, 1995; Buysse et. al., 2003; Cobb et. al.,
2003; Costa & Kallick, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004) and negotiating power in my role as an elementary school principal. Clearly, while supporting and promoting this new structure, I was also struggling with the shift of control over what teachers were learning and how they went about their exploration.

While I did try to provide some directions for the faculty about finding their own meeting space and getting started after dismissal time, I found myself worrying. I found myself wondering, will they get started? Do they really know what to do? Will this be worthwhile? The doubt was interesting in light of my staunch belief in trying to establish this at my school. I even worried about the lack of any type of protocol to be used during the meeting - this was surprising, given my belief that a protocol might overtake the point of the meeting, a belief that was supported by the literature review I completed for the qualifying paper. So I made an announcement reviewing that the groups should let me know where they would be meeting and that I would be "around" during the meeting time. (Reflection Memo 11-11-13 Processed)

Struggles like these are noted time after time in the data, highlighting a discomfort with my own disequilibrium while learning to define and refine my new role in relation to professional learning at Lakeside Elementary School. Darling-Hammond and
McLaughlin (1995) might see this as a way my leadership style and practices were evolving during this process.

This struggle seemed to be exacerbated by the fact that there was no model for me (the principal) to follow while trying to implement this type of inquiry-based professional learning structure in a school. One can look at ways authors have talked about the significance of teachers and administrators planning and talking together about practices as part of a learning community (Berry et. al., 2005; Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2011; O’Donovan, 2007; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Talbert, 2010; Wood, 2007); however, the Design Your Own Learning structure creates a more personal space for professional learning, allowing and requiring the topics to come from the teachers and not to be specified for them. The literature appears to be silent on ways that principals can come to learn about being inquiry-based teacher educators in their own settings, and this study suggests that this is an area for further investigation.

**My struggles with teaching teachers.** While looking closely at the data related to learning to be a teacher educator, a related conflict emerged: the principal’s role as a teacher educator who was facilitating inquiry-based professional learning rather than providing direct instruction as in typical professional development sessions. In a sense this conflict reflects one that a teacher might face when trying to employ more student focused teaching strategies as opposed to a direct instruction method. It is an interesting conflict in this study since I, the principal, was creating a space for inquiry in the school. For example, sometimes I can be very clear about my role: “I felt that as a facilitator my role was to help connect the teachers with resources and to serve as a guide during
discussions—trying to help clarify meaning when a group's discussion appeared to be unclear to the members of the group” (Reflection Memo 11-11-13 Processed). However, other data suggest I was more conflicted and cognizant of my position and presence in meetings and wanted to ensure that teachers had control over their learning and their inquiry.

I think they may have sensed my confusion; perhaps it came across as displeasure as they seemed to ask me if they were doing this [the meeting] right. . . . To deflect, I asked them to tell a bit about what they wanted to do with the Mimio. One teacher spoke up and talked about the challenge of using the Mimio in the classroom because of the lack of electrical outlets to supply power to the projector. I felt a bit frustrated. Was this an excuse or their way of telling me about a real constraint? I suggested that their group think about ways they wanted to use the tool as well as ways they might work around any obstacles. The teacher who had spoken before indicated that they definitely do use the Mime; I think she felt I was suggesting they were not using the tool, and I reiterated that part of their work as part of the group should be to identify meaningful ways to use the Mimio as a teaching and learning tool with their students. (Reflection Memo 11-11-13 Processed)

Creating the time and space for inquiry did appear to create a balance of power, as is suggested in the literature, allowing for teachers’ control over their inquiry (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006; Scriber, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007); however, I was unsure
of how to coach teachers as they engaged in inquiry. In other words, I did not know how to be an inquiry-based teacher educator. I was fearful of participating, feeling like I would be encroaching on the teachers’ space. The only way I thought I could allow for an organic inquiry experience was to position myself as an observer to the work. I was almost paralyzed.

I did not yet know what I did not understand about my learning process related to Design Your Own Learning. For example, I reflected, “I think I believed that all teachers would embrace this progressive change in school structures. I think I believed that they would all understand it; however, it is so different from what is engrained in ‘school culture’ that while open to the change, I'm not sure everyone could fully comprehend the opportunity to actively engage in an opportunity to intellectualize their practices rather than talk about and share some activities” (Data Reflection Memo 4-11-14). While it may be true that teachers did not understand some aspects of Design Your Own Learning or the inquiry process, this statement creates some distance between their work and the work a principal who sees herself or himself as an inquiry-based teacher educator can do to support teachers. Actually, I was creating the distance by not identifying a way that I could coach or “teach into” each group and best help promote a greater understanding of the inquiry process. Additionally, I allowed myself to blame teachers for their lack of understanding, not taking any responsibility to help guide my teachers during this change. Clearly my distance created a void, one that it seems each group filled in the best way they could. This signifies another place where this study identifies a continued need for research, as there does not seem to be any literature that addresses this process.
In this chapter I presented the findings related to the first full action research cycle leading to the start of the second year. I used the data to help tell the story of my process as a principal becoming a teacher educator. The first section described the circumstances and events that led to the implementation of Design Your Own Learning and included a description of initial findings that were synthesized during the first year of this structure. I addressed the ways in which I grappled with and reflected on my (the principal’s) emerging role as an inquiry facilitator and teacher educator. Additionally I described specific decisions I made to support the faculty, the structure, and myself during this first year of implementation.

The second part of this chapter presented the findings related to starting a second year with Design Your Own Learning, specifically what I learned about myself as a building leader from implementing an inquiry-based professional learning structure. I describe the way I welcomed the faculty into the action research process to member check suggested changes to the program and inform the second year of implementation. After I reviewed all data sources for this study, I identified a key theme, Principal as Teacher Educator, and findings from this study that represent new learning. The theme Principal as Teacher Educator represents what I learned about myself, the former principal of Lakeside Elementary School; what I learned about my former teachers’ learning processes; the structures that supported inquiry-based professional learning; and what I learned about the principal’s role as a teacher educator fostering an inquiry-based learning structure like Design Your Own Learning in a public school.
Chapter Five: Learning From Design Your Own Learning:

A Discussion of Findings Across the Data

The purpose of this study was to explore what happens when a school principal works with his faculty to try and make inquiry an integral part of professional learning within an elementary school. In the previous chapter, I described the practitioner action research cycle related to the implementation of Design Your Own Learning at Lakeside Elementary School and findings related to the role of the principal in implementing an inquiry-based professional learning structure. In this chapter, I look across all data sources collected to identify key themes and findings from this study that represent new learning, using the research questions as a lens through which to review the themes. I focus on the overarching question: “What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure, Design Your Own Learning, in my school?” as well as two of the sub questions: “How did teachers describe their emerging practice of inquiry?” and “How did what they were learning affect their professional practices?” I discuss the findings in relation to the literature and describe four main themes while looking across all of the data in relation to these research questions.

At this time there is very little written about grassroots efforts, like the one described in this study, to make meaningful changes to professional learning structures in schools, the way they came to be, and the impact these types of efforts have had on establishing inquiry as a tool used to promote professional learning for all teachers. With this study, I wanted to make our experiences with Design Your Own Learning public, by
describing the way we worked to implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure in hopes that others may learn from these experiences and foster meaningful changes within the professional cultures in schools. I wanted to add to the research related to the ways inquiry is used as a professional learning structure within schools by examining the way I, an elementary school principal, established an inquiry-based series of faculty meetings called “Design Your Own Learning” in which teachers were responsible for planning and carrying out professional learning based upon their own inquiry into their daily practices with students in an elementary school. Therefore, it was critical to look at all of the data collected and identify findings that could be used to make suggestions for further action and research.

The data collection and analysis were recursive and dynamic, reflecting the iterative nature of action research (Burns, 1998; Gibbon, 2002; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Throughout the study and the data analysis period, I was engaged in a spiral of “planning, acting, observing and reflecting” (Anderson et. al., 2007, p. 145). Any action research is a continuous process; however, due to the reality of specific timelines related to the dissertation process, I focus on the snapshot of time from June 2013 to January 2015, pulling from data collected during Year 1 and the start of Year 2 of Design Your Own Learning as well as the Focus Groups held in January 2015. With this study, I purposefully bridge one complete action cycle - plan, act, observe, reflect (Lewin, 1948) - and the start of a second cycle related to the Design Your Own Learning structure. Using data from the 2013-2014 school year, I was able to identify any challenges with
Design Your Own Learning as well as suggest revisions to the structure. Figure 3 is a graphic representation of this process.

Figure 3. Continuous review of the data during the action research cycle.

I collected new data in September 2014 and held Focus Groups in January 2015 in order to systematically analyze and problematize the implementation of this inquiry-based professional learning structure such as Design Your Own Learning. Figure 16 represents how information from the focus group helped to further illuminate themes that emerged when I looked across the whole data set.
Quality interactions and experiences help to construct a collaborative school inquiry network that is focused on its work with students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1938; Elmore, 2004; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). These networks provide opportunities for developing communities of practice, as described by Wenger (1998), where professionals work collaboratively to construct a shared professional identity and to enhance their professional knowledge. I viewed the Design Your Own Learning structure as a way to help form these types of networks within Lakeside Elementary School. It was an opportunity to redesign typical professional learning opportunities into vibrant interactive opportunities that allowed teachers to be in control of and responsible for their learning. Wenger (1998) notes that interactions within these communities...
promote common understandings within the group, ultimately enabling all members of the community to be more effective in their workplace: “All of this takes place in a social world, dialectically constituted in social practices that are in the process of reproduction, transformation and change” (Lave, & Wenger, 1991, p. 123). During the data analysis process I was looking for ways that the teachers and I as the principal engaged in these types of social interactions with each other while working within the Design Your Own Learning structure.

In this chapter I present and discuss my findings, focusing on the teachers and how they engaged in meaningful collaborative inquiry through Design Your Own Learning. This is presented using four main themes: Reimagining Faculty Meetings; Authentic and Organic Teacher Inquiry; Structuring a Shift in Power; and Inquiry Promoting Practical Research (see Appendix 9). These themes provide an explanation of the dance between the teachers’ growth and learning, as well as the ways that the Design Your Own Learning structure supported and promoted this work.

**Reimagining Faculty Meetings**

Having the time to work with something you need right then in your classroom rather than just like a general thing for the whole school, I think, was beneficial to the teachers and the students. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Design Your Own Learning allowed me the opportunity to change the paradigm for typical monthly faculty meetings. Unlike structures that mandate topics for inquiry, this model provided the faculty with the opportunity to direct their own learning, by creating a space for authentic and organic inquiry into their practices. As principal I
made a decision about the way that we could and would use this time that was a contractual obligation for each teacher. While the literature suggests that mandated participation in inquiry is not effective (Smith-Maddox, 1999; Wood, 2007), the teachers at Lakeside appear to have embraced the open-ended responsibilities related to engaging in professional inquiry as well as the opportunities to work with their colleagues as colleagues, co-learners, teachers, and critical friends: “It gives us a chance to focus more on, on something that we choose. It gives us a little bit of freedom as far as what we’re pursuing, what we’re looking up” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

Contrary to the inquiry groups or PLCs identified in the literature, Design Your Own Learning was not a forced “add on” to the teachers’ schedule; it was a complete change to the professional learning structure in the school, placing teachers and professional inquiry at the center. In order to properly support professional learning communities, schools must commit to replacing faculty meetings in which the principal is leading the agenda with structures that allow regular time for conversations and inquiry into teaching and learning as part of each educator's work day (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003).

Unlike structures that mandate topics for inquiry, Design Your Own Learning gave faculty a space for authentic and organic inquiry into their practices. Richardson (1998) suggests that structures such as this help to create an ecology of thinking that supports teachers as they question their work and try new ideas. This means that the school as a whole has developed an inquiry stance toward professional learning and the
ways teachers can enhance their practices. The Lakeside teachers recognized the importance of cultivating this school wide stance.

I was just going to say, thinking about other districts, I mean, this set up is a lot more on that teacher than it is on the administrator. So, you know, you are, have to have some buy in, you know, of the teachers involved because they need to know that they’re going to be the ones facilitating these meetings. Doing, you know, the research, um, putting something together. So if you don’t have that core group of teachers that are like, okay, this is fun how do you do this? If you have a school where everything has been done for them [teachers] and they’re like, well this is just something else [we have to do], we don’t have faculty meetings.

(Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

This provides an interesting commentary about teachers and teacher learning. Here I see the Lakeside teachers not only recognizing the shift in responsibility for typical meetings, embracing it as positive, but also recognizing the challenge this might present in most public schools. I see this as one way Lakeside Elementary teachers viewed themselves as true professionals, capable and responsible for their own professional learning.

Clearly providing the time alone would not be enough to support a structure like Design Your Own Learning, as Hammerness et al. (2005) note, “teachers also need to understand how to work with others in the school and community and to become leaders who can collaborate to change system constraints” (p. 365). Another teacher was quite clear about the importance of culture in order to support changes in professional learning structures, saying, “I think [Lakeside Elementary School] is a unique place with teachers
that are motivated and teachers that always want to learn and do better and work well together. And I think that’s a very important piece” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). While I truly believe that Lakeside Elementary School has exceptional teachers, it is important to note that Design Your Own Learning was not their first experience with altered faculty meeting structures. As I described in Chapter 4, many different meeting alternatives had been explored before I implemented Design Your Own Learning. For example, teachers had experience with the Topic-Based Meetings which allowed them to select to attend a meeting on a given topic that I had decided was important for the school to explore.

Structural changes that encourage and enable teachers to interact with each other, while seemingly positive for relationship building, can create a dissonance as teachers weigh this opportunity as another pull on their time (Smith-Maddox, 1999). While I held strong beliefs about this concept I worried about how teachers would perceive the Design Your Own Learning structure. For example, after the first group inquiry meeting I reflected, “I wonder if this gets perceived as [me] not wanting to do any work, or if there is a true understanding that I want to try and create this personal learning space for the faculty” (Reflection Memo 11-11-13 Processed). Clearly I (the principal) had doubts in the school culture’s readiness to employ such a different learning structure. However, even with doubts I did have trust in my teachers, and I believe this is the core of an inquiry community. Teachers talked about the power of their interactions during Design Your Own Learning, saying, “And you’re like, I don’t know if that will work, but then . . . being able to, like, share that with the people in your group make you a lot more
comfortable . . . you get, like, another tip from another teacher and then you . . . try it” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Another teacher added to this saying, “So you were just . . . getting different ways . . . and it was nice to get all the different perspectives” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). The Lakeside faculty appeared to have trust in one another, a trust that allows for erasing position and privileging an open and honest dialogue between all involved in the inquiry (Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013). I present the remainder of this theme, Reimagining the Faculty Meeting, using three sub themes: Learning With and From Colleagues, A Negotiable Non-Negotiable, and Structuring Authentic Inquiry is Messy. These themes describe the complexity involved with reimagining the faculty meetings at Lakeside Elementary School, illuminating the ways in which we were able to make, understand, and embrace these changes.

**Learning With and From Colleagues**

The individualistic culture of teaching and schools often can stifle teachers’ ability to think critically about their practices as part of a larger professional culture (Richardson, 2003). In contrast, Lakeside teachers developed an appreciation for learning with and from “others.” This included the opportunity to develop new kinds of professional relationships: “You also get to know a lot of the teachers that that maybe you don’t know personally” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). This provides another example of ways that Design Your Own Learning broke down “walls” of traditional school structures and social boundaries to learn with and from colleagues. Diversity in the groups was seen as a boon to developing knowledge.
It was nice being in the group where everybody taught something different. Like [teacher's name] was in first [grade] and I was in second and [teacher's name] in resource room. So, we all used it in a different way. So, when we came back, even that was different, I mean we all used it in a different way. And then it helped us tweak it [Google conferencing form] even more because then we knew how it worked and didn’t work within the classes. (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

Design Your Own Learning offered opportunities for teachers to interact, learn, and share with one another across grade levels and teaching roles (e.g. classroom teachers, resource teachers, self-contained special education teachers, related arts teachers, etc.). Engaging with different colleagues helped to support group learning, allowing for different perspectives to shed light on the inquiry. Design Your Own Learning challenged typical meetings by supporting diverse group sharing opportunities within inquiry groups and also by providing spaces for the groups to make their learning public with the whole faculty. It is an example of how invitations for collaborative work provided teachers with the opportunity to learn about, experiment with, and reflect on new practices within their context, sharing knowledge and expertise (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

Many teachers’ conversations focused on identifying ways that they could learn with and from each other to best meet the divergent needs of their students. In this way their work allowed them to start shining light on what they knew, understood, and needed to learn about teaching, their content, and the students. This helped them to start to know themselves as “experts” or resources in some areas.
We were originally speaking about doing Guided math groups when we started. And then the more we researched that, and we even went to a workshop, we were like, we are kind of doing that. We thought there might be more out there, but we were like, oh, we kind of got that covered. So now if we’re doing that, what can our other students be doing and how can we differentiate for those other students who might not be in that small group? (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Design Your Own Learning invited teachers to share ideas as well as fostered the confidence to reflect on their own practices in safe and open spaces.

Questions and conversations also led teachers to investigate and share information that would help them to understand and develop teaching practices through collaboration. Zeichner (2003) notes that engaging in ongoing and intensive inquiry and reflection helps teachers generate meaningful knowledge about their settings, confidence in their teaching, and confidence in their ability to influence the circumstances in which they teach: “I mean it made people feel effective, like they were doing something to improve their teaching. People felt confident” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). In this sense the time and opportunity to engage in inquiry helped to elevate the value of teachers’ daily work, their knowledge, and their questions. As one teacher reflected: “Everyone found it to be a good use of learning time because of how it met the interests and needs of participants” (Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). Another teacher wrote: “Making choices and collaboration was important; also [the] opportunity to learn from others” (Reflection on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). As the Lakeside teachers engaged in collaborative learning, they appeared to develop a sense of
confidence in their professional voices and practical knowledge. Teachers not only demonstrated confidence in their abilities to try and test new ideas, but also came to engage in the processes fully, enjoying successes and recognizing challenges as learning opportunities.

Professional development, as Phillips (2003) puts it, “occurs every day on the job among teams of teachers who share responsibility for high levels of learning for all students” (p. 242). While teachers worked on their inquiry, they used outside resources (e.g. journals, websites, professional books, workshops, etc.) to support their learning. At other times the teachers became resources for one another, enhancing their understanding by simply sharing personal knowledge and experiences with one another. Coming to see themselves as sources of knowledge and information is another way teachers recognized power in what they knew or learned during their careers and as part of their inquiry. For example, during the first focus group, a teacher involved in the conferencing group noted the way the multiple strengths of individuals helped to develop their work,

And then with the conversation going we were wanting something a little bit easier, quicker and then, and then I think [teacher’s name], I don’t know how it happened, I think just communicating, conversing with each other and then we have data and then you joined our group, I think, Mike [principal] and you said this whole thing of Google. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Another member of this group who participated in the second focus group spoke directly to the way this group’s research was tied to their interactions. She reflected: “The first year we did it [Design Your Own Learning] we were actually creating something so . . .
we sat down, we had something to actually do and to put together. We could use it and come back and say how was it working instead of just research as in reading about it” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

Teachers learned with and from each other in practical ways. One spoke about her questions related to technology integration, her low level of comfort with technology, and the way in which her interaction with colleagues helped to support her learning. She reflected: “I knew nothing about the Mimeo, and my technology [knowledge] wasn’t that great. But others knew somewhat, a couple things about it. So we kind of all helped each other to try to get to a point where we were able to use it within the classroom” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). This is interesting in that colleagues could really be honest with one another about what they knew and what they could do. Teachers were able serve as supports and cheerleaders for each other, each taking and giving in ways to meet everyone’s individual needs: an interesting phenomenon that developed organically within each group as they negotiated their group’s learning culture.

Learning occurred on many levels as teachers collaborated with one another on a practical level that allowed teachers to implement a practice as well as a deeper level that promoted critical thought about teaching and learning. As part of Design Your Own Learning, teachers were connected to their inquiry in a way that allowed them to honor their ideas and questions as worthy of exploration.

The other teacher and I always had questions about what we ended up doing for our Design Your Own Learning. So, it kind of, it just came to be because we had so many conversations about it and talked about it and tried to figure out different
ways to meet that goal beforehand, that we thought, ahhh. It came to us, like, we should do this for Design Your Own Learning because we have more time to give to it and maybe we, we can come up with some answers that we’ve been trying to figure out anyway. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Here the teachers identified that they could explore that “need,” that nagging question they have been thinking about but not given the opportunity to explore. Working within the structure of Design Your Own Learning, teachers could validate their own needs and empower themselves to explore these needs or questions together. They did not wait for an “other” to tell them what to explore or what to ask; they negotiated that for themselves within their groups. This was a big change and really provided a space for teachers to develop a sense of confidence in their abilities to develop their own professional knowledge as well as their classroom practices. For example, one teacher reflected:

I think it also makes people feel good about the work they were doing. I mean people were confident about it, I mean to hear just right here [in the focus group], I mean [teacher’s name] and [teacher’s name] talking about their Google form and they’re really proud of it, which is, I mean it made people feel effective, like they were doing something to improve their teaching. People felt confident. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

An interesting choice of words: “it made people feel effective.” In this age of accountability, effectiveness is most often tied to student scores on standardized tests whose selection, implementation, and scoring is typically outside the control of the classroom teacher. However, this teacher linked participation in Design Your Own
Learning as a way of helping to redefine “effectiveness” in the classroom as a way in which teachers are actively engaged in driving their own learning in order to enhance their practices and meet the needs of their students. Design Your Own Learning was a meaningful and interactive process that supported and challenged teachers at Lakeside to expand and construct professional knowledge that is directly related to their contexts and students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Schulman, 1998). It helped to support a community focused on learning and instructional improvement, bringing the teachers out of their typically isolated classrooms and encouraging them to engage in meaningful and impactful ways with their colleagues (Supovitz & Christman, 2003).

A Negotiable Non-Negotiable

Despite the fact that participation in Design Your Own Learning was required, the faculty as a whole appeared to embrace the opportunity to engage in personal professional inquiry. This runs counter to what the literature (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Wood, 2007) suggests about mandating participation in inquiry. While teachers did need to participate, Design Your Own Learning was not perceived as another mandated chore. In this sense it was a negotiable non-negotiable, requiring participation but allowing teachers a choice about how they would engage in their professional learning. The faculty recognized the difference between Design Your Own Learning and traditional faculty meetings, noting the say and control they had as part of this new model: “You get to choose your own topic and research something you’re actually interested in. It’s much less dreadful than knowing [laughter], okay it’s Monday and we have faculty, faculty meeting and I gotta sit there and listen” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Another
teacher specifically talked about the time dedicated to allowing teachers to gather and learn together.

I think the allotted time that was designated to it was also really important because it wasn’t like, hey if you want to meet on Thursday were doing this, you know, but we still have the meeting on Monday . . . so I think everyone was more motivated just because, we were all there, and we were all like required to be there but then it became more than that. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Recreating the way we used “faculty meeting” time allowed the teachers to explore topics and construct questions that were meaningful to them and their classrooms. Most practitioners are typically not afforded the time, space, and encouragement to share and problematize their practices (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Zeichner, 2003). Design Your Own Learning became a resource in itself, providing teachers with the opportunity to ask questions about their students and their practice. Shulman and Shulman (2004) might refer to the Design Your Own Learning structure as a form of “capital” in which the set time alone was a critical resource afforded to the teachers at Lakeside Elementary School.

One teacher recognized the interplay between having the time and using the time, noting, “Administration has to provide that time and that opportunity, and the staff and teachers they have to be willing, wanting to do it” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). According to the teachers, “Having the time and opportunity to make the choices necessary to pursue a topic(s) of interest along with colleagues were strengths of participating in Design Your Own Learning” (Reflections on Year 1 Member Check
Summary 9214). Teachers saw the time to talk as an opportunity to fully engage in discussions about their questions in ways that typical faculty meetings or common planning time did not allow. For example one teacher shared,

Yeah, because it might be something you’ve been talking about, like that’s how my group formed, I mean, we might say, oh yeah we should really do that, but you never really get around to doing it. So it gives you the chance to put that time aside. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

This is interesting since Design Your Own Learning did not provide more meeting time; it simply required and allowed teachers to use their usual meeting time differently. I believe that language, reflection, and action promoted questioning about curriculum and pedagogy, helping to promote and support a learning community among the groups and within the faculty: a community where all members were growing and learning in a continuous and iterative process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1910, 1938; Lave, & Wenger, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Teachers were motivated to fully participate in their meetings, not only to further their individual learning, but also so that they could fully support and explore their group’s inquiry. Fostering these types of authentic interactions between school professionals were a central guiding principle of the Design Your Own Learning structure.

**Structuring Authentic Inquiry is Messy**

It seemed like the level of engagement in the Design Your Own Learning meetings was greater than in traditional faculty meetings: “It wasn’t like the typical meeting where you’re like, okay see you next week. It was, you were excited about it so,
you may have gone home and researched that idea or, you know, or made up a form or whatever to bring back” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). However, excitement and engagement did not always mean that a group was focused. Inviting teachers to participate in authentic inquiry did not mean that it was easy for all of the groups; it was quite a messy process. This structure forced the teachers and me to construct new ways of engaging with each other as well as forced us to learn to engage in the inquiry process. There were no real models for us to follow or emulate. It was a constant negotiation between individuals and the process; we were finding our way as we went.

Some groups had difficulty getting started; others changed topics or really never settled on a focus for their work in the first year. I reflected on this after a conference with a teacher who was part of a group that originally was going to focus on small group learning and then began to focus on iPad apps:

Each time I would "listen in" to this group, they were talking about apps or sharing a website, but the talk always seemed very basal. I do not think anyone in this group knew what group to join, more specifically I do not think they truly understood how to question or talk critically about their practices (Data Reflection Memo 4-11-14).

It was never clear to me if there was a goal other than to identify interesting apps. For example a member of the group noted, “We found that a lot of our research was based on trial and error and seeing if it indeed, can you meet the needs of a specific grade level, or if it was a good fact fluency app” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). In other words, this group constructed its own way of making sense of this new structure. This highlights
the messiness of engaging in inquiry, with each faculty member and each group entering
the process at different places and developing their own paths. Traditional conceptions
about school structures (e.g. the faculty meeting) and expectations for these may have
limited their ability to make the most of the structure during the first year. For example
during a meeting with a faculty member in April 2014, the teacher told me, “I didn’t even
know what group I should join” (Data Reflection Memo 4-11-14). I reflected on this,
noting,

How could I have been so naive? When [teacher's name] said this I was stunned,
not only by the self-reflection that was taking place, but also about my own
miscalculation about some of the challenges I observed in some of the Design
Your Own Learning groups. I am embarrassed to admit that it never occurred to
me that somebody might really not have "known" what group they wanted to join.
On a deeper level I wonder if everyone truly understood what it might mean to
take time to explore a topic or a question in depth. (Data Reflection Memo 4-11-
14)

This speaks to the way in which this model was asking teachers to engage in their own
professional learning in new ways. Teachers were confused; I was confused, as we
worked together to make meaning out of the Design Your Own Learning structure.
Teachers had to learn to experience and appreciate the unpredictability of the inquiry
process, something I could not explicitly teach them and something that each group
experienced in its own time and way.
Design Your Own Learning created a sanctioned space for teachers to talk about their work, making conversations about practices a critical part of professional learning at Lakeside Elementary School. It provided an outward approval and placed value, if you would, on the power and importance of collegial conversations as a way to learn about and improve teaching practices. A teacher described Design Your Own Learning as a focusing opportunity by “really making you [the faculty] sit down and trying to get[you] to achieve what you want to achieve throughout your year. Because, I feel, like, sometimes you just need to be seated and you need to have a set date to get down and get it done” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). However, focused conversations about teaching and student needs did not always come easily or naturally, another way in which this process was messy. As teachers worked with each other in their Design Your Own Learning groups, they needed to develop an ability to communicate with each other about their needs and their learning. This structure did not give teachers a specific protocol to follow that would guide them through each meeting. It did however require teachers to construct learning plans, prepare for their own meetings, and share the status of their groups with me. Additionally I anticipated and expected that teachers would actively participate in their group meetings. Teachers in each group appeared to use their learning plans, meeting notes, and their agendas to organically develop their own group norms during the year. These expectations provided a small scaffold for teachers as they worked within this very different open-ended professional learning structure. This is one way Design Your Own Learning provided teachers with ownership over constructing their own inquiry process. It forced them to negotiate ways that they would work with
each other as well as provided them with opportunities to develop a sense of responsibility to and for their groups. Teachers completely owned this process, cultivating new ways of interacting with each other in order to best support the group’s work. While challenging at first, I feel that this occurred in meaningful ways because of the connection to and control teachers had over organizing and completing their inquiry.

The open-ended nature of Design Your Own Learning also forced teachers to develop their own strategies for using the dedicated time effectively, helping them focus and foster their group’s inquiry. Teachers needed to move from the perception of being audience members in a typical faculty meeting to being directors and active participants driving their own learning. This was a new and messy experience for everyone. For example, looking across the November 2013 and March 2014 group agendas, one can see ways in which the groups identified specifics about their goals, needs, and questions. Table 4 highlights focus questions presented by some of the groups in their meeting agendas during Year 1.

Table 4
Examples of Group Meeting Goals During Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>November 2013</th>
<th>March 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>List some questions you want to address during this particular meeting:</td>
<td>List some questions you want to address during this particular meeting:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Inclusion | ● What is typical for children during the times when our students visit the classroom?  
● Are our students capable of exhibiting the behavior that is | ● What does a transition plan meeting look like?  
Who attends and what are the roles of everyone involved?  
● After looking at the expectations for |
The questions reveal ways in which teachers’ inquiries developed to focusing on getting information about their students and teaching in order to enhance their practices and effectiveness in the classroom. Each group developed ways of using Design Your Own Learning structures, such as meeting agendas, to identify and communicate its goals,
opening up a space for deeper thinking and professional dialogue about the group's inquiry during meetings. Each group had its own fluid, unique process. As teachers’ questions evolved, so did their need for information. Teachers had to become critical consumers, creators, and colleagues, fully engaging in the inquiry process. As part of this, teachers experienced the disequilibrium of inquiry, learning to develop some patience and elasticity in their own professional learning. This was an especially important part of meetings when the group was testing a concept or a practice they were piloting in their classrooms with students. For example, a teacher shared:

I mean, you learn from your mistakes. I mean, I shouldn’t say mistakes, it’s not a mistake, it’s just, you learn like, this is not giving me enough information that I need. What can I do? What can we do a little bit more? How can we branch out just a little bit more? So, it was like a trial and error as well. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Design Your Own Learning presented most teachers with a bumpy process as they struggled with identifying their true questions while simultaneously processing new information. This was truly a shift from the predictable patterns of faculty meetings. Fluidity in learning created intellectual conflict: a sense of disequilibrium for teachers, which enabled some teachers to challenge their thinking and practices (Nelson, 2008; Paugh, 2006). This occurred because the Design Your Own Learning structure promoted the messiness of inquiry and the use of the dedicated time and space in order for teachers to identify how to best explore questions and test new ideas over a sustained period of time. Negotiating meaningful ways of working together as part of Design Your Own
Learning helped make these meetings sanctioned spaces for learning and collaborative inquiry. I believe that Stigler and Hiebert (1999) would see this as a way the Design Your Own Learning structure helped to move Lakeside School away from its traditional conceptions about faculty meetings and professional learning at the school.

Shulman and Shulman (2004) note, “an accomplished teacher is a member of a professional community who is ready and willing, and able to teach and learn from his or her teaching experience” (p. 259). Some teachers seemed to have expanded their understanding of learning to include learning from perceived “failure.” For example, a teacher shared, “We tried to start a group and it was based on something, and we only set aside a few weeks, and it just never came to fruition, the things we were trying to do” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). This too was a messy process and appears to have fostered new conceptions of “success” in relation to professional learning. The teacher who was in the “failing” group noted, “I brought something away from it. It didn’t exactly succeed as we had planned, but I did learn some ideas. So I think it was still beneficial.” In this sense, failure was defined as an inquiry that did not allow for deep learning; it was a question that had an easy answer. A “failure” did not help teachers make sense of teaching and learning within their own setting (Lieberman, 1986; Richardson, 1994). However, an inquiry or questioning stance enhances a group’s capacity to grow and stretch teachers’ understandings and knowledge (Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013). Ultimately, as teacher researchers, the faculty became confident and continuous learners, accepting failure as a part of the inquiry and learning process: “We’re still learning . . . Yeah we’re still learning and trying to figure that out” (Focus
Group 1, January 21, 2015). It appears as if they became comfortable with the messiness of inquiry. This is especially interesting in the era of No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and an educational climate that downplays the importance of “knowledge of” and “knowledge in” practice and pushes assessment and promoting “scripted” practices as keys to improving learning for students as well as for teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore, 2004; United States Department of Education, 2004).

While engaging in inquiry was messy, the process of engaging in collaborative inquiry added a new challenge by requiring colleagues to communicate questions, learning, needs, and disagreements. The teachers seemed to respond to this positively, noting, “The opportunity to share and learn with colleagues provided teachers with the impetus to find ways to engage in meaningful and productive work during their meetings” (Design Your Own Learning Feedback Survey March 2014 Processed; Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). This engagement typically involved talk and learning to use discussions as tools for learning and growth. As one teacher said: “It [Design Your Own Learning] gave us the time to really talk about it [inquiry topic] and look at it together and develop it more” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Nelson and Slavit (2007) found that as collaborative inquiry groups met, the professional relationships they formed with one another made it more conducive for individuals to open up their classroom practices to group examination. Teachers at Lakeside not only embraced the collaborative nature of Design Your Own Learning, but also recognized the opportunity this structure provided for them to take charge over their own professional learning. In a sense the Design Your Own Learning structure helped to provide teachers
with supports to face this messy process constructing an approach to and understanding of collaborative inquiry. There was, however, no specific coaching or teaching involved with these scaffolds (e.g., meeting agenda, meeting notes, feedback surveys, and resources folders).

I believe that the commitment to dedicated, ongoing time during the year to engage in inquiry is a key to helping support an initiative like Design Your Own Learning. Design Your Own Learning provided teachers with access to a committed learning space where they could talk, share, test, and investigate their practices. One teacher shared:

I didn’t realize it would be across the scope of a year. I thought it would be, you know, just for that session or maybe the next faculty meeting. I didn’t realize that, you know, it would be something that we would continue to work on, continue to build on . . . (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

Participating in Design Your Own Learning helped to make Lakeside Elementary School a place of sustained learning by placing value in practitioners having and using time for critical inquiry into their teaching (DuFour, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Eaker & Keating, 2009; Larrivee 2000; Nelson et. al., 2010; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Talbert, 2010).

**Authentic and Organic Teacher Inquiry**

As teachers worked within the Design Your Own Learning structure, their inquiry appeared organically, stemming from student needs they had identified in their classroom. Authentic professional learning happened continuously through practice and experience
(Lieberman & Mace, 2008) as teachers used their meeting time to learn how they could use their own questions to drive their inquiry. At Lakeside Elementary those involved in the day-to-day work of teaching and learning were actively questioning, reflecting on, and changing their work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Teachers’ needs and interests often revolved around identified issues in their particular classrooms, either related to students or, at times, challenges caused by imposed directives (new curriculum, assessments, etc.). For example, a member of the “math group” noted,

Me in particular, the other teacher and I, always had questions about what we ended up doing for our Design Your Own Learning. So it kind of just came to be because we had so many conversations about it, and talked about it, and tried to figure out different ways to meet that goal before hand. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Teachers also identified this during the member-checking meeting when Group 6 wrote, “We agree that everyone found it to be a good use of learning time because of how it met the interests and needs of participants” (Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). For example, when looking at the topics for Year 1 (see Table 3), groups focused on new preschool standards and their current curriculum program, ways to support inclusion opportunities for students in a more restrictive environment – a thrust for the special education department, and identifying ways to incorporate iPads – recently introduced in all classrooms – into daily instruction.
Authentic professional learning occurs daily as teachers engage with each other in inquiry and provides them with opportunities to transform and theorize about information from their environment (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lawton, Saunders, & Muhs, 1980). During the first Focus Group (January 21, 2015) a teacher noted, “It was a way for us to really dig deeper into exactly which area, specifically, the greatest need was, for that particular student.” Smith-Maddox (1999) found that teachers who engage in inquiry need to build and rebuild spaces where they can raise questions, reflect on their work with students, and develop common understandings related to their inquiry. The Design Your Own Learning meetings and the collaborative spaces this structure helped to foster seemed to allow teachers time to learn about ways they could use their own questions to focus their inquiry: “It gives us a chance to focus on something that we choose. It gives us a little bit of freedom as far as what we are pursuing” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). A teacher talked about emerging inquiries emanating from conversations that typically occurred between colleagues: “It might be something you’ve been talking about . . . we should really do that, but you never really get around to doing it. So, it [Design Your Own Learning] gives you the chance to put that time aside” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Since the topics were driven by their ideas and needs, the groups were able to explore a question that emerged from classroom work. Table 3, for example, shows how teachers’ inquiry topics became more focused in Year 2 in comparison to the inquiry topics in Year 1, suggesting that as teachers developed confidence in their abilities as well as in the structure, they began to identify ways to use inquiry to enhance their practices. Another teacher wrote: “By the end of the year we were more confident
with our topic and were able to transform and expand upon our original idea”

(Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Comparing Year 1 and Year 2 Inquiry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Year 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Instruction</td>
<td>I wonder if this would be a good opportunity to flesh out our science and social studies curriculums? What resources might we find?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided reading/small group instruction</td>
<td>How can we use technology to enhance student communication and communication with families?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding what health topics are covered in the classroom so I can build on those during PE class.</td>
<td>I wonder if there are mini activities/lessons that will help foster more independence with students. For example: asking for help when needed, &amp; being aware of their surroundings to look for clues to aide with self-regulation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>I wonder if we could look into designing some activities that would reinforce our FUNDATIONS units/skills. How can we encourage the students to use the skills that they are learning in everyday spelling and writing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding preschool CCS and preschool curriculum</td>
<td>I wonder how I can organize my classroom library to better suit my students who take them home and check books in and out?? Something with classroom library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation in phonics instruction</td>
<td>I wonder how I can use Google Apps to structure collaboration among students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated instruction in math</td>
<td>Researching more appropriate apps for special education and inclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mimio help! | Exploring iPad apps to enhance small group instruction and to optimize independent iPad use
---|---
Reading/writing conferencing | How can we use our Google Docs to better communicate student progress with resource/BSI teachers in order to develop lesson plans and/or in class support? groupings?
More useful apps | 

As teachers’ engaged in Design Your Own Learning, they began identifying more specific deep questions about their inquiries rather than simply naming a topic. This allowed their work to become more overtly focused on student learning. Zeichner (2003) notes that engaging in ongoing, intensive inquiry and reflection helps teachers generate meaningful knowledge about their settings, confidence in their teaching, and ability to influence the circumstances in which they teach. As teachers developed confidence in their ability to engage in inquiry, they were able to use Design Your Own Learning to help make an impact on their teaching. For example, during Year 1 a group wanted to explore “differentiation in phonics.” As with the inquiries from Year 1, this was presented as simply a topic. In contrast during Year 2 a group asked, “I wonder if we could look into designing some activities that would reinforce our FUNDATIONS (phonics) units/skills. How can we encourage the students to use the skills that they are learning in everyday spelling and writing?” (Table 3). Table 5 provides a comparison between the groups’ inquiry proposals. When comparing these, it is clear that during Year 2 the groups were able to provide a greater focus on digging deeper into specific goals and finding ways that they could help their students apply their phonics skills in
other contexts. This table also illuminates the ways in which group members developed as inquirers after participating in inquiry during Year 1. In a sense the teachers did learn from the messiness of the first year and constructed clarity about their own goals for authentic professional inquiry. I see this as a way the teachers problematized not only their ideas and questions, but also the whole inquiry process presented by Design Your Own Learning. Dewey (2010) might see this as a way the teachers learned to make their learning experiences intellectually effective. I describe it as a process that allowed the teachers to come to know their true questions about their practices. It seems to me that the questions presented for Year 2 would promote more specific learning for the teachers and provide an opportunity for them to generate targeted changes in their practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comparing a Year 1 and Year 2 Design Your Own Learning Group Inquiry Proposal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design You Own Learning – Group Proposal Questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inquiry Topic</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **What do you want to explore that will help you support your students’ learning and development?** | • Differentiation in phonics instructions  
- During whole group  
- During small group  
- Spelling lists/tests  
- Pushing excelling | This was not part of the Year 2 Plan. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify some goals you have for your inquiry . . .</th>
<th>List some questions you have related to your topic . . .</th>
<th>Why do you feel this is a critical topic to explore with your</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Develop differentiation lessons.</td>
<td>• What is an appropriate learning progression for phonics?</td>
<td>Phonics is a pivotal piece in k-2 instruction that affects a student’s performance in all areas of academics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Find a progression of learning for phonics.</td>
<td>• What are some resources that we can use?</td>
<td>We utilize FUNDATIONS in our classrooms and want to find novel ways to engage our students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Look more deeply into data garnered from the Wawa/Wilson probes.</td>
<td>• What is the best way to set up phonics instruction time?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Develop assessments to check for real life application.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

spellers
- Creating a connection between phonics, reading and writing
  - They are one in the same
- What are the essential components of solid phonics instruction?
  - What do we have that we can build upon, change or add to?
  - What are the building blocks for phonics? What is the progression?

Engaging activities, transfer of skills to writing, fun, high-interest ways to teach everyday skills.

- What is an appropriate learning progression for phonics?
- What are some resources that we can use?
- What is the best way to set up phonics instruction time?

Why do you feel this is a critical topic to explore with your... Phonics is a pivotal piece in k-2 instruction that affects a student’s performance in all areas of academics. We utilize FUNDATIONS in our classrooms and want to find novel ways to engage our students.
Spaces for greater communication about teaching and learning within a school tend to open when teachers engage in meaningful intellectual work with their colleagues (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). As teachers began to see themselves as inquirers, they identified the importance of breaking down typical classroom boundaries and opening spaces to make professional learning and dialogue public. Design Your Own Learning encouraged teachers to not only share ideas with their group members but also to share their inquiries, learning, and products with the whole faculty, thus allowing their work to be public. During the focus groups the teachers expressed the value of sharing ideas and strategies outside of their groups, indicating that teachers across the school saw themselves as supports and resources for one another.

We would share experiences of what worked in the classroom. So, what was beneficial was meeting once a month or every two months. We came back and talked about what we shared and that way we learn from each other because
someone would share their experience or kind of help you or support you or give you an idea of what you could try next time in your classroom (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

The sustained nature of the Design Your Own Learning structure created an open opportunity for the teachers to focus on their inquiry, allowing them to process and test ideas in new ways. However, as O’Donovan (2007) notes, “Collaboration is more than collegiality. It is hard work, as tough questions must be confronted” (p. 95). Teachers acknowledged this challenge during the member checking session, writing, “Sometimes working with other staff members may be difficult, and we need to plan accordingly” (Reflections on Year 1 Member Checking Summary 9214). However, differences were not a challenge in every group; during the second focus group, a teacher shared, “You know she [another teacher] loves to share opinions, and she has a lot to say, and it’s really nice because she’s not afraid to say, say, like, maybe I don’t do this right so we, we were really like it was comfortable” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). It appears that some teachers found the opportunity to make their questions and learning public an important part of meaningful professional learning.

Opportunities for dialogue and sharing enabled a new type of forum that challenges established norms within schools, creating a stronger, more flexible dialogic community (Huffman & Moss, 2008; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Paugh, 2006). In this sense differences in ideas and practices that may have presented challenges to individual ideas during group meetings did not seem to matter as much as staying true to the inquiry goals. Teachers began to value sharing their ideas as well as note an importance in their
thinking, something that was different from typical engagement in a traditional “faculty meeting.” For example, during the second focus group a teacher shared, “We always have that idea of like, holding kids accountable in our classrooms so that’s when, that’s kind of like what helped us or challenged us or kept us going, or somebody brought up an idea and to always make sure that it went with how we taught in our classroom” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). Here the teachers would discuss and share ideas, and challenge each other to ensure that new concepts were aligned to the needs and expectations in their classroom. Open conversations were a developing part of the process, as teachers sought to shape their inquiry and ensure it was meaningful. One teacher put it this way: “I think that is what challenged us to continue pushing in doing more because we wanted something that we could actually use and it worked, and so we didn’t settle on the original thought right away” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

DuFour (2004) notes, “collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private – goals, strategies, materials, pacing questions, concerns and results” (p. 10). The opportunities for sharing and conversation help to support individual and collective improvement to classroom instructional practices and ultimately student learning (DuFour, 2004, 2007; Nelson et. al., 2010; Vescio et. al., 2008; Wood, 2007). The Lakeside faculty noted the importance of more frequent sharing opportunities between groups in order to best support their work and professional learning: “Through our discussion we thought it would be helpful to have more time to share our findings to learn from each other and know who to go to as a resource” (Group 6, Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). Here again teachers
recognized their colleagues as important sources of information and learning. As one teacher put it, “As soon as we share, you know what everybody else is talking about. You know what they have found. Without the share, you’re kind of in the dark” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). Teachers actually looked forward to hearing from and learning from others.

We like had the opportunity to share, so our group was able to share with every other group and say this is what we have been working on. And then, just like now [they] shared out the Google forms so it was just like cool and interesting to see what everyone else was working on because everyone’s was so different. And like I’ve started using the Google forms now after we met this year, so I think that everything is starting to come out of the group that it started in, and people are seeing things and using things and asking questions. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Here teachers were pulling back the curtains on their work with students, sharing their inquiries openly with their colleagues as examples of success as well as examples that spurred more questions. In this sense the work of the groups had an impact on the professional growth and development of the whole school faculty. Differences were viewed as learning opportunities, and it seems that these teachers were open not only to asking questions but also to be questioned about their work by their colleagues. This occurred organically with no formal instruction about ways to run an inquiry meeting or how to establish group norms.
Teachers who engage in inquiry develop close relationships that foster mutual learning (Harris, 2003). This, in turn, helps teachers make sense of teaching and learning within their own setting (Lieberman, 1986; Richardson, 1994). I believed that these types of interactions would help promote a sense of collaboration among the faculty and give each teacher a meaningful voice in ongoing professional conversations (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). That is why it was critical that groups form organically and that I did not set a minimum or maximum number for group membership. It was simply understood that no matter what, one would not work alone. One teacher noted, “Being able to pick our groups instead of, you know, being put in groups really helped . . . because you’re already comfortable with the people, because you chose to be where you were” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). Other teachers talked about ways that their interactions with each other helped to promote their inquiry process and allowed them to challenge their thinking.

If you choose the topic, like wisely, in the beginning, if you really wanted something to actually work. So I think that is what challenged us to continue pushing in doing more because we wanted something that we could actually use. And it worked. And so, we didn’t settle on the original thought right away. We used it, we came back and then we would tweak it. (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

Lakeside teachers’ conversations about their students’ needs as well as their practices created opportunities for them to investigate and question their teaching. Participants
recognized an importance in working with colleagues to process ideas as they were also implementing new ideas and strategies in their classrooms (Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). Englert and Tarrant (1995) might see this as a way the interactive structure of Design Your Own Learning emphasized the importance of “involving teachers as informed agents, problem solvers and collaborators in the educational change process” (p. 325).

When looking at any type of initiative that would support changes in classroom practices the varied needs of teachers must be considered and placed at the center of any change (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). As teachers engaged in authentic and organic inquiry as part of Design Your Own Learning, the questions, growth, and change emanated from each individual and/or group. As one teacher put it, “It was different because everyone is in a different place with their teaching. Different levels, different types of education, so, it was a differentiated approach as well” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). The opportunity to engage in Design Your Own Learning seemed to provide time and space for teachers to learn more about themselves as teachers (Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005). This is important given the fact that the faculty represented general education, special education, related arts, and speech educators as well as the school nurse. The teachers noted the way Design Your Own Learning helped to facilitate this.

When you have your faculty meeting you have like [the school nurse], what [the school nurse] needs and you know what [the music teacher] needs and what I need. They’re all completely different so you know when you’re setting up one thing for everybody, it’s got to be hard to think, you know, how can everybody
use this? In Design Your Own Learning, you can use it because you’re taking whatever you want to do. (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

Darling Hammond and Baratz (2007) would explain this phenomenon as: “Being a professional involves not simply ‘knowing the answers’ but also having the skills and the will to evaluate one’s practice and search for new answers when needed, at both the classroom level and the school level” (p.116). Design Your Own Learning provided an open-ended learning opportunity for the faculty at Lakeside Elementary School that created a space for teachers to start to identify questions, needs, and ideas that required exploration. Some teachers even recognized the similarities in this inquiry-based approach and effective differentiated teaching approaches applied in the classroom.

It was also good to, kind of like, what we said earlier, to pick your own topic. To kind of, you know, research and look into versus being in a typical faculty meeting where you, you are all, kinda forced to talk and discuss the same thing, whether you want to or not or whether you need it or not. It kind of reminds you of the classroom where, you know, you’re kind of teaching one-way and some kids get it, some kids don’t. Some kids need more, some need less. But, you’re not kind of meeting everybody’s needs with that, that way. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

The Design Your Own Learning structure allowed teachers to engage in professional learning that best met the specific needs of each group or individual (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Garet et. al., 2001; Hammerness et al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Shulman & Shulman,
What was not clear in the literature or in the data is how to best support or coach varied teacher needs as teachers engage in a differentiated approach to professional learning.

Richardson (1998) might suggest that Design Your Own Learning helped to create an ecology of thinking that supported teachers as they learned to question their work and try new ideas. Teachers learned the importance of give and take in a collaborative learning community, saying,

- It was like, that questioning back-and-forth . . . and I found my partners, you know . . . that have the same questions, and we met and we had the same ideas.
- And it was brought to a whole different idea from just that conversation. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

Design Your Own Learning was constructed as a collaborative learning opportunity for the teachers at Lakeside Elementary School. The structure is built around the concept that quality interactions and experiences help to construct a collaborative school inquiry network that is focused on its work with students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1938; Elmore, 2004; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). These networks provide opportunities for developing communities of practice, as described by Wenger (1998), where professionals work collaboratively to construct a shared professional identity and to enhance their professional knowledge. In this sense, each group is a community of practice: all of the groups comprise an inquiry network that lives within the larger community of practice of the whole faculty. This model challenged the faculty to learn
about ways they could engage in self-directed professional learning as well as work in collaboration with other teachers in the building.

**Structuring a Shift in Power**

I believe that Design Your Own Learning helped to strengthen the culture within the Lakeside Elementary School by creating a shared sense of responsibility, control, and power over teachers’ professional learning. Design Your Own Learning, from its inception, empowered teachers to have total control over their engagement in the inquiry process. There were no specifics about how many teachers should be in a group, how many times each member should speak, or even how much one individual should contribute to the group. The structure provided teachers with greater control over their professional learning, shifting the power from the way typical faculty meeting time was used at the school. However, this did not just happen; it evolved within the school over time. I believe this started with my first attempts at reshaping the faculty meetings with the Topic- Specific Meetings. In order for inquiry groups to have a positive impact on daily practice, a culture of mutual support and collegial learning must be established within schools (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al.2008; Nelson, 2008; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007). A positive and supportive school culture is described within the literature as something that is cultivated with school administrators, not only by the administrators (Austin & Harkins, 2008; Hipp et al., 2008; Nelson, 2008; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Wood, 2007).

School inquiry communities are spaces where practitioners are viewed as—and believe they are—knowledge generators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1910;
Lieberman & Miller, 2011). The Design Your Own Learning structure promoted a sense of empowerment and collegiality among the faculty of Lakeside Elementary School, enabling teachers to take and make opportunities to take charge of their work and drive their own professional learning. While teachers were responsible for engaging in this model, the structure afforded them the power to choose their topic, their method of exploration, and their collaborators. This is in sharp contrast to typical faculty meetings and even represents a difference with the topic-based meetings that essentially were a form of controlled or contrived choice, and clearly placed value on specific topics or practices. For example a teacher shared, “Our group chose a topic that we felt [we] needed to improve upon as teachers, so we felt it was an area of weakness, something we wanted to learn about to be better teachers and be more effective in the classroom” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

In a true professional learning community, teachers and teacher leaders focus on “learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively” (Harris, 2003, p. 314). As teachers participated in Design Your Own Learning and began identifying needs, questioning their practices, and sharing their ideas, they appear to have engaged in interactive social learning experiences that challenged the typical isolation teachers experience within most public elementary schools. Their work was based on open dialogue and interactions surrounding the common question or goals of the group’s inquiry. Vygotsky (1978) considered language a key tool in creating a transformation in individuals as well as communities. I believe the interactive language experiences within a Design Your Own Learning Group were empowering, helping
teachers to recognize their professional voice and providing them with opportunities to raise questions about their practices, student needs, and school culture, all of which have an impact on classroom teaching (Giroux, 1988; Lave, & Wenger, 1991). The space to engage in inquiry created an opportunity and necessity for teachers to open their practices and questions to others. This created opportunities for different teachers from different grade levels and areas to work and learn together. This too provided teachers with new power to choose collaborators and helped them to break down traditional departmental walls between professionals within the school.

**Inquiry Promoting Practical Research**

Many teachers who participated in Design Your Own Learning appear to have moved beyond simply asking questions to actually engaging in informal forms of action research. By gaining confidence in their abilities to question, reflect, make choices, and take actions, they were now ready to try new practices and collect data related to their topics of study. Teachers noted that being invited to focus on questions related to their practice as well as the needs of their students created opportunities for some teachers to engage in practical action research. I define practical action research as involving inquiry into “one’s own practice” (McNiff, 2001, p. 5), thus influencing the delivery and quality of instruction. It requires that teachers collect evidence (data) related to their daily work with students that can help them to evaluate the effectiveness of their practices (McNiff, 2001). Practical action research occurred organically, developing from the opportunity and requirement to plan for inquiry as part of Design Your Own Learning.
Practical action research allowed some teachers to dig deeper into their inquiry and problematize their work, classrooms, and understanding of their students’ needs (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). Many groups used their Design Your Own Learning goals and questions to research their daily practices with a focus on ways to enhance their work with students. For example, the math group in particular is interesting in that through their research they came to a clearer understanding and definition of their classroom needs. This group used its repertoire of strategies and practices as data, focusing on looking at different ways they could employ them to support differentiated learning within their classrooms. During the course of their work in Year 1, they compared these to strategies presented by “experts,” realizing that while they had lots of good strategies, what they needed were new ideas about ways to use these strategies effectively.

We were talking about differentiating our instruction for math, and we were just looking at like a small group instruction, and we were thinking about how to, I guess, better use that in our classroom and . . . both of us went to a workshop . . . although it was called Guided math groups, she only really talked about giving the kids like different things while she was pulling math groups so it wasn’t like talking about how to teach that math group. . . . and so that changed our outlook on the whole process. . . . And that was kind of where we realized that we maybe needed to change, not change our research, but change what we were looking at, like how we were looking at what we needed help in our classroom with. (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)
This workshop was a data source for this group; however, as they were reviewing the data they recognized that it was not helping them to learn more about their question. I saw this group constructing its own type of criteria to try and better identify data sources that would help with its inquiry focus. This group used the Design Your Own Learning structure as a vehicle to better define its own professional learning needs. Their work led these teachers to solidify what they did know and understand, which helped them to best identify what they still needed to learn in order to help support their students. Learning appeared to be determined by an individual’s increased participation in his or her inquiry group, with individuals taking on a more active role in their communities of practice (Lave, & Wenger, 1991).

Many group discussions focused on daily classroom work as well as new information gained through teachers’ engagement in the research process. For example, teachers from the conferencing group would test their new recording sheet, bringing data to share and discuss as well as feedback from using the online recording form. Teachers in other groups similarly would bring back new information from their implementation of new ideas and practices in their classrooms. These types of interactions really seemed to help teachers problematize their daily work as well as their inquiry (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). One teacher talked about the ways her group experienced problematizing their work as an interactive process.

We kind of decided during our, you know, conversations and what not, that, you know what? We need to kind of hold off on that. We needed to develop . . . a
This came about as part of a dialogue about ways this group would continue its investigation into differentiating phonics instruction. These types of interactions supported a closer look at student needs as well as wonderings related to their classroom practices. One teacher talked about one way her group did this, saying, “When we came together it was after when we looked at something or read something and sometimes we brought student work . . . and . . . looked at that as well” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). These collaborative endeavors provided groups with opportunities to raise questions and engage in practical research about their practices, student needs, and school culture, all of which had the potential to have an impact on classroom teaching (Giroux, 1988; Lave, & Wenger, 1991).

Design Your Own Learning supported the development of teacher researchers by inviting teachers to come to know and understand what they already knew about curriculum, pedagogy, and their students. This was most evident in the math group, highlighted earlier in this section. These teachers came to better understand their professional knowledge and their inquiry after going to a workshop and listening to an “expert.” One teacher from that group, in reference to reflecting on her work after hearing an “expert,” said, “That changed our outlook on the whole process because we were kind of like, we know how to teach. We know what our kids need” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). In this sense teachers used their daily practices as data, to recognize
their own strengths, and better identify what they wanted and needed to learn. These teachers spent time reviewing and evaluating their work with students, looking for patterns and themes that would help them identify ways to best differentiate their math instruction, much like the ways researchers cull data looking for findings to emerge.

As some teachers developed their inquiry and practical research skills, they also developed an understanding of inquiry and action research as an iterative process. This was clear in the group that investigated conferencing tools. This group began its work by talking about ways to capture conferencing data; however, early on in the process their conversation opened up to include conference techniques as well as what types of data were useful to capture during a student conference. This conversation about “practical” data collection related to student performance morphed into a dialogue about the type of data the teachers would be collecting in order to test their conferencing tool and was described in the following way: “We have this whole idea of how to work with our students to, to try and find . . . information, which is the conferencing piece. To make it easier for us to help and to learn about our students” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015).

This group’s members spent time during meetings tinkering with their conferencing tool and talking about significant data to collect. Their conversations were an interesting dance between what they were learning about their students as well as what they were learning about the tool they were creating. At times their focus was more on the tool rather than on understanding student learning, which, while understandable, represents a place where teachers needed some guidance during their process.
Right, so it just felt like we all kind of brought something different to the table, like [teacher’s name]’s technology experience was extremely helpful in the sense of creating the form and kind of like knowing where to go to put things together, and then you know we learn what worked last year, and then we learn what didn’t work last year. So last year was a 1234 scale, and this year was, um, 1 to 5, 1 being low and 5 being pretty high. So that conversation piece, we’re learning about what worked and what didn’t work, so, and just taking suggestions from the other people who were using it. Like what, like a lot of times we would come together at the next meeting and say, oh this wasn’t working, this was working and then whatever wasn’t working we would just kind of adjust (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015).

Another teacher in this group expanded on this, informally explaining their use of the iterative process. Comprised of teachers from different grade levels, this group’s members worked on a Google Conferencing Form and then tested it in their respective settings, returning to their next meeting with feedback and data from their trials. Their continuous work on this tool became a process of refinement and testing of their work that continued into Year 2.

And I think each time we went we had the tool which kind of sparked our conversation. So, we created this tool we use that, we came back and talked - How is it working? So we could tweak it, change it each time. You know, make it what we wanted to make sure we get what we wanted to get from it. And then from there, you know, okay, how can we go further? Now how can we, how can
we use this with like math or like [teacher's name], how can we share this information and actually use it to better ability? So I think that for our group was easy because we use that to spark the conversation each time and then build around that (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015).

These teachers truly embraced this process, recognizing that they could learn from their practices and interactions, and becoming adaptive experts through collaborative research. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) might see this as a way the teachers used their emerging research to rethink their practices and teach in ways they had not contemplated before.

Summary

In this section I presented the findings synthesized by looking across all data sources collected, identifying key themes and findings from this study that represent new learning. I discussed the findings in relation to the literature using four overarching themes I constructed while looking across all of the data in relation to the research questions: What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure (Design Your Own Learning) in my school? How did teachers describe their emerging practice of inquiry? How did what they were learning affect their professional practices? This lens helped me to fully describe four themes and the findings they represent.

Four main themes were presented in this chapter: Reimagining Faculty Meetings, Authentic and Organic Inquiry, Structuring a Shift in Power, and Inquiry Promoting Practical Research. These themes helped to describe the main findings of this study. The
Design Your Own Learning structure changed the paradigm for school-based professional learning, allowing for dedicated time and space for teachers to direct their own learning. This structure also helped us to reimagine the way a required “meeting,” such as a typical faculty meeting, could be used as a space to engage in professional inquiry. Additionally, a review of the data revealed that the teachers who engaged in Design Your Own Learning came to see themselves as collaborators, confident inquirers, and scholars gaining useful inquiry skills, such as the ability to think critically about their teaching, learn with and from colleagues, and recognize the power of their own knowledge and understanding. As teachers developed in these areas, they were able to challenge school norms and ask meaningful questions about their practices. These findings were presented in relation to related literature, the research questions, and my conceptual framework.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

The purpose of this practitioner action research was to examine the way I, an elementary school principal, established an inquiry-based series of faculty meetings called “Design Your Own Learning” in which teachers were responsible for planning and carrying out professional learning based upon their own inquiry into their daily practices with students at Lakeside Elementary School. Practitioner action research provided me with a space to deliberately and systematically review the data collected (Anderson et. al., 2007) as well as reflect on the process of implementing Design Your Own Learning and acknowledge my role as an active participant in the study. With this study I wanted to make my experiences with Design Your Own Learning public, by describing the way I worked with my faculty to implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure in hopes of teaching others how to foster meaningful changes within their professional school cultures. I wanted to add to the research related to the ways inquiry is used as a professional learning structure within schools.

The two previous chapters detailed the ways that I analyzed the data in order to identify the findings for this study. Chapter 4 described the way I, the building principal, engaged in practitioner action research while implementing Design Your Own Learning. I used the data to help tell the story of the first year of this practitioner action research by identifying my learning and struggles with the implementation of Design Your Own Learning. Using the theme Principal as Teacher Educator, I shared what I learned while implementing the structures that supported inquiry-based professional learning and what I learned about my (the principal’s) role as a teacher educator fostering an inquiry-based
learning structure like Design Your Own Learning in a public school. This narrative provided a way for me to highlight my process of coming to know myself as a researcher, principal, and teacher educator. It allowed me to explore a struggle I experienced while trying to coach teachers and support their inquiry. Additionally, I explored my struggle with engaging in practitioner action research, identifying discomfort with being the researcher and the researched.

In chapter 5 I turned my lens to identifying what I learned about my teachers and the Design Your Own Learning structure. I discussed my findings using four main themes: Reimagining Faculty Meetings; Authentic and Organic Teacher Inquiry; Structuring a Shift in Power; and Inquiry Promoting Practical Research (see Appendix 9). A close look at the Design Your Own Learning structure suggested that Design Your Own Learning allowed for a change in the paradigm for school-based professional learning within the school. Design Your Own Learning dedicated time and space for teachers to direct their own learning, allowing us to reimagine the way a typical “meeting” structure, such as a faculty meeting, could be a space to engage in professional inquiry. After reviewing the data, I also found that the teachers who engaged in Design Your Own Learning came to see themselves as collaborators, confident inquirers, and scholars gaining useful inquiry skills, such as the ability to think critically about their teaching, learn with and from colleagues, and challenge school norms to ask meaningful questions about their practices.

In this chapter, I present the implications of this research as well as share recommendations based on the findings in this study. I begin by discussing the findings
in relation to what is known about professional learning in public elementary schools. I follow this with suggestions for schools and school administrators to allow for the support and development of inquiry-based professional learning structures within other elementary schools. In addition, I offer suggestions for further research, to enhance the knowledge base about the school principal’s role as a teacher educator and ways school administrators and teachers can make cultural shifts to support the development of new types of professional learning structures within schools. Finally, I conclude with some final thoughts on this research and the future of Design Your Own Learning.

**Design Your Own Learning: A Structure that Promotes Organic Inquiry, Professional Learning, and Growth for All Educators in a Public Elementary School**

With the publication of *What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future* (1996), the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future focused on encouraging schools to think systematically about encouraging and rewarding efforts to investigate and promote excellent teaching within schools. Professional development was positioned as an opportunity to connect teachers in various communities to tackle understanding, problems, challenges, and practice over time (*What Matters Most*, 1996). This affirmed Dewey’s (1910) claim that problematizing practices and concepts helps make learning experiences intellectually effective. As such, teachers were being challenged to *intellectualize* their work and to take responsibility for questioning their teaching (*Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cohen, 1988; Giroux, 1988; Lieberman, 1991; What Matters Most, 1996). Clearly there has been slow progress toward achieving these goals in most typical public schools. A school community and structure must be fostered
that supports a culture of professional learning in which teachers teach, learn from, and share with one another (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Enacting a new professional learning structure such as Design Your Own Learning required courage on my part and the staff in order to challenge the professional learning paradigm that is ingrained in traditional school power structures. Existing school structures that support this paradigm include faculty meetings, professional development days, and professional release time to attend workshops (Cohen, 1988; Elmore, 1996; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Talbert, 2010). School cultures create scripts for the way things “should be,” and a change in beliefs is required to promote this kind of change in practice (Kennedy, 2005; Lieberman, 1992; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). The data from this study suggest that teachers at Lakeside Elementary School appreciated the time and space Design Your Own Learning offered, recognizing the way it allowed them to share successes and challenges in authentic contexts. However, not all teachers were ready to engage in professional inquiry. Additionally I learned that I, the principal, was not always able to fully support and engage in collaborative inquiry within the school. Traditional conceptions and expectations may have limited everyone’s ability to make the most of the Design Your Own Learning structure during the first year.

Reflecting on the introduction of Design Your Own Learning, I noted, “While I feel that the Design Your Own Learning structure provides a great step toward fostering authentic inquiry, I am not certain I provided a scaffold to help the teachers develop an understanding of what it means to question your practices in meaningful ways” (9-16-13...
DYOL Meeting Agenda Data Memo). Looking across all data sources, I see that the struggle was connected mostly with finding a role for myself, the principal, as teachers engaged in authentic organic inquiry. This struggle prevented me from acting and allowing myself to be an active participant in the action research. For example, during a meeting with a faculty member in April 2014, a teacher told me, “I didn’t even know what group I should join [in September 2013]” (Data Reflection Memo 4-11-14). This is when the principal or school leader should have stepped in to recognize confusion or support teachers as they struggled with the shift in expectations and responsibilities. I reflected on this, writing, “How could I have been so naive? When [teacher’s name] said this, I was stunned, not only by the self-reflection that was taking place, but also about my own miscalculation about some of the challenges I observed in some of the Design Your Own Learning groups” (Data Reflection Memo 4-11-14). Throughout the study, I too was developing an understanding of inquiry as professional learning and how I could teach, support and use this with practitioners.

Design Your Own Learning appears to have provided teachers with a sense of control, responsibility, and power. In this sense power was built on a sense of shared responsibility for professional learning: power that is nurtured and cultivated within the professional learning community (Hipp et al., 2008). As one teacher shared, “We have to come prepared like [teacher's name] said, with the goals . . . you had a goal that said that next time you were going to bring something, and you obviously had to do that outside the group work time to bring something to the next meeting” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). There was a sense of pride and responsibility to members of the inquiry groups.
Ironically as teachers developed a new sense of power and control, I struggled to carve out and define a new conception of power and authority for myself as the principal. I did not fully embrace or comprehend my role as a facilitator and researcher, I resisted giving up the control that is typical in school hierarchy, and I struggled with trusting my faculty to do great work without major intervention from me. I questioned their ability to do valuable and meaningful work without my “guidance,” again suggesting a need and want to be in control. While teachers saw my presence and support in terms of resources to help them to engage in inquiry, I continued to maintain a more traditional view of myself as the “principal,” the leader who should be directing the work of the faculty. I struggled to find a place for myself in this new self-driven learning environment as well as within this research.

Implementing Design Your Own Learning caused me to reimagine my role as an educational leader in the school and challenge my own traditional conceptions of power as a principal of a public school. Power in this sense means the ways that building administrators typically are “in charge” of professional learning in a school building. A catalyst for these shifts included starting to see myself as teacher educator, recognizing my role in fostering teacher development by identifying the varied needs of teachers as learners, and discovering the most effective ways to help support teachers as they worked to expand their knowledge about their students, curriculum, and pedagogy. I recognized the need to provide some type of intellectual support for the faculty. The research process created an opportunity for me to think critically about the way I, as an administrator, teach teachers and what is important to support teacher learning.
The data presented in this study suggest that Design Your Own Learning was able to change the paradigm for typical faculty meetings and create spaces for teachers to problematize their practices collaboratively. This appears to have promoted a collective value in the intellectualization of our teaching. Teachers identified that the time Design Your Own Learning provided allowed them to focus on questions related to their practice as well as the needs of their students, which created a space for practical and meaningful inquiry. Design Your Own Learning provided teachers with an opportunity to learn with and from colleagues and focus on their learning on classroom needs. As one teacher reflected: “I think it was a great way to accomplish your goal. You have a goal and it gives you an opportunity to work with your group and to achieve that goal but working throughout the year to gain experience and knowledge” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). This placed practitioners as active participants in the planning and execution of professional learning opportunities, suggesting that the needs of students could be better addressed through this type of work. During the first Focus Group (January 21, 2015) a teacher specifically noted, “It was a way for us to really dig deeper into exactly which area, specifically, the greatest need was, for that particular student.” It seems that the Design Your Own Learning structure allowed teachers to engage in professional learning that best met the specific needs of each group or individual (Brookfield, 1995; Cobb et. al., 2003; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Garet et. al., 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Larrivee, 2000; Putman & Borko, 2000; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). What was not clear in
the literature or in the data is how to best support varied teacher needs as they engage in a
differentiated approach to professional learning.

Authentic professional learning happens continuously through practice and experience (Lieberman & Mace, 2008). It occurs daily as teachers engage with each other in inquiry, providing them with opportunities to transform and theorize about information from their environment (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lawton, Saunders, & Muhs, 1980). The data suggest that as teachers developed confidence in their abilities as well as in the Design Your Own Learning structure, they began to identify ways to use inquiry as a way to enhance their daily practices: “By the end of the year we were more confident with our topic and were able to transform and expand upon our original idea” (Reflections on Year 1 Member Check Summary 9214). As the teachers engaged in inquiry, they were able to develop a questioning stance, born from the development of their ability to step back, reflect on, and problematize their daily work (Crockett, 2002; Hines, Conner, Campano, Damico, Enoch, & Nam, 2007; Nelson & Slavit, 2007; Norman, Golian, & Hooker, 2005; O’Donnell-Allen, 2001; Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Smith-Maddox, 1999).

Ongoing opportunities for collaborative work provided teachers with the opportunity to learn about, experiment with, and reflect on new practices within the context of their school and classrooms, and share knowledge and expertise (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Participating in Design Your Own Learning encouraged teachers to reflect on and talk about their practices as well as any challenges students were experiencing within the classroom. Colleagues began to see each other as
supports, resources, and critical friends. Teachers’ conversations about their students’ needs as well as their practices appear to have created opportunities for teachers to investigate and question their teaching. One teacher described this as offering multiple perspectives on the topic saying, “So you were just getting different like opinions and different ways to go about it, and it was nice to get all the different perspectives” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Being part of an inquiry group, as Zeichner (2003) notes, helped the teachers at Lakeside Elementary School recognize the importance of collaborative work and increased the quality of conversations between professionals within the school.

The interactions between professionals helped to promote the intellectualization of teaching and teaching practices. Teachers began to think critically about their daily work with students, identifying and sharing questions about their practices with their colleagues. The Lakeside teachers intellectualized their work by focusing on the everyday challenges involved with teaching, learning, and school life (Blase & Blase, 2000; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Richardson, 1994; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). Teachers valued sharing ideas and strategies, indicating that they saw themselves as supports and resources for each other: “Well the group I was in it, it was just two of us, and we are both on the same grade level, so, what engaged us was that we were both finding similarities between the two of our classes” (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015). With Design Your Own Learning, teachers needed to direct their inquiry and demonstrate a responsibility to their groups to support their collective work. Here teachers were pulling back the curtains on their work with students, sharing it openly
with their colleagues as examples of success as well as examples that spurred more questions. Differences were viewed as learning opportunities, and it seems that these teachers were open not only to asking questions but also to be questioned about their work by their colleagues. This occurred organically with no formal instruction about ways to run an inquiry meeting or how to establish group norms. These interactions appear to have allowed for spaces to talk about all strengths, challenges, and constraints that may have an impact on teachers’ daily work with students.

Design Your Own Learning helped to facilitate new conceptions of professional learning within Lakeside Elementary School. Design Your Own Learning replaced typical faculty meetings at Lakeside Elementary School, and the teachers were required to participate. I found that the level of responsibility for and engagement in the Design Your Own Learning meetings was greater than during traditional faculty meetings. Teachers actively prepared for their meetings, focusing on ways to continue and apply their group’s work between official Design Your Own Learning meetings. As one teacher shared, “It wasn’t like the typical meeting where you’re like, okay see you next week. It was, you were excited about it so, you may have gone home and researched that idea or, you know, or made up a form or whatever to bring back” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). However, excitement and engagement did not always mean that a group had a strong focus.

Recreating the way we used time and space typically reserved for “faculty meetings” allowed the teachers at Lakeside Elementary School to explore topics and questions that were meaningful to them. In this sense teachers felt as if the time and
effort were useful and really mattered. One teacher expressed this directly, “Well since it is in place of a faculty meeting, we, we know we sort of have to be there during that time too. So, it’s, we know we have that time, we put it aside and we know [what] we’re going to work on. So, if we have a schedule of, you know, what you want to accomplish” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). During the second focus group a teacher noted, “Going to a faculty meeting, even though we get the agenda, you’re not as well-prepared because you don’t necessarily know if you’re going to have to do anything. (INSERT DATE?)” While it is not surprising, it notes that no matter how the meetings were designed, teachers viewed the concept of the faculty meeting through a negative lens and as void of useful professional learning opportunities. Lieberman and Mace (2008) might see this as a way the typical school structures leave teachers feeling as if professional learning opportunities within their schools are random and disconnected to their needs as practitioners. Design Your Own Learning signaled a change in the way the faculty experienced professional learning, causing me to think critically about how I, as the principal, would develop my teachers as inquirers. Both of these shifts are not well addressed in the literature.

The data suggest that teachers constructed a new stance for their own learning, moving from wanting “success” toward an appreciation for fluid learning generated through the inquiry process. Shulman and Shulman (2004) note, “an accomplished teacher is a member of a professional community who is ready and willing, and able to teach and learn from his or her teaching experience” (p. 259). Teachers developed an understanding and appreciation for the need to take time to question, process, and play
with ideas as part of the inquiry process. They appeared open to the fluidity of their learning, accepting that some answers and new learning were not certain. Some who participated in Design Your Own Learning seem to have expanded their understanding of ways to learn from perceived “failure.” This appears to have fostered new conceptions of “success” in relation to professional learning. For example, a teacher who was in a “failing” group noted, “I brought something away from it. It didn’t exactly succeed as we had planned, but I did learn some ideas. So I think it was still beneficial.” In this sense, failure was defined as an inquiry that did not allow for deep learning; it was a question that had an easy answer. A “failure” did not help teachers make sense of teaching and learning within their own setting (Lieberman, 1986; Richardson, 1994). However, an inquiry or questioning stance enhanced a group’s capacity to grow and stretch teachers’ understandings and knowledge (Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013). One teacher summed up this open-ended process, saying, “We’re still learning . . . Yeah we’re still learning and trying to figure that out” (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). Ultimately, as teacher researchers, the faculty of Lakeside Elementary School used these experiences to help them become confident and continuous learners who accepted failure as a part of the inquiry and learning process.

Lakeside teachers also developed new conceptions about “experts,” viewing themselves and their colleagues as valuable experts and resources. The time and the space gave the teachers a greater opportunity and reason to engage with one another, and share ideas, questions and experiences. Inquiry helped teachers to develop a sense of what they knew, what they understood, and what they needed to learn. Professional
Development, as Phillips (2003) puts it, “occurs every day on the job among teams of teachers who share responsibility for high levels of learning for all students” (p. 242). While teachers worked on their inquiry, they used outside resources (e.g., journals, websites, professional books, workshops, etc.) to support their learning. At other times the teachers became resources for one another, enhancing their understanding by simply sharing personal knowledge and experiences. This helped bring teachers out of the isolation of their classrooms and engage with their colleagues in impactful ways (Supovitz & Christman, 2003). The time and opportunity to engage in inquiry helped to elevate the value of teachers’ daily work, their knowledge, and their questions. In this sense the teachers who were part of Design Your Own Learning were as Englert and Tarrant (1995) note, “informed agents, problem solvers and collaborators in the educational change process” (p. 325).

Design Your Own Learning provided teachers with a new type of structure that helped to foster a new sense of professionalism within Lakeside Elementary School. I have referred to Design Your Own Learning as a structure, something that has a particular set of parameters allowing it to be implemented in other school settings. This structure is one that runs counter to typical school cultures and expectations, empowering practitioners to take ownership and charge of their own learning. Design Your Own Learning created a new paradigm for professional learning at Lakeside School. This structure provided the time (set meetings throughout the year), the structure (the responsibility for developing a learning plan and agendas for the meetings, etc.), the supports (time to work on inquiry outside the meetings in the building, resource folders,
workshops, etc.) and the opportunity (switching from the typical monthly faculty meeting in which the principal set the whole agenda). The data suggest that the time, structure, supports, and opportunity helped to create a space where the teachers at Lakeside School could investigate topics and questions that were meaningful to them in some way. They noted the difference between Design Your Own Learning and traditional “faculty meetings,” recognizing their role in helping to foster powerful learning. Design Your Own Learning was asking teachers to actively engage in their own professional learning in new ways.

I wonder if you would get the support of other teachers in other schools or if they would just look at it as a time to just, not to be as productive because they’re sort of on their own time . . . . [Another teacher:] Right, and that’s what I think as soon as it becomes that, the importance of it goes out the window, then those meetings are just going to the time killers, they’re just going to be empty. (Focus Group 2, January 25, 2015)

This suggests the need to develop a collaborative culture for professional learning along with the other supports in order to cultivate a structure like Design Your Own Learning. Teachers at Lakeside used and appreciated the opportunity “to learn about practice in practice” (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007, p. 115). They embraced the open-ended responsibilities related to engaging in professional inquiry as well as the opportunities to work with their colleagues as collaborators, co-learners, teachers, and critical friends.
Learning From Design Your Own Learning: Implications for Further Research
Defining Emerging and Changing Roles for Administrators Who Support and
Engage in Inquiry with their Faculty

This study illuminates information about the role of a school principal or building supervisor in helping to promote, implement, and support an inquiry-based professional learning structure like Design Your Own Learning. While the literature is clear about the importance that leadership plays in fostering this type of professional learning structure (Bezzina, 2006; DuFour, 2004, 2011; Dunne et. al., 2000; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Garrett, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Nelson et. al., 2010; Talbert, 2010) it does not provide information about the ways leaders learn to embrace their roles as teacher educators, foster professional inquiry with their teachers, and counter the typical school professional learning structures. It also does not suggest how the administrator learns to engage in inquiry with his or her faculty as a means to foster school improvement. Based upon the data presented, this is a critical area for further investigation.

Schools need high quality leadership to provide high quality professional development (Wahlstrom, & York-Barr, 2011). However, most school principals might tell you that they focus their work on managing people, budgets, structures, and routines in relation to keeping school running, not teaching their teachers. Additionally, the entrenched bureaucratic systems and cultures in schools and school districts promote the use of traditional management tools such as directives, rules, prescribed routines, and sanctions to impose professional learning in the name of “change” (Talbert, 2010). Given my background and stance, I was surprised to find that the data from this study
suggest a clear disconnect between what I (the principal) “understood” about being a principal or educational leader and my emerging conception of the principal as teacher educator. Engaging in this practitioner action research truly forced me to face my own conceptions about the role of the principal and about supporting teachers. Creating the Design Your Own Learning structure was the easy part, while learning to lead and support teachers as they engaged in inquiry-based professional learning appeared to be more challenging for me. While the literature talks about the importance of creating the time and the space to give teachers an active role in their professional learning (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003), it does not address the evolving role of the principal as a facilitator who supports teachers as they are engaging in their inquiry. There is a difference between directing teachers to engage in inquiry and guiding them as they engage in meaningful professional inquiry. While both involve teachers questioning their practices, one shifts the role for both teachers and administrator, allowing the practitioner and the needs of his/her classroom to drive the research. This was a huge struggle that emerged in the data. Since this is something that is typically not discussed in educational leadership programs or in the literature, I recommend that researchers spend time looking at ways principals deal with or are influenced by the various pressures and interactions as they are trying to implement progressive changes to traditional professional learning structures in a school. In particular I suggest that researchers explore ways that principals learn to reflect on their goals, and recognize a need to modify their roles as instructional leaders as they work to make these types of shifts in their schools.
We know that teachers come to the classroom with preconceptions about how schools and teaching work, (Hammerness, 2005) and I contend that this is the same for school leaders. As principals begin to see themselves as inquiry-focused teacher educators, they must come to terms with their beliefs and priorities for professional learning within their schools (Cobb et. al, 2003; Brookfield, 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Larrivee, 2000; Richardson, 2003; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). “I really do believe that at a certain point you have to drive your learning as a professional. My job is to give you the space and the time to do that” (Michael Ryan, Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015). I felt it was important to stress this to teachers since in my experience as a teacher and administrator, time for professional learning is a commodity that most teachers feel they cannot control. I struggled with my role as a teacher educator, either by completely removing myself from the work teachers were doing at times or doubting that they would engage in meaningful work. I was unsure of how to guide the faculty as they participated in Design Your Own Learning and was seemingly paralyzed to sanction a new role for myself. Throughout the study I did not do much to change my interactions with the faculty during the first year, possibly because I did not know what to do or how to do it. In fact, when I did try to “teach” my faculty at the start of Year 2 the way I was teaching was not necessarily representative of inquiry-based teaching and learning. This might explain why while we know a good deal about the characteristics of good professional development, we know much less about ways to organize and implement professional development so that it will influence practice in schools and classrooms (Elmore & Burney, 1999). I suggest that
further research explore ways that principals learn how to become teachers of teachers and the ways they foster teacher learning. This may include investigating ways these topics are or are not addressed as part of educational leadership programs as well as the ways that practicing principals are supported throughout their careers.

A Principal Learns the Tensions of “Participating” in Practitioner Action Research

With this study I wanted to make my experiences with creating and implementing Design Your Own Learning public, by describing the way I worked with my teachers to implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure. Practitioner action research views the participants as collaborators, assuming that all who participate are invested in developing meaningful knowledge and enhancements to their daily practice (Anderson et. al., 2007; Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Newton & Burgess, 2008; Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008). I believed practitioner action research would provide me with the space to deliberately and systematically review data collected as well as the process I employed and experienced while implementing Design Your Own Learning. I anticipated learning a great deal about how teachers might be changed by this experience; however, I did not prepare for the way this process would change me as a principal, researcher, and practitioner. This created a struggle I faced in the roles of researcher and the researched.

While working to try and establish new norms related to professional learning, I was challenged with identifying my emerging role as principal, researcher, and subject. When reviewing my reflection data from Year 1, I found it was clear that I had neither fully established nor embraced my role as part of Design Your Own Learning and the
ways that I could use the recursive cycle to make decisions and adjustments to the structure during the research. I kept myself at arm's length from the research, allowing myself to participate mostly by observing or being a shadow. I had great difficulty with positioning myself as part of the research, believing that I should not impose myself in any way on the teachers’ work. This highlights an isolating dynamic that gets established within the typical power structure of a school and a challenge school administrators will face when engaging in this type of research in their schools.

My distance certainly eliminated some of my sense of my “authority over” the teachers’ work. However, some teachers did need greater support to better understand their work and the inquiry process and I continuously struggled to provide that for them. I did not allow myself to act on new learning in order to support teachers and enhance Design Your Own Learning. Additionally I struggled with learning about myself as a principal and the role of a practitioner researcher. This made it difficult for me to ask my faculty about what I could be doing better to support their work and ultimately enhance the research process.

Making Time for Organic Inquiry and Authentic Professional Learning

Despite the suggestion of research findings promoting the contrary, school cultures in the U.S., in general, still do not promote dialogue about practice among teachers and administrators, nor do they seem to overtly value the wealth of knowledge and learning embedded in the daily work of teaching (Elmore, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). The data from this study suggest that changes to a typical school culture and structures can occur, but they must be purposefully cultivated and
supported. One way this can be done is by making a commitment to time for teachers to engage in professional inquiry.

I think the allotted time that was designated to it [Design Your Own Learning] was also really important because it wasn’t like, hey, if you want to meet on Thursday were doing this, you know, but we still have the meeting on Monday . . . so I think everyone was more motivated just because, we were all there and we were all like required to be there but then it became more than that. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015)

This requires a shift in attitude and expectations related to professional learning by the faculty as well as the building leader who can foster and facilitate structures that promote practical inquiry. School leaders need to change the way they schedule time during the school day as well as the purposes of professional learning. Additionally, changing traditional paradigms requires a shift in perceptions about what teachers are doing during the short time allotted for professional learning and collaborative work. Teachers’ expectations must also evolve, but more importantly, school leaders need to recognize the importance of building collaborative spaces for inquiry into a school’s or district’s professional learning calendar. This helps to make inquiry a natural part and expectation for all practitioners.

While this study demonstrates that these types of changes can and do occur on local levels, there has been limited development in terms of educational policy that would help to promote the time and space for teachers and administrators. On the contrary, an increased focus on high stakes testing have perpetuated systems of professional
development in schools that typically employ the use of outside consultants or pre-packaged programs that focus “learning” on program implementation (and especially on commercially-developed program implementation), and which tend to use expert-directed lessons, workshops, or presentations to promote teacher development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Elmore, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Talbert, 2010; United States Department of Education, 2004). Policy initiatives have focused mostly on testing (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010; Public Law, 2002; United States Department of Education, 2004; United States Department of Education, 2010), which promote a more “directed” method of professional development that seems to counter enduring recommendations supporting critical inquiry as a means for enhancing professional learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dewey, 1904, Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1988; Grossman, et. al. 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Shulman, 1998; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Thus, it is important to explore the findings presented here in order to investigate possible policy initiatives that could promote the value of inquiry approaches to professional learning among teachers and administrators. Such policies could help to promote dedicated time for professional learning within schools and help to educate the public about the benefits to schools and students of these types of initiatives.

**How do Cultures that Support Professional Learning Emerge?**

Design Your Own Learning challenged the faculty at Lakeside Elementary School to re-conceptualize their views and expectations for professional learning. Teachers learned ways they could engage in self-directed inquiry as well as work in collaboration
with other teachers in the building. Professional learning built into the typical “work lives” of teachers at Lakeside Elementary School promoted meaningful and ongoing research into teaching practices (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003). However, the data are not clear about the cause of this cultural development. This shift requires further research or exploration.

While it is understood that to change a school’s capacity to promote teacher learning requires enhancement to the school’s professional culture as well as to the structures that commonly define professional learning (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009; Zeichner, 2003), I cannot attribute the cultural changes that occurred at Lakeside Elementary School to Design Your Own Learning alone. In fact, it would seem that a culture focused on collaboration, openness, and professional learning would be important before a structure like Design Your Own Learning could be successfully implemented. Further research on the interactions that help create a professional culture that promotes professional interdependence and establishes norms and structures that eliminate professional isolation is needed. All of this counters typical beliefs about power, time and opportunities for professional learning, and traditional roles for teachers and administrators in public schools.

**Exploring Connections Between Teacher Inquiry and Student Learning**

This study makes it clear that teachers do have the willingness and capacity to engage in meaningful and practical inquiry. The data suggest that during the span of this study, teachers developed an understanding of and appreciation for the need to take time to question, process, and play with ideas as part of the inquiry process. In fact, some
teachers did seem to make changes to their practices as part of their inquiry. What cannot be addressed is the impact this ultimately had on student learning. While teachers indicated that their inquiry helped them to question and reflect on their practices and learn to make changes as they worked students in their classrooms, it is not clear if this helped to improve student understanding or performance. Further research is needed in order to investigate possible correlations between teachers engaging in an inquiry-based professional learning structure like Design Your Own Learning and changes in student learning and performance.

**Concluding Thoughts**

With this practitioner action research, I worked to analyze, understand, and improve the Design Your Own Learning structure at Lakeside Elementary School and learn what it did to promote inquiry, reflection, and professional learning related to daily teaching. It appears that the faculty came to embrace inquiry as a professional learning tool and discovered ways a structure like Design Your Own Learning can enable teachers to link professional learning with the demands of their daily work with students.

I realized, okay, like this is our opportunity to, to kind of explore what we’re interested in learning about. It was almost like, okay, what are we doing, doing right now that we, that we don’t have time to do? That we kind of brush to the side? Because we have all these other things to do. Now here’s an opportunity to focus on one of those things that we never get done that we want to do. (Focus Group 1, January 21, 2015).
Teachers seemed excited about their inquiry topics as well as the process that promoted the creation of networks of interest within the faculty (Lieberman, 2000). Overall, the data suggest that we were able to transition from a focus on what Lieberman (2000) would call “one size fits all” professional learning solutions to creating professional learning spaces about which Lieberman would note that the learning is sensitive to “individual and collective development” (p. 221).

This study also revealed information about my role as a school leader and me as a learner and teacher educator. It illuminated information about a struggle I experienced with traditional conceptions about the principal’s role, administrative power, and the concept of being a facilitator for inquiry and a practitioner researcher. This struggle is significant given my personal stance toward inquiry and my role in developing and fostering the creation of Design Your Own Learning at the school. It also represents what I think is a clear hole in the literature related to the ways principals make changes to professional learning structures and ways to help building leaders identify their roles as teacher educators and co-learners with their faculty. Additionally, I feel that this work identifies real tensions that must be identified and addressed by other principals who may wish to engage in practitioner action research.

While I feel the findings of this study present some significant evidence of ways that the teachers at Lakeside Elementary School constructed a practice of professional inquiry and how I, as the principal, worked with teachers to make Design Your Own Learning a living and growing structure for inquiry, these findings are not without their limitations. Clearly this study must be considered in relation to the culture previously
established at Lakeside Elementary School, the goals and practices we had previously established, and recognition of the fact that the school has a narrow focus on early primary students in grades PreK-2. However, I do feel that this study can inform further research on ways school leaders and faculty can help to create inquiry-based professional learning opportunities that challenge typical school structures that may inhibit teacher learning and development (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999).

I am happy to note that Design Your Own Learning is still running at Lakeside Elementary School. While not perfect, it is my hope that the structure will continue to grow and change with the ongoing input from the faculty, and truly represent the iterative inquiry cycle. Additionally, I have brought a revised version of Design Your Own Learning to my new job setting and implemented it as part of our New Teacher Induction program for third year teachers. This allows me to continue to explore new conceptions of power now as a district administrator, test ways teachers can engage collaboratively in inquiry across different school buildings, and test new ways of supporting teachers as they engage in professional inquiry. All of these present exciting new learning and growing opportunities. The messy work of my practitioner action research is now continuing in different and more complex ways.
References


## Appendix A

### Themes in the Literature

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<th>Search category: Action Research and Professional Learning in Elementary Schools</th>
<th>Search category: Teachers Questioning Their Practices</th>
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<td>Teacher and Student focus Expert Teachers Teacher Research Data Driven Collaborative learning Structures and Culture Collaboration and voice Professional learning Going public with learning Ongoing Self reflection Dialogue/Conversations Outside support Leadership Relationships Self determined needs Sustained learning Ownership Politics</td>
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<td>• Administrator support</td>
<td>• Teaching as a professional community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intellectualizing the teaching process</td>
<td>• Data Driven</td>
<td>• Agency</td>
<td>• School as professional community</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Questioning practice</td>
<td>• Dialogue and conversations</td>
<td>• Leadership</td>
<td>• Vision of teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Questioning student performance</td>
<td>• Outside supports</td>
<td>• Teachers as researchers</td>
<td>• Connection to Goals and Student Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding teaching decisions</td>
<td>• Leadership</td>
<td>• Community</td>
<td>• Professional expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Problematize nag teaching practices</td>
<td>• Relationships</td>
<td>• Inquiry</td>
<td>• Assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ownership of professional learning</td>
<td>• Sustained learning/ongoing</td>
<td>• New professionalism</td>
<td>• Leadership</td>
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<td>• Intersection of theory and practice</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td></td>
<td>• School culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teacher expertise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Teaching culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Making meaning out of student work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Outsiders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Making meaning out of practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Resources for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Common understanding</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Structures for professional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Challenging practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Outsiders</td>
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<td>Search category: Inquiry, Professional Learning, Professional Development, Research and Schools</td>
<td>Search category: Professional Learning Communities (PLC)</td>
<td>Search category: Action Research and Professional Learning in Elementary Schools</td>
<td>Search category: Teachers Questioning Their Practices</td>
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<td><strong>Processed Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Processed Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Processed Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Processed Themes</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Balance of Power:**  
- Leadership  
- Vision  
- Power  
- Control  
- Collective control  
- School leadership  
- Common purpose and understanding | **Going Public with Professional Learning:**  
- Teacher research  
- Expert teacher  
- Collaboration and voice  
- Self reflection  
- Dialogue and conversations  
- Outside Supports  
- Leadership  
- Relationships  
- Ownership  
- Politics | **Empowering Teachers:**  
- Ownership  
- Community  
- Meaningful  
- Collaboration and voice | **Teacher Learning and Development - The that acts that teachers engage in as they are growing in their knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy and practice:**  
- School as professional community  
- Understanding teaching  
- Leadership  
- Change  
- Connection to Goals and Student Needs  
- Assumptions  
- Teacher learning  
- Resources for learning  
- Structures for professional learning  
- Teacher as researcher  
- Challenging practice  
- Outsiders |
Appendix B

From June 13, 2013 Faculty Meeting: Introduction of the concept of Design Your Own Learning.

**Professional Learning 2013-2014**

- Design your own professional inquiry and professional learning space...
  1. What do you want to explore that will help you support your students learning and development?
  2. Who will you work with?
  3. How do you want to go about your exploration?
  4. What supports do you need?
  5. How will you share what you learned?
Appendix C

From June 13, 2013 Faculty Meeting: Using a Google Doc the faculty co-created a definition of “professional inquiry.”

What is professional inquiry?

Take a moment and add some ideas that will help us develop a common understanding and definition of professional inquiry:

- Asking questions and trying to find answers
- Designing a study for your professional learning
- Sharing with others
- Learning from others and research
- Open to conversations
- Meaningful discussions
- Developing a common goal together
- Collaboration working together
- Sharing
- Collaborating with colleagues
- Asking questions to guide professional development
- Finding better ways to share in real time
Appendix D

From June 13, 2013 Faculty Meeting: Using a Google Doc the faculty began to brainstorm areas of inquiry as well as possible collaborators.

![Designing Our Own Professional Learning Table]
Appendix E

September 16, 2013 Faculty Meeting Agenda outlining how to create the learning plan for their Design Your Own Learning group.

---

**ProK-2 Faculty Meeting**

**Topic:** Getting Started with Designing a Learning Plan

**Agenda:**

**Monday, September 16, 2013**

3:30 School No. 2 All Purpose Room (to start)

**You Need:**
- Laptop/Pad (one or two per group is fine... this is a collaborative experience). If need to use a school iPad let Mike know and he will provide you with an iPad to use.
- Some thoughts and ideas about what you would like to explore related to students or teaching during this year.
- To have reviewed the Design Your Own Professional Learning Proposal Template.
- Please check back for any updates...

**Agenda:**

**Design Your own Professional Learning**

- Brief overview of the purpose of a community of inquiry
  - What does it mean to design your own learning space?
  - Some things to keep in mind as you are working in your groups
- Meet with your group
  - Design Your Own Learning Opportunity
  - Why do you want to do this?
  - Why is it significant in relationship to your teaching and student learning?
  - Work collaboratively to complete your group’s proposal – this helps you set a plan for future gatherings.
  - Group to meet with Mike briefly to talk about any questions or needs.
  - Establish your group’s next steps...

Please note that if you spend more than the typical 45 minutes working in your group during this meeting you should log your additional time on the Professional Learning Recording Sheet (click File > make a copy to save a copy for yourself. This sheet will auto update your hour totals).

Some tools we can/will use:
- Attributes of a Learning Community
- Forming Group Rules for Your Group
- Learning of Concern and Influence - a tool that may help you refine goals for your inquiry
- Tools that might help you in future meetings to dig deeper into your area of inquiry.
Appendix F

Sample of a Design Your Own Learning group proposal from September 16, 2013 Faculty Meeting.

Designing Our Own Professional Learning Proposal
2013-2014

Submitted by:

What do you want to explore that will help you support your students learning and development?
We want to differentiate math instruction to allow students to become independent learners in math.

Identify some goals you have for your inquiry:
- Find/create meaningful math activities
- Give students more time to be independent learners during math
- Find an alternate way to teach the mini-lesson (e.g., hands on guided learning instead of whole group Mimio guided practice)
- Build confidence in ourselves to know that we’ve given them enough information to go off on their own.

List some questions you have related to your topic:
- When do we know it’s appropriate to let students be more independent?
- Where can we go to find some supporting resources for our math lessons?

Why do you feel this is a critical topic to explore with your colleagues?
We think students need to improve their higher level thinking skills in math so that they can apply them in daily math work, assessments, and everyday life. We feel that more independent time will build those critical thinking skills.
Appendix G1

November 2013 feedback survey used with the faculty.
Appendix G2

March 2014 feedback survey used with the faculty.
Michael Ryan Invites You to Participate in a Research Study of Design Your Own Learning

Hello!

My name is Michael Ryan and I am a doctoral candidate in the Teacher Education and Teacher Development program at Montclair State University. I am writing because your school implemented an inquiry based professional learning structure called, “Design Your Own Learning” and I am interested in learning more about teachers’ experiences with this inquiry based structure.

I am currently the Director of Curriculum and Instruction in Millburn, New Jersey. Prior to this position I was a building principal for nine and a half years and was also an elementary school teacher in New Jersey for eleven years. As a building administrator I worked to try and encourage my faculty to engage in meaningful professional learning that would help practitioners reflect on their practices and the changing needs of their students.

It is my hope that you might be willing to work with me as I begin my dissertation study entitled, “Encouraging Teachers to Design Their Own Professional Learning Inquiry Structure” (Montclair State University IRB#001604). My research is guided by the questions: How did teachers describe their emerging practice of inquiry? How did what they were learning effect their professional practices? I hope to explore teachers’ experiences with the inquiry-based professional learning structure, Design Your Own Learning where they were responsible for planning and carrying out professional learning based upon their own inquiry into their daily practices with students in an elementary school.

For this study I would like for you to participate in a focus group related to your experiences with Design Your Own Learning. During the focus group session I would engage you and the other participants in a discussion about your perceptions of Design Your Own Learning and the ways inquiry is used as a professional learning structure within the school. It is my hope to collect data from January 2015 through April 2015. I may also reach out to you after that time in order to clarify any questions that arise as I review the data. Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not need to answer or respond to all questions during the focus group and you can withdraw your participation at any time.

At this time I am writing to see if you would be willing to participate in a focus group. I would be happy to come and talk with you and/or a group of teachers if you have any questions about this study. While I understand the demands of your daily work with students, as well as the upcoming holidays, I ask that you reply to this e-mail to let me know if you would be willing to participate in the study by December 23, 2014.

I thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Michael G. Ryan
## Appendix I

### Design Your Own Learning Data Sources - Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Information About the Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 13, 2013</td>
<td>Artifact: What is Professional Inquiry?</td>
<td>This was the tool used to introduce the concept of professional inquiry to the faculty when rolling out Design Your Own Learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 13, 2013</td>
<td>Artifact: Faculty Presentation / Initial Introduction of Design Your Own Learning</td>
<td>The presentation used to introduce the faculty to the concept of Design Your Own Learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 13, 2013</td>
<td>Artifact: Design Your Own Learning Initial Brainstorming List</td>
<td>Collaborative document the faculty used to begin identifying ideas they wanted to explore as part of Design Your Own Learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 3, 2013</td>
<td>Artifact: Faculty Meeting Agenda - Identifying the purpose of Design Your Own Learning groups and group options</td>
<td>This is the agenda distributed to faculty for introduction of Design Your Own Learning concept for 2013-2014.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 3, 2013</td>
<td>Artifact: Faculty Presentation - Identifying Your Design Your Own Learning Groups</td>
<td>Collaborative document the faculty used to identify the groups for Design Your Own Learning during the 2013-2014.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 16, 2013</td>
<td>Artifact: Meeting agenda for the initial design your own learning meeting</td>
<td>This is the agenda distributed to faculty for the first Design Your Own Learning meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 16, 2013</td>
<td>Artifact: Template for Design Your Own Learning Plan</td>
<td>This is the tool I gave teachers to use as they were starting their Design Your Own Learning groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Data Source</td>
<td>Information About the Source</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 11, 2013</td>
<td>Artifact: Design Your Own Learning Agenda Planning</td>
<td>Document provided to each of the Design Your Own Learning Groups to plan the agenda for their meeting (can I use some of the completed versions?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 11, 2013</td>
<td>Open Ended Response Survey Results - feedback related to Design Your Own Learning</td>
<td>Group/individual survey responses related to the November Design Your Own Learning meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 11, 2013</td>
<td>Reflection Memo: Administrator’s reflections after the November Design Your Own Learning meeting</td>
<td>Principal’s reflection after engaging with groups during the November Design Your Own Learning meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 31, 2014</td>
<td>Open Ended Response Survey Results - feedback related to Design Your Own Learning</td>
<td>Group/individual survey responses related to the November Design Your Own Learning meeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| April 11, 2014  | Reflection Memo: Reflection on a statement made regarding Design Your Own Learning during a post observation conference. | Context: Post observation conference with SO, a veteran teacher who moved from the middle school to my school this year. This was our third and final post observation conference for the year. Significant quote: "I didn't even know what group I should join..."

| May 7, 2014    | Reflection Memo: Reflection on a dialogue with a first year teacher during a summary evaluation conference. | Context: Summary evaluation conference with JK, a first year physical education teacher. Significant quote: "I'm not sure I know what you mean..."

| June /July 2014 | Reflections on Year 1 Open Ended Response Survey Results - end of the year feedback related to teachers’ participation in Design Your Own Learning. | Survey sent to faculty at the end of the school year with a request for feedback and suggestions related to Design Your Own Learning for the 2014-2015 school year. |
Design Your Own Learning Data Sources - Year 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2014</td>
<td>Reflections on Year 1 Survey Summary</td>
<td>This is a summary of the feedback shared in the Open Ended Response Survey from June 2014.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2, 2014</td>
<td>Member Check Meeting: Responding to summary of the 2013-2014 end of the year survey.</td>
<td>During this meeting the faculty reviewed the summary of the feedback from the Reflections on Year 1 Survey along with the raw data to check for understanding or clarification based upon my synthesis of the information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2, 2014</td>
<td>Artifact: Year 2 Introduction of Member Checking and Design Your Own Learning 2.0</td>
<td>This is the presentation I used to introduce the faculty to the member checking activity as well as the proposed changes to the 2014-2015 Design Your Own Learning Structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2, 2014</td>
<td>Reflection Memo: Reflecting on Member Checking</td>
<td>Principal’s reflection after engaging the faculty in the member checking activity based on the results of the Reflections on Year 1 Survey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2, 2014</td>
<td>Reflection Memo: So This is Inquiry</td>
<td>Principal’s reflection after presenting specific information about inquiry and the inquiry process while introducing Design Your Own Learning 2.0.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2, 2014</td>
<td>Artifact: 14-15 Design Your Own Learning Topic Brainstorming Sheet</td>
<td>Collaborative document the faculty used to begin identifying ideas they wanted to explore during Year 2 of Design Your Own Learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 15, 2014</td>
<td>Artifact: 9-15-14 Faculty Meeting Agenda</td>
<td>This is the agenda distributed to faculty for the first Design Your Own Learning meeting in September 2014.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 15, 2014</td>
<td>Artifact: Year 2 Design Your Own Learning Group Proposal Template</td>
<td>This is the template the groups used to develop their learning plans for their inquiry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 15, 2014</td>
<td>Artifact: Design Your Own Learning Plans 2014-2015</td>
<td>These are the completed learning plans from the various inquiry groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 21, 2015</td>
<td>Focus Groups: Sharing Your Thoughts About and Experiences With Design Your Own Learning</td>
<td>Semi-structured, open-ended questions were posed to the groups to prompt a discussion of their learning and experiences via the opportunities provided in “Design your own Learning.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J

11/11/13

Context: Design Your Own Learning Meetings (small group personal inquiry meetings held in various locations around the school (after school 3:30-3:45 approx.)

Reflection Memo:

This was the first "real" meeting for each of the inquiry groups. For the past few weeks I've been prodding groups to think about and plan for their first meeting. In preparation I reviewed each group's plan and began a shared resources folder the included various articles and studies obtained from professional organizations such as the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development and a Google Scholar Search related to the topics identified by each group. I felt that as a facilitator my role was to help connect the teachers with resources and to serve as a guide during discussions - trying to help clarify meaning when a group's discussion appeared to be unclear to the members of the group (this was true of the Mimio group and the small group instruction group).

I provided a planning sheet for each group prior to this first meeting. Even though I had been encouraging the groups to think about their first meeting ever since we held the initial planning session I did not give the planning sheet to the groups until about a week prior to the actual meeting. This was more a function of being swamped with other responsibilities and not providing myself with enough time to think about what the planning sheet should look like. Ultimately the final sheet was a simplified version of the group planning and goal sheet I used during the first session. In order to try and facilitate some thought in planning, I allotted some time toward the end of a recent half professional day to have the groups meet to establish some goals using the planning sheet. The challenge with this became identifying my role in establishing or commenting on the goals they set for the meeting. While I did read each agenda that was shared with me, I opted against making any comments or suggestions. I wonder if this gets perceived as not wanting to do any work, or if there is a true understanding that I want to try and create this personal learning space for the faculty.

While I did try to provide some directions for the faculty about finding their own meeting space and getting started after dismissal time, I found myself worrying. I found myself wondering, will they get started? Do they really know what to do? Will this be worthwhile? The doubt was interesting in light of my staunch belief in trying to establish this at my school. I even worried about the lack of any type of protocol to be used during the meeting - this was surprising given my belief that a protocol might overtake the point of the meeting, a belief that was supported by the literature review I completed for the
qualifying paper. So I made an announcement reviewing that the groups should let me know where they would be meeting and I would be "around" during the meeting time.

It was my intention to have a chance to visit each group's meeting, that did not happen. Over the course of the hour I was able to visit four of the eight groups. Of the groups I knew that I wanted to spend some time with the kindergarten group since I did not have a chance to spend time with them during the planning session. I began meeting with the group exploring conferencing tools, they were the closest to my office. The three teachers all had their laptops or iPads open as I entered and they were talking about trying to create a conferencing recording tool using Google Forms. When I entered one of the teachers asked me to show them how to set up a form (I had suggested they look at this tool when they were seeking commercially available apps that could be used to gather data while conferencing with students.). I immediately was in teaching mode - I felt useful and needed. While we worked together I asked the group to think about what type of data they wanted to collect. Initially they seemed more focused on the tool, but as I suggested and showed them that the forms they created could be personalized this spurred interest and discussion. Two of the teachers began a side conversation about the types of questions and collection options they might want to be using as I worked with the other teacher as he was constructing a form. At this point I exited the meeting.

The second group I went to go and see was the kindergarten group. This group set their goal as exploring uses of the Mimio with their students. I was skeptical of this group as it was the only group that stayed together as a grade level. While this might not seem like a challenge I was not certain if this was a topic of convenience or if the whole group followed one teacher's idea - as this is often the case during regular grade level meetings. Their plan seemed lacking - yet I needed to remind myself that I had not met with the group during the planning session so I had to remain open to the possibility that the group's learning goals were deeper than I was assuming. I walked into a dark classroom, four of the teachers were looking at the projected image on the whiteboard while one teacher (the first year teacher) was at the computer showing the teachers how to use tools from the Mimio software in order to create an interactive presentation. I was somewhat surprised to see how basic this discussion was - at the same time I was not surprised to see some of the teachers really wanting to learn how to use the Mimio. I think they may have sensed my confusion, perhaps it came across as displeasure as they seemed to ask me if they were doing this (the meeting) right. I will need to look more closely at this section of the transcript of my language. To deflect I asked them to tell a bit about what they wanted to do with the Mimio. One teacher spoke up and talked about the challenge of using the Mimio in the classroom because of the lack of electrical outlets to supply power to the projector. I felt a bit frustrated. Was this an excuse or their way of telling me about a real constraint? I suggested that their group think about ways they wanted to use the tool as well as ways they might work around any obstacles. The teacher who had spoken before indicated that they definitely do use the Mimio, I
think she felt I was suggesting they were not using the tool, and I reiterated that part of their work as part of the group should be to identify meaningful ways to use the Mimio as a teaching and learning tool with their students.

My visit with this group continued and the first year teacher continued to explain details of the software. I suggested that they also look at some pre-made forms using the Mimio share site. I suggested that this might save some time, especially if creating an interactive presentation was an obstacle for some of the teachers. I also suggested that they consider taking time to observe colleagues in first and second grade using the Mimio. The teacher at the computer brought up the Mimio share site and showed her colleagues some of the presentations available as well as how they could download, save and edit these. One teacher seemed very excited about seeing a pre-made interactive letter game. As the group then focused their discussion on working with this presentation, I exited the room.

The third group I visited was the “small group instruction group.” Member of this group sat around a table with iPads in hand. They were talking about various iPad apps. One teacher asked about ways they could purchase apps. I reviewed the process we use to purchase apps. As they talked about looking at apps, I sensed that they were looking for me to tell them that the app was good or not. How would I know? I tried to think about ways to convey that it was more important to think about why the app would be helpful to the student without stifling an obvious excitement about using the iPads with the students. It was really difficult for me to hear a connection to “small group instruction” but I then looked at the clock and realized that I wanted to try and visit at least one other group before time was up for today.

The final group I visited was the phonics and spelling group. As I entered the teachers all had score sheets from the Developmental Spelling Assessment (Words Their Way) they had administered out in front of them. When I sat down the teachers addressed me with questions about the current Wilson Fundations program we are using, spelling and the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts. The teachers noted that Fundations lacked opportunities for students to work with long vowel spelling patterns as is identified as a first grade goal in the Common Core. I pointed out that there is a second edition of this program, suggesting that the team look at it carefully as an option to replace our current program. This led to a conversation about the possibility of different spelling patterns and lists. I suggested that we want to have an idea of what first grade spelling means. I pushed them to investigate what we should be expect from first grade spellers. As part of this discussion we briefly talked about individual spelling lists. During this discussion another teacher came to the door of the classroom and handed me the notes from their meeting. I realized the time and rushed to the office to announce the end of the meeting time.
Appendix K

Sample Design Your Own Learning Meeting Plan from March 2014.

Designing Our Own Professional Learning Proposal - Meeting Agenda - Inclusion Group

(Go to file “make a copy” to create the agenda for your team. Be sure to share it with all members of your team and Mike!!!)

Meeting Date: March 31, 2014

Submitted by: [Redacted]

***We will be meeting in [Redacted]***

Identify some goals you have for this meeting:

- Look at the expectations for gen. ed. students in a Pre-K and 1st grade morning meeting and compare those expectations to that of students in the KDG and 2nd grade classrooms.
- Look at what a meeting amongst the staff consists of for a student who was to be included in a less restrictive environment.

List some materials/resources you will need/use for this meeting:

- Comprehensive Assessment of Student and Team Supports (CASTS)

List some questions you want to address during this particular meeting:

- What does a transition plan meeting look like? Who attends and what are the roles of everyone involved?
- After looking at the expectations for students in morning meeting in Pre-K, KDG, 1st, and 2nd grade what similarities/differences do we see amongst the different grade levels?
Appendix L

Teacher-Focus Group Interview Protocol
“Reflections on Design Your Own Learning”

Hand participants the Teacher Explanation, Demographics and Definition Sheet at the start of the interview. This will provide the investigator with some basic demographic information about the group and participants with an overview of the study as well as some specific terms related to the study.

Read aloud the following:
The purpose of this research is to study teachers’ experiences with an inquiry-based professional learning structure, “Design Your Own Learning” where you were responsible for planning and carrying out professional learning based upon your own inquiry into your daily practices with students in an elementary school. My research is guided by the questions: How did teachers describe their emerging practice of inquiry? How did what they were learning effect their professional practices?

This is a qualitative study using focus group interviews and demographic data. Participants from __________ will be asked to complete a demographic sheet and then engage in a discussion about professional development in their school. Semi-structured, open-ended questions will be posed to the group to prompt a discussion of their learning via the opportunities provided in “Design your own Learning.” Michael Ryan will make a digital audio recording of the session as well as take notes during the discussion.

This study will take about one session, which will last about 60-90 minutes. A follow-up session may be requested, but is not required of the participants.

Interview Questions:
1. Your school participated in a different structure for professional learning called Design Your Own Learning. Design Your Own Learning changed the way that faculty meetings were run at your school. What did you think of the experience?
   a. What were your first reactions to DYOL?
      i. What did you think was expected as part of DYOL?
   b. What is meaningful learning?
      i. How did you and your group come to decide on a topic or focus for your inquiry?
      ii. What sparked your interest in a topic? How did you come to your inquiry?
   c. What did you learn from participating in the Design Your Own Learning Group?
      i. How did you engage in learning as a group?
ii. How did you teach each other?
   d. How did Design Your Own Learning impact professional learning opportunities within your school?
   e. How did you address or resolve any challenges that your group faced?
2. Inquiry allows educators to identify an area within their classroom/school to investigate. This involves reviewing various professional resources, reviewing data (can be observations, test scores, surveys, etc…) and having honest dialogue about their work with colleagues and students. Tell me a bit about the inquiry process you experienced as part of your Design Your Own Learning Group.
   a. Talk about your research process
   b. What type of work did you do outside of the meeting time related to your inquiry topic?
   c. How did you learn with and from with your colleagues?
3. Most schools do not engage in open-ended inquiry as part of their professional learning. How would you describe the way professional learning time is structured to colleagues from other schools or school districts?
   a. How do you think Design Your Own Learning-like structures could be started and implemented in other school settings?
Appendix M

Main Research Question:
What happens when I (the building principal) implement an inquiry-based professional learning structure (Design Your Own Learning) in my school?

- How did teachers describe their emerging practice of inquiry?
- How did what they were learning effect their professional practices?
- What did I, as the principal, learn about implementing an inquiry-based form of professional development?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authentic and Organic Teacher Inquiry</th>
<th>Inquiry Promoting Practical Research</th>
<th>Structuring a Shift in Power</th>
<th>Reimagining Faculty Meetings</th>
<th>Principal as Teacher Educator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Together: Learning as a social experience, varied groups enriching the learning possibilities, learning as a continuous conversation, learning and sharing coming out of the group, learning born from your daily work, learning through professional interactions, responsibility to your group, developing a learning community, collaboration as a powerful learning experience alone, talking about common needs in our classrooms, teachers as learning partners</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Rules for engaging in inquiry: Learning to question, share, create, emerging iterative cycle, tool for making learning meaningful and useful for your classroom, professional development as learning time, learning as continuous, being prepared to participate in the inquiry</td>
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<td>Learning, Instruction and Assessment: Learning through student work and performance, learning to study student work, learning to evaluate practices</td>
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<td>- Focus Group 1 (394, 395, 398)</td>
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<td>- Focus Group 2 (188)</td>
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<td>School/Group Culture and Dynamics: Collaboration, interactions, personal needs, relationships, learning as a supportive social experience, sharing ideas/questions and those who share your inquiry interest, varied groups enrich learning, learning to work as a group, learning to challenge each other, collaborative responsibility, empowerment, developing a learning community, DYOL as learning time – developing yourself as a teacher, allowing learning to move beyond the DYOL meetings, developing as a learning community, school must see themselves as a learning community, sharing questions and needs, culture of inquiry, opening the school up, some challenges</td>
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<td>- Focus Group 1 (23, 162, 165, 173, 190, 256, 268, 271, 272, 275, 443, 500)</td>
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<td>- Focus Group 2 (159, 221, 250, 360, 364, 392, 397, 410, 420, 488)</td>
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<td>Assumptions about Professional Learning and what teachers know</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Authentic and Organic Teacher Inquiry
Defining Teaching: effective teaching, successful teaching, differentiation, enhancing learning for students
- 13-14 DYOL Plans at a Glance
- DYOL November Agenda Overview Processed
- DYOL February Agenda Overview
- DYOL March 2014 Agenda Overview
- 14-15 DYOL plans at a glance

### Inquiry Promoting Practical Research

### Structuring a Shift in Power
Asking Questions: Coming to a question, daily wonderings about your practice, empowering practitioners, freedom and choice,
- DYOL November Agenda Overview Processed
- DYOL March 2014 Agenda Overview
- 9-15-14 faculty meeting agenda – processed
- Focus Group 1 (243, 379, 381)

### Reimagining Faculty Meetings

### Principal as Teacher Educator
Balancing Priorities
- November 2013 Survey Processed
- 6-9-14 Design Your Own Learning Meeting Agenda Processed
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<tr>
<th>Authentic and Organic Teacher Inquiry</th>
<th>Inquiry Promoting Practical Research</th>
<th>Structuring a Shift in Power</th>
<th>Reimagining Faculty Meetings</th>
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<td>&quot;Resources&quot;</td>
<td>Inquiry as professional learning</td>
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<td>Empowering themselves to plan for</td>
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<td>DYOL as learning time – developing yourself as a teacher, student work as a learning resource, report cards, assessments, standards</td>
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<td>their learning, establishing actions</td>
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<td>to take, identifying specifics about</td>
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<td>what they want to learn, identifying</td>
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<td>Identifying Personal Learning: empowerment, choice, personal needs, personal expectations, personal learning goals, managing your own learning, control and power over your learning, becoming comfortable with new ideas, learning moves outside of the meeting time, having the opportunity to choose another goal or make a change, personal professional learning needs, something tied to your classroom</td>
<td>Time and Space for learning (Reflection): Making this time a priority, learning to work within a new structure, time to explore questions about our practice, learning beyond the DYOL meeting and group, this time as valuable, time focused on personal learning interests as respectful of people’s time, looking at the time as an opportunity, DYOL as learning time – developing yourself as a teacher, learning moving outside the meeting time, joining another group/making a change, culture of inquiry</td>
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<td>- Focus Group 2 (36, 46, 57, 93, 164, 439, 441, 444, 462)</td>
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### Authentic and Organic Teacher Inquiry

Assessing their own progress
“Working,” identifying needs in their study, identifying next steps, the iterative process at work, building on their research, managing your own learning, learning through mistakes, being comfortable with mistakes, making a change if needed, giving and getting feedback, challenging each other, trial and error, testing, finding what works for you,

- DYOL February Agenda Overview
- DYOL Feedback Survey March 2014 processed
- 6-9-14 Design Your Own Learning Meeting Agenda Processed
- 14-15 design your own learning topic brainstorming complete – processed
- Focus Group 1 (53, 187, 249, 282, 285, 451)
- Focus Group 2 (41, 301, 382, 392, 397)

### Inquiry Promoting Practical Research

Structuring a Shift in Power

Mandate, Option or Opportunity?
Freedom and choice, empowering experience, having the time put aside for meaningful learning, looking at the time as an opportunity, expanding control (personal control) over the research pushed meetings outside the meeting time, interest transcended the mandate, having the time set aside created a space for more interest in inquiry outside the meeting, providing the opportunity for faculty, difference between this structure and a faculty meeting, being prepared for your group, finding what works for you, focus on something that you are doing in your classroom,

- November 2013 Survey Processed
- 6-9-14 Design Your Own Learning Meeting Agenda Processed
- 9-15-14 faculty meeting agenda – processed
- Focus Group 1 (68, 379, 381, 385, 422, 424, 485, 489, 494, 500)
- Focus Group 2 (46, 360, 392, 397, 441, 444, 462)

### Reimagining Faculty Meetings

Principal as Teacher Educator

March 2014 processed

- 6-9-14 Design Your Own Learning Meeting Agenda Processed
- 9-15-14 faculty meeting agenda – processed
- Focus Group 1 (68, 379, 381, 385, 422, 424, 485, 489, 494, 500)
- Focus Group 2 (46, 360, 392, 397, 441, 444, 462)
## Authentic and Organic Teacher Inquiry

- Inquiry Promoting Practical Research
- Structuring a Shift in Power
- Reimagining Faculty Meetings
- Principal as Teacher Educator

### Communicating Findings:
Making learning public, sharing ideas, sharing progress, making learning public, confident in what they know and confident in their work, teachers teaching teachers, challenging each other, being prepared to discuss at meetings, opening the doors to our professional lives

- DYOL February Agenda Overview
- DYOL Feedback Survey March 2014 processed
- 6-9-14 Design Your Own Learning Meeting Agenda Processed
- 6-9-14 Design Your Own Learning Meeting Agenda Processed
- Focus Group 1 (268, 271, 272, 275, 228, 333, 431, 436)
- Focus Group 2 (50, 115, 159, 360, 364, 382, 402, 410, 423, 468)
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<td>Understanding inquiry:</td>
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<td>Learning to be reflective practitioners, iterative process, learning to build on new learning, coming to a question, learning through mistakes, teachers as researchers, coming to understand research, choosing the “right” topic to study, testing our work and learning through trial and error, what is the real need, being prepared for your group, finding what works for you, research takes time,</td>
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Appendix N


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<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>What do you want to explore that will help you support your students learning and development?</th>
<th>Identify some goals you have for your inquiry...</th>
<th>List some questions you have related to your topic...</th>
<th>Why do you feel this is a critical topic to explore with your colleagues?</th>
<th>My Raw Thoughts</th>
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</table>
| Math (2 members)    | We want to differentiate math instruction to allow students to become independent learners in math. | • Find/create meaningful math activities  
• Give students more time to be independent learners during math  
• Find an alternate way to teach the mini-lesson (ex: Hands on guided learning instead of whole group Mimio guided practice)  
• Build confidence in ourselves to know that we’ve given them enough information to go off on their own. | • When do we know it’s appropriate to let students be more independent?  
• Where can we go to find some supporting resources for our math lessons? | We think students need to improve their higher level thinking skills in math so that they can apply them in daily math work, assessments, and everyday life. We feel that more independent time will build these critical thinking skills. | • Promoting independence  
• Alternate ways to teach  
• Build confidence in ourselves  
• Knowing about students  
• Wanting students to develop critical thinking skills.  
• The goals listed do talk about independence but really do not define that in relationship to math learning goals... |
| Preschool (2 members) | 1. How does Creative Curriculum best utilize the Preschool Learning Standards of 2009 and address pre-readiness skills for Kindergarten?  
2. Does another state approved preschool curriculum better meet the needs of the Little Falls School Community? | • 1a. Identify pre-readiness skills in the PLS 2009 area of language arts, math and science.  
• 2a. Research the other four Preschool approved curriculums in NJ to see if they better support the pre-readiness skills of the Little Falls Community. | • Are Curiosity Corner and Bank Street for mixed age group of 3’s and 4’s?  
• Can we obtain sample materials to look at?  
• 3. Can we observe a classroom that implements Curiosity Corner/Bank Street? | None stated. | • The questions in this group are really not looking at a practice and they do not really indicate what goals they would have for an observation. Interesting that the goal is about the tool or the curriculum and not specific student learning. |
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<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>What do you want to explore that will help you support your students learning and development?</th>
<th>Identify some goals you have for your inquiry...</th>
<th>List some questions you have related to your topic...</th>
<th>Why do you feel this is a critical topic to explore with your colleagues?</th>
<th>My Raw Thoughts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rubric and Writing Conferencing (3 members)</td>
<td>Data? - What should I be asking? What data should be collecting during a typical reading and writing conference? What should be on a conference “form?” Organization? - How can we work to organize the data in a functional way? How can we use what we learned to track the data over an extended period? How can we take that the data to help build/form small groups based on specific needs? Is it best to use a very specific/generic rubric?</td>
<td>We would like to establish a manageable and effective way to collect data during Reading and Writing Workshop.</td>
<td>• How can we work to organize the data in a functional way? • How can we use what we learned to track the data over an extended period? • How can we take that the data to help build/form small groups based on specific needs? • Is it best to use a very specific/generic rubric? • What should I be asking? • What data should be collecting during a typical reading and writing conference? • What should be on a conference “form?”</td>
<td>To be able to track student growth. Placement of students. An organization of data to keep in order to show parents.</td>
<td>• This group seems to be asking about data and digging into the meaning of the data. It seems they are most interested in making the data useful to help them with their instruction during reading workshop. Interesting after reading the questions the goal is more about the tool and not about student learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small Group Instruction Group</td>
<td>Finding engaging hands-on activities to use during small group instruction. Finding iPad apps to use during small group instruction. Differentiating instruction within the small group.</td>
<td>To create a list of effective LAL and Math apps to use during small group instruction. - To share (amongst each other) of hands-on activities already used during small group instruction in the classroom.</td>
<td>Which will be more effective: hands-on activities or iPad apps? How will we keep track of gaming on the iPad apps? How can we pinpoint LAL areas of deficit/need?</td>
<td>- How can we help transfer digital learning to real-life?</td>
<td>• This group seems to be blending the use of small groups, differentiation and integration of technology into one. Interesting that the goal is more about the practice not really about learning.</td>
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<td>Group</td>
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| Health Team (2 members)     | Basic human anatomy - While stretching include nurse. Growth development - Exploring properties of basic growth & Development. Tie in with grade levels. (chicks, toads, butterflies) | • Storytelling  
• Checking pulse  
• Role playing  
• Exploring feelings/ emotions | • What part of your body are you stretching?  
• What can you do that a baby cannot do?  
• What happens to your pulse when you are running?  
• Ask teachers what subjects they are covering in class? | Reinforcement of different topics that are learned in class (health, Science, Bullying, Feelings)  
Allow students to understand the role of the heart.  
Reinforce proper techniques for hygiene | • Goals listed for this group seem more like activity goals. Things they would like to do or learn how to do in relationship with their work with students.  
• Interesting that the questions almost seem like essential questions from curriculum… |
| Inclusion Team (3 members)  | Best practices Pros/cons real life experiences/expert opinions  
Background Successful techniques  
Prerequisite skills needed  
Range/hierarchy of support  
Parent input  
Teacher planning/collaboration on Meaningful student data | Research & develop hierarchy of support w/ inclusive classroom - understanding what's typical | • How do you know if its meaningful for the student?  
• What makes the student ready?  
• What is typical? | More common practice to include special need students.  
How do we best support them in the LRE? | • This group wants to understand what is typical – wonder if that is what is a typical classroom or what is a typical student…  
• Interesting that there is no real mention of what it means to be included and what is the goal of “inclusion.” |
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| Phonics Group (4 members) | Differentiation in phonics instructions  
• During whole group  
• During small group  
• Spelling lists/tests  
• Pushing excelling spellers  
• Creating a connection between phonics, reading and writing  
• They are one in the same  
What are the essential components of solid phonics instruction  
• What do we have that we can build upon, change or add to?  
• What are the building blocks for phonics?  
What is the progression? | Develop differentiation lessons  
• Find a progression of learning for phonics  
• Look more deeply into data garnered from the Wawa/Wilson probes  
• Develop assessments to check for real life application | What is an appropriate learning progression for phonics?  
• What are some resources that we can use?  
• What is the best way to set up phonics instruction time? | Phonics is a pivotal piece in k-2 instruction that affects a student’s performance in all areas of academics | Interesting that they talk about the pivotal nature of phonics but do not mention anything about what the students’ current level of performance is – wonder if this is related to something lacking in the initial form... |
Appendix O

June 2014 Design Your Own Learning agenda outlining the parameters for the group share.

PreK-2 Faculty Meeting
Topic: Show and Tell!
Monday, June 9, 2014
3:30 All Purpose Room

You Need:
- Laptop/iPad/Chromebook or any technology you would need to share your work
- Any handouts or links to a Google Doc (etc...) that you are going to share with your colleagues.

Agenda:
Show and Tell!
Investigating and exploring our teaching practices or understanding of curriculum or student learning is a vital part of developing and enhancing our professional knowledge. However most often we may never have a chance to share our learning with others. It is important that we make our learning public so that we can help and inspire others and so that we can also continue to grow and learn.

- Your group will have between 5-10 minute to share the learning journey that you took with your Design Your Own Learning team during this year. Note that your work may not be complete - THAT IS OKAY! This is simply an opportunity to let others know about your inquiry and what you have learned so far...
- Consider the following as you are planning:
  - How will you explain your exploration to others?
  - Be sure to include some information about why this exploration was important to you and your group.
  - How did you go about exploring your topic?
  - What did you learn about your topic as a result of your Design Your Own Learning meetings?
  - What are your “next steps” related to this topic? (Have you completed your inquiry into this topic? Do you have a question related to this topic that you would like to explore further? etc...)
  - Consider having some sort of a “take away” or handout for your colleagues. This could be a sample form you used or a shared Google Docs with links to helpful sites that everyone might be able to use.