Fresh Beginnings: Promoting a Culture of Teacher Inquiry through Passion in the Profession

Jonathan Hart
Readington Township Public School District, jhart@readington.k12.nj.us

Divonna Stebick
Gettysburg College, dstebick@gettysburg.edu

Fresh Beginnings: Promoting a culture of teacher inquiry through passion in the profession

Abstract:

Teachers are required to participate in professional development and seek meaningful opportunities to truly grow in the profession. Teacher inquiry, or teacher research, is one way to accomplish professional development goals. Teacher inquiry is thought of as individualized, personalized, and meaningful professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Teacher inquiry must go beyond a teacher wondering (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020) where teachers develop a project from their own practice, collect data, and draw conclusions to continue their professional development. In this study a cohort of certificated professionals engaged in a year-long project that included asking research questions and developing an independent study to examine their practice. Nine certificated professionals participated in the year-long project representing various grade levels and experiences. The results have implications for educational administrators, indicating that a trusting, supportive environment among teachers, in collaboration with administrators, is paramount in developing a culture of inquiry. Further results demonstrated that peer collaboration by way of periodic workshops promoted professional discourse, camaraderie, and collaboration when exploring individual projects. This research project furnishes further evidence of the importance of teaching inquiry in schools and provides a sample structure for school leaders wishing to develop a culture of inquiry.

Introduction

Knowing that teaching is a complex activity that occurs within webs of social, historical, cultural, and political significance, teacher leaders seek to deliver professional development that is meaningful and purposeful (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Many districts are successful and schedule relevant, timely professional learning for certificated staff; however, we have also concluded that adult learning theory, when implemented, has the structure to make professional development exceptionally powerful for teachers (Knowles, 1984; Rodman, 2019). One of the most effective ways to engage staff in high-level professional development throughout the school year is to create a safe, trusting environment of inquiry (Cochran-Smith, & Lytle, 2015; Gillis & Mitton-Kükner, 2019). This work is embedded in ways where a one-year veteran superintendent could develop, promote, and enhance a teacher inquiry culture within a school district.

Adult Learning and Teacher Inquiry

To engage adults in powerful learning, andragogy should be considered to plan, implement, and reflect upon the learning outcomes. Knowles (1984) makes five assumptions to differentiate the characteristics of adult learners, andragogy, that are different from the assumptions about child learners, pedagogy.

●Self-Concept - As a person matures his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.

●Adult Learner Experience - As a person matures he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

●Readiness to Learn - As a person matures his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.

●Orientation to Learning - As a person matures his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. As a result, his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject- centeredness to one of problem centeredness.

●Motivation to Learn - As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal.

Furthermore, Knowles (1984) recommends that adult learning should include the following principles:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.

Knowles' (1984) work provided a framework for districts wishing to seek alternatives to traditional professional development, namely teacher or practitioner inquiry. It is critical that school leaders consider adult learning theory as a framework for promoting powerful professional development. Knowles' (1984) principles transcended the teacher inquiry process, making it a useful theoretical tool to develop successful inquiry-based professional development (1984).

Cochran-Smith and Stern (2014) affirmed that these andragogical principles are necessary to create a professional learning community in which teachers develop an inquiry stance. Consequently, when this inquiry process is cultivated,

the positions of teachers and teacher leaders become seamless as they collaborate in inquiry communities and propel their knowledge to practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Our research focused on andragogy as a fundamental principle in designing a year-long professional development opportunity that allowed teachers to self-explore and cultivate an inquiry stance. Further, our research sought to mobilize school leaders in promoting a culture of inquiry.

Teacher inquiry has been thought to be important to instructional improvement because it is a type of individualized, personalized, and meaningful professional development for educators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). This notion of teacher inquiry is still true and critically important to the field of education. Our year-long exploration moves beyond this assumption about teacher inquiry and suggests that teacher inquiry is now even more important for 21st century teachers because of the ever-changing landscape of the profession; a profession that requires problem-solving, creativity, and research-based decision making (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). Further, our research sought to better understand how school leaders can develop a culture of inquiry within a learning organization by starting small with purposeful, personalized professional learning (Rodman, 2019). If we are to expect teachers to use instructional strategies that are based in research and best practices, we must offer teachers professional development in the inquiry stance to promote curiosity, evaluation, collaboration, planning, data analysis, and problem-solving. School leaders must cultivate and model this expectation. There is a natural intersection of andragogy and teacher inquiry, and the district initiative within this paper explored the ways in which teacher inquiry connects with Knowles' (1984) principles for adult learning to be most effective.

Our research sought to build upon other current research that explored the role of self-directed teacher learning to design a framework for teacher exploration (Cummings, 2011). Teacher inquiry professional development must go beyond allowing teachers to select a wondering or a curiosity in which to develop a project; it must provide teachers with the necessary supports (e.g. financial, time, guidance), a safe learning environment (e.g. risk-taking is encouraged and failure is worked through, perseverance) and a sense of shared accountability (e.g. peer expectations, critical friends) (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Ultimately, the effective professional development of the teacher-participants resided in their individual desires to develop an inquisitive approach to the teaching and learning process through a self-driven, data informed, dynamic professional development opportunity. Our journey into teacher inquiry taught teachers how to be consumers of research and critical thinkers when it came to analyzing data and reflecting on one's teaching practice. This approach is supported by current research that

identifies teacher inquiry as a way to solve real-world problems of practice in the classroom (Mertler, 2021). This journey is told through qualitative data reinforced by reflection journals of the teacher participants themselves along with conversations during inquiry professional development meetings. It is the experience of the teacher-participants in this study that offered insight into the role of leadership in providing the necessary supports to promote this critical work among professionals.

The Role of School Leadership

Using the word 'culture' as a means to describe this professional experience is purposeful. Creating an inquisitive mind-set among a small group of professional faculty allowed inquiry to be more accessible to other faculty. Initial conversations of inquiry naturally breed further inquiry projects throughout the school district. Essentially, we sought to develop an overall mind-set of professional inquiry within the professional teaching staff, which cannot occur over night. Rodman (2019) emphasized quality over size to develop a culture of inquiry. We started small with an intimate group of teaching staff, and planned to expand in the future. Rodman (2019) further discussed a problem in professional development leadership where school leaders oftentimes promote professional development that is geared for all staff members. This research challenged leaders to think about a more personalized approach to professional development and this is where our exploration of inquiry became the driver for teacher-led learning. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that educational leaders need to take time to shift teacher perceptions of professional practice. This concept of building culture must start with a single brick. If a slow, cautious layering is not built, leaders run the risk of structural collapse.

This concept of focused teacher inquiry was investigated by Glanz (2016) using case study design in a high school. This study interviewed teachers involved in action research. The trends discussed included ensuring reflection was built into the inquiry process, success along with failure were inevitable, and implementing change was slow and deliberate. The article summarized that "transformational change does not occur quickly" (p. 16).

While our investigation used previous research to guide leaders in starting small and having patience in promoting instructional change, it also informed us to the importance of building relationships while investing in this type of professional development. The work of Fullan (2001) suggested that relationships are a way to build positive culture. In order for leaders to cultivate a spirit of change, which is linked to inquiry, they must build these relationships. When trust and vulnerability are present among a group of professionals the results can be limitless. More recent

research by Fullan (2016) suggested that school administrators should co-learn and co-lead projects, indicating that side-by-side partnership with staff is an important attribute for educational leaders.

Other recent research noted the necessity of powerful school leadership in developing inquiry (Gillis & Mitton-Kü, 2019). Specifically, the participants in this study reported, "They [also] felt that if leaders were honest in sharing their successes and failures, those wary of the teacher inquiry process could learn from a leader's example" (p. 25). This led us to foster a culture of collaborative sharing where the administrator-researcher partnership designed their own inquiry project within the teacher inquiry professional development. This inquiry-on-inquiry process provided a unique perspective for the participants to see the inquiry in action as well as to observe their administrator's vulnerability and eagerness to engage. This process accelerated the group's willingness to create a trusting environment as the administrator shared his vulnerability, reflection, and openness to new learning.

The Current Study

This research study used Knowles' assumptions and principles of adult learning theory in combination with what we learned about meaningful professional learning in a manner to promote inquiry problem-solving (Knowles, 1984; Rodman, 2019; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020; Simon, 2015) while also taking a stance from the school leader's perspective (Fullan, 2001; Gillis & Mitton-Kükner, 2019).

The purpose of this project was to develop a framework to support teachers in their individual inquiry processes. Several guiding questions were asked in regard to promoting inquiry among a small cohort of teachers in a school district: 1) How can administration create a trusting, supportive environment where teachers have an opportunity to explore an inquiry project? 2) What structures do teachers identify as valuable within a teacher inquiry project?

Methods

Participants and Materials

Nine certificated staff in a PreK-8 regional public school district in New Jersey, with total enrollment of approximately 1,500, volunteered to participate in a two-day workshop in the summer of 2019. This was the first in a series of workshops that would be offered during the 2019-2020 school year. The teachers

represented various grade levels and content areas from grades 2 through 8, including a certificated non-teaching staff member (e.g. school counselor, school social worker, school nurse). For clarity, the terms 'teacher(s)' and 'participant(s)' are used interchangeably to describe all participants.

The summer workshops were facilitated by the administrator-researcher partnership and the workshops during the academic year were facilitated by the administrator with the researcher joining remotely or consultatively when available. This partnership of individuals not only led the workshop sessions, but also modeled their own inquiry within each session for two specific reasons. First, this provided the participants a model of how one engages in the inquiry process. Second, this promoted an atmosphere that fostered sharing, engagement, and trust (Gillis & Mitton-Kükner, 2019). Each participant was given a copy of the Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) text titled *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn Through Practitioner Inquiry.* This text provided a scaffold for participants as they engaged in the research project. The book included various types of inquiry, the importance of reading about a specific inquiry topic, strategies for collecting data, and how to report findings among other supports. The text was also used as a resource to drive conversation during the scheduled monthly meetings as noted in Table 1.

Table 1

Inquiry Project Timeline

Date	Essential Question	Assigned Reading/ Resource
October 30, 2019	How has your journey into your passion project gone thus far? Where are you in your data collection?	Chapter 4
December 11, 2019	Have you collected data to satisfy your wondering?	Chapter 6
January 15, 2020	What is one thing you need most assistance with regarding your passion project? How can you best share your learning?	Chapter 7
February 12, 2020	How can we best plan for sharing our learning?	Chapter 7 (*continued*)
March 2020	*A workshop was scheduled for participants to share their wonderings to colleagues within the district. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic this did*	

	not occur. In lieu of an in-person workshop a video was developed where teacher volunteers shared their learning in the month of June.

Roles of the Administrator-Researcher Partnership

The administrator-researcher partnership consisted of the school district superintendent and an associate professor who teaches in an education/teacher preparation program at a liberal arts college and served as the researcher for this inquiry. This administrator-researcher partnership provided a balanced approach to the inquiry: their roles in the project and their focus in the research questions. The superintendent had a multi-faceted role in that he provided the funding, resources, and strategic initiative for teacher inquiry work. The researcher provided background research and expertise in the area of teacher inquiry and her role was crucial as a non-evaluative individual who could listen to reflection and hear concerns without any supervisor authority over the faculty who participated in the workshop. This partnership provided a checks-and-balances relationship when answering the two research questions; however, each role in the partnership had naturally developed more of a focused inquiry as it related to their role. Specifically, the school superintendent was primarily concerned with research question one, looking to ensure a supportive culture was created to promote teacher inquiry. This is more specific to a role in educational leadership. The researcher sought to answer research question two that related to the structures for creating an environment of teacher inquiry as a theoretical framework. This paper is the result of the investigation into these research questions.

Timeline and Workshop Content

The participants attended a two-day workshop in the summer of 2019 where they were introduced to the topic of inquiry and developed a year-long project to investigate. The administrator-researcher partnership facilitated the summer workshop and the administrator alone facilitated each subsequent workshop. After the two-day workshop, participants volunteered to continue the inquiry project into the school year and were paid a professional development stipend according to their local contract. Subsequent workshops, titled Teacher Academies, were held on October 30, 2019, December 11, 2019, January 15, 2020, and February 12, 2020 after school. The workshop topics and essential questions progressed by using the Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) text as the resource for each session. The topics and chapter resources provided a framework in order for the teachers to prepare for each Teacher Academy (refer to Table 1 for topics and resources). These workshops included an opportunity for progress updates via post-it notes, journal reflection,

peer sharing using the essential questions, and post-workshop feedback forms (see Appendix 1 for a sample feedback form).

Participants returned in the summer of 2020 for a one-day reflection workshop with both the administrator and researcher who facilitated the previous summer's workshop. At this time, summary reflections of a year's worth of inquiry work were collected.

Data Sources

Data were collected from various quantitative and qualitative sources. These sources of data were designed to inform the administrator-researcher partnership as to what support and guidance the teachers required as they engaged in the inquiry process. Creswell and Poth (2018) captured the importance of methodology within qualitative research, through inductive inquiry that includes the researcher to work from the ground up through the lens of the inquirer. The inquirer's lens, meaning the administrator-researcher's lenses, were used to develop various data tools. Data were collected using the following tools:

- ***Post-it note progress at each meeting*** (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The physical process of moving and posting, on chart paper, where the teacher was in the teacher inquiry process was captured visually and cumulatively. Meaning, at the beginning of each workshop participants were asked to do two things as "Do Nows." First, they were to answer the reflection question referenced in Table 1 in their journal. Second, the participants were asked to identify where they were in the inquiry process using colored post-it notes. Once they decided on what stage of inquiry they were actively working, participants posted the appropriate post-it notes as a visual representation (similar to a bar graph) on large poster paper. The post-it notes allowed the facilitators and participants to monitor their progress through the inquiry project. Green post-it notes meant the participant had yet to complete that stage of inquiry, yellow post-it notes meant the participant was actively working on that stage of inquiry, and red post-it notes meant the participant had completed that stage of inquiry. The stages were adapted using the Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) text as a framework. The nine stages are listed as follows from beginning processes to end processes: generating ideas, narrowing my wondering, selecting my wondering, collecting data, satisfaction with the data collected, reflecting on data, answering my wondering, reporting out my wondering, having a new wondering. Digital photographs of the post-it note progress was a data collection method adapted from Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020).

- ***Tracking resource requests from participants*** (i.e. materials, substitute coverage, meeting requests, etc.) (Appendix 2). The tracking tool allowed the on-site administrator to observe and collect resources needed for teachers to be successful through the inquiry process. The tracking tool was developed by the researcher-administrator pair brainstorming types of requests that may come from teacher participants at the onset of the project. Those requests fell into the following categories: materials (such as books), time (such as meeting time with the administrator), coverage (such as substitute coverage), consultation (such as time with the researcher), and other (this became mostly additional professional development the participants sought). Data was collected by analyzing the number of requests along with the nature of the requests.
- ***Course feedback forms.*** Course feedback forms from each Teacher Academy workshop session were collected (Appendix 1) as a more "formal mechanism…to capture action, talking, thinking, and productivity…" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020, p.121). The evaluation form is a district-developed form used for all professional development workshops. These evaluation forms allowed the administrator-researcher partners to reflect and adjust during the sequence of Teacher Academy workshops. The evaluation form asked participants to make a judgement on the effectiveness of the workshop (scale of 1-5), the pacing of the course, and the relevance of the course. The evaluation also allowed for open ended comments regarding the value of the course along with suggestions for improvement.
- ***Shared journal responses and anecdotal field notes.*** The researchers also collected journal responses shared by the teachers as well as anecdotal field notes taken during each meeting. These journals provided further evidence of participants' reflection and growth, which in turn assisted the researchers in drawing more powerful conclusions on how to develop a culture of inquiry by creating a framework. The research team also collected and analyzed anecdotal field notes. "To capture action in the classroom, many teacher researchers take field notes as they observe" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020, p.100). In this case, the researchers were taking notes during the meetings, collecting email correspondences between the researcher and participants, as well as email correspondences between the administrator and participants.

Figure 1

Project Status as of October 30, 2019
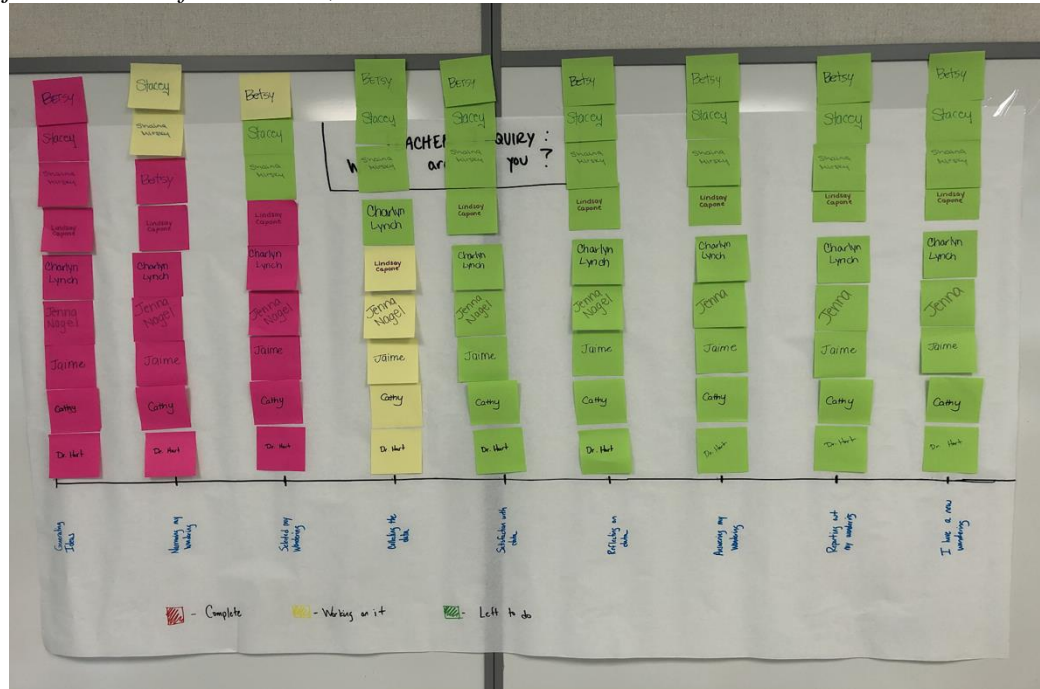
Figure 2

Participant Progress October Compared with February
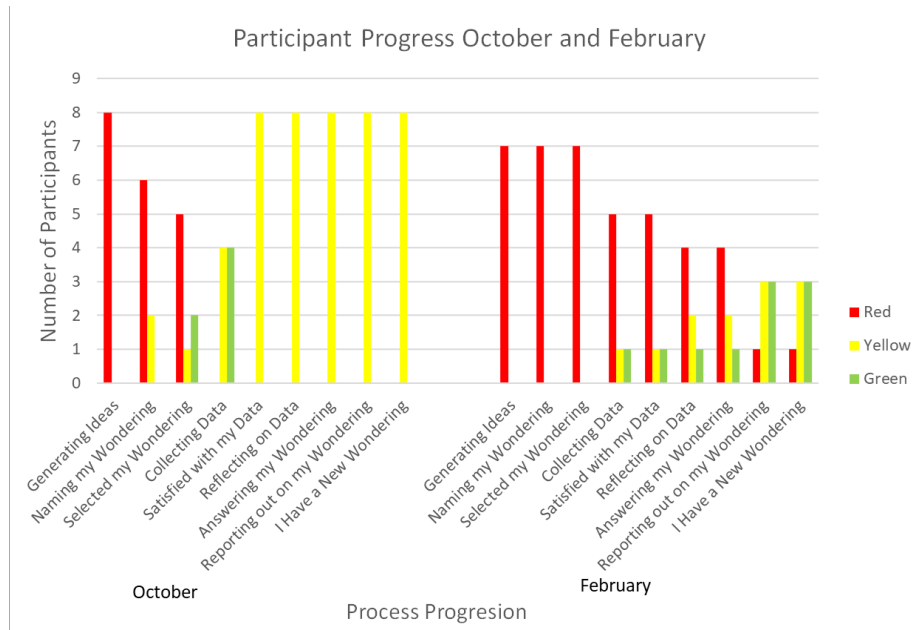
Results and Conclusions

Post-it Note Progress

Figure 1 visually demonstrates how the post-it note progress poster provided movement and reflection on the process of inquiry through a digital photo. It illustrates how during the "Do Now" of each meeting, participants used post-it notes and placed them on a large tracking poster paper. Figure 2 shows the progress over time from the first meeting in October to our final meeting in February, turning the digital photos into a graph. Red post-its and bars on the graph indicate work completed while green post-its and bars on the graph indicate work left to do. Yellow post-it notes and bars on the graph show that teachers were in the process of working on that particular portion of their inquiry project. The results demonstrate that in October five out of nine (5/9) teachers had completed the first three stages of the inquiry process. By February, five out of nine (5/9) had completed the first five stages of the inquiry process and four out of nine (4/9) completed the first seven stages of the inquiry process. One teacher reported having completed the project and began developing a new wondering (new project).

Course Feedback Forms

A review of the course feedback forms from all of the meetings suggested several activities and structures that assisted participants through the teacher inquiry process. First, when asked about ranking course relevance on a scale of 1-5, all teachers had scored relevance as a 5 for all sessions. When asked about pacing all participants indicated pacing as "just right." When asked about relevance of the course content the results indicated the course was "necessary," "relevant" and "useful." There were two opened ended questions that elicited important responses. They are as follows with sample responses:

What element of the course did you find most valuable? Virtually all participants pointed out that small group discussions with colleagues was most valuable. Specific comments read as follows, *"Talking it out with a peer was so helpful," "The project was intimidating to me at first...the support of all involved has made the experience so positive," "I found talking with another teacher to be the most valuable part," "Talking with someone about my project as well as listening to their wondering helped greatly," "The feedback was very helpful," "Sharing with a colleague and validating other's work," "I love when the facilitator asked if we wanted to work with someone out of our own 'bubble,' love the opportunity for new fresh insights."*

If you had to make a suggestion for improvement for this course, it would be…
Specific comments regarding this statement read as follows: *"I would love to talk with a partner again," "Can we use coverage to work on our research?" "Time to plan for a presentation in March," "Have a full day [of inquiry workshops] during the school year," "Seeing live examples [of other projects] would be helpful," "The superintendent always made us feel comfortable sharing any questions or concerns."*

The course feedback forms provided some of the most significant data when it came to answering our research questions about a supportive environment to promote inquiry as well as the valued and supportive structures of the inquiry process. It is clear that the collaborative relationship, open and honest dialogue, and the pace of the workshops were paramount. High value was placed on feedback and conversations with colleagues.

Resource Requests

Finally, a review of the requests made by participants demonstrated that at least 75% of participants had requested some additional resource. These requests

included resources such as a book, an individual progress meeting with the administration, or an out-of-district professional development workshop related to inquiry. Each request was honored.

Shared Journal Responses and Anecdotal Field Notes

We also asked the question; What structures do teachers identify as valuable within a teacher inquiry project? Again, journal responses and discussions, captured with anecdotal field notes, during meeting time suggested that the time to collaborate with colleagues in an environment where the teachers could 'check-in' on their progress. Sample responses are listed in Table 2. Anecdotal conversation with the participants yielded a term that was repeated often: accountability. The periodic pacing combined with the participant collaboration provided a structure and space for teachers to share their inquiry with one another, but participants knew their colleagues would need them to be prepared for deep thought during the Teacher Academy sessions. Many reported that they felt these meetings held them accountable for progress on their project in a supportive, collaborative way. The visual, using post-it notes, allowed participants to gauge one's own progress compared with others. This comparison allowed teachers to seek others' assistance based on progress.

When reflecting on the question regarding structures teachers identified as supportive in this process, we found similar results as those structures that were valued (i.e. collaboration, peer feedback, progress updates). However, we must note that teachers reported the simple structure of time as supportive and even went as far as to request more. Specifically, the participants wanted more periodic meetings throughout the year, suggesting that four was not sufficient. The Teacher Academy time provided the highly-coveted peer conversation opportunity and this time was seen as supportive.

To summarize the results, participants reported that having conversation and receiving feedback was extraordinarily helpful. The collegial opportunity for sharing was clearly the dominant structure that provided for the most success. Second, the time and pacing structure of the workshops was highly valued. Some participants even reported that more workshops may have been helpful for their learning and moving through the inquiry process.

Table 2

Sample Journal Responses from Participants and Field Notes from Administrator Researcher

Participant	Reflection/Response
Participant 1	As I reflect on my experience in teacher inquiry I am able to see that reflecting in my journal was the most beneficial part of this journey. From my first journal entry to my last I am able to conclude that as a teacher I am asking more meaningful questions. I also noticed that what I was trying to promote in my own classroom was exactly what teacher inquiry gave me. It gave me a safe place to share and ask questions with my colleagues.
Participant 2	Collaboration with our Superintendent, associate professor, and my teaching colleagues provided support and the opportunity to reflect on my inquiry at all points along the journey. Journal entries and reflections allowed me to track my progress, make adjustments as needed, and led me to further wonderings.
Participant 3	What attracted me to the Teacher Inquiry project was the opportunity to personalize and direct my own professional development. As an education professional who is not a teacher, it enabled me to be not only reflective of my performance but to think about it in a way that demanded growth and change.
Researcher	There are several key take-aways from this meeting: Participants are feeling positive peer pressure to be prepared for each meeting. • One participant said, "I'm looking for a useful question and data tool [to help my students]." This participant received a lot of useful feedback from peers.

	• One participant suggested that this inquiry opportunity allowed for a positive relationship with the Superintendent. Others agreed and suggested the Superintendent provided the resources – there were no barriers. • I began to wonder how this was truly linked to our strategic goals.
Email sample between participant and researcher	Hi XXXXX, I definitely need your help narrowing down my idea. I'm available most days at 2:00 (my prep) or after school. Let me know if you have any availability. Thank you, YYYY

Discussion

When it comes to school administration developing a trusting, supportive environment, it has become evident, through this investigation, that administrative staff can do this. The administrator-researcher partnership allowed for trust to be built in a non-evaluative way. The feedback received from participants suggests that the opportunity to collaborate with a colleague allowed for trust to be built as well. The administration promoted this conversation and collaboration among colleagues from across the district during the Teacher Academy sessions with reflective questions and the post-it note progress tool. This was evidenced by comments such as these from the course feedback forms: *"Talking it out with a peer was so helpful," "The project was intimidating to me at first…the support of all involved has made the experience so positive."* The superintendent, in this case, was the catalyst to provide that environment and to support the teachers with resources. Essentially, it was up to the administration to design the workshop meeting times, provide time, and purchase resources to encourage the environment that led to such professional growth.

One of the goals of this study was for teacher leadership to promote trusting, supportive environments for teachers to explore a topic of inquiry as their professional growth evolves into an inquiry project (Cochran-Smith & Stern, 2014; Fullan, 2001; Glanz, 2016). The results, specifically, the course feedback forms,

the requests made by the participants, and the anecdotal field notes along with journals, demonstrate evidence of a trusting relationship built between administration and the teachers. By the end of the workshop series, teachers reported a sense of comfort and support working collaboratively with administration and one another. A comment from a reflective journal stated: "*Collaboration with our Superintendent, associate professor, and my teaching colleagues provided support and the opportunity to reflect on my inquiry at all points along the journey.*"

In addition, having an outside facilitator (the researcher) assisted in building the relationship between administration and teachers, where teachers were able to seek guidance of the researcher prior to and/or after meeting with administration. The role of superintendent as being the individual who could provide funding and resources (i.e. a substitute teacher or a book) were valued. The superintendent's role as co-presenter seemed to also be valued by the participants, as they were able to observe him as a learner as well. However, the researcher's expertise and confidential support was also critically necessary. This balance, we believe, provided the collaborative, trusting environment. Other research suggests that partnerships between institutions of higher education and school districts provide evidence of enhanced professional learning and teacher reflection (Grau, Calcagni, Preiss, & Ortiz, 2017). Further, by having the facilitators (including the superintendent) co-learn alongside faculty demonstrated a level of vulnerability and collaboration that seems to have allowed for the trusting environment as well (Fullan, 2016).

Conversations with peers during the inquiry processes were of critical importance. This conversation and informal sharing of ideas with colleagues promoted professional confidence and competence when exploring inquiry projects. The more the administration supported these professional conversations, the more the participants felt value in the workshop framework. In other words, this collaborative conversation allowed teachers to share experiences and enrich one another's projects as critical friends and colleagues (Bambino, 2002). The concept of critical friends is seen in course feedback forms responses such as: *"I found talking with another teacher to be the most valuable part," "Talking with someone about my project as well as listening to their wondering helped greatly," "The feedback was very helpful."*

Even if the inquiry was not fully answered (or if the wondering was not satisfied), it is clear the participants demonstrated considerable growth as a professional as well as the confidence in their ability to ask and answer questions about their own teaching practice. This is summarized by a participating teacher

who said, "*People say that teaching is both a science and an art. This inquiry project highlighted the science of teaching and allowed me to answer my own specific questions. With the guidance and support from my superintendent, I was able to design a research tool to measure my students' motivation to read. After graphing the data, patterns of how students' reading motivation was impacted by high and low reading scores became apparent.*"

Our research sought to promote a culture of inquiry. This culture of inquiry has begun in small ways, making it is clear that these faculty, from diverse professional and personal backgrounds, from across a district developed their own professional learning community (Glanz, 2016). Collaboration across schools in a multi-building district is challenging to promote and organize, but this learning model promoted true articulation by cross-disciplinary colleagues. The results speak to how participants appreciated this, as it helped them learn and grow.

In summary, the framework that was used to promote the trusting environment and create a culture for inquiry was effective. This is evidenced by the post-it note progress charts collected throughout the school year. The results, in this instance, report that over half of the participants had completed the vast majority of process stages to answer their inquiry wondering. This framework (i.e. use of administrator-research partnerships, collaboration with colleagues across a district, setting specific process goals) can be used and replicated in other school districts who desire to promote this type of professional learning.

Next phases of research include asking questions revolving around how to make this small cohort larger. Creating a culture of inquiry within a school district must go beyond nine participants, as this is a small segment of the entire school district. In order for inquiry to be a truly embedded culture, the next phase must expand making inquiry exploration an expectation in larger ways. While we understand that starting school initiatives in small, strategic ways is the prominent practice, we seek to have a larger impact as we move into future years of this project. In the next phase, our plan is to bring this first cohort of teacher participants back for a second phase of summer and after-school workshops in the next school year. Simultaneously, the administrator-researcher partnership will seek to bring in a new cohort of teachers to begin this process of inquiry. In addition, future research should investigate ways in which the administrator-researcher partnership begins to take less of a role in designing and facilitating workshops. The goal would be to have teacher leaders take ownership of this project to further promote inquiry. The goal will be to take teacher leaders from this first cohort and train them to be the facilitators of future inquiry cohorts. While the administrator-researcher pair

resulted in a positive experience from the participants, teacher leadership will further promote an inquiry culture.

References

Bambino, D. (2002). Critical friends. *Educational Leadership, 59(6)*, 25-27.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (2015). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation.* Teachers College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Stern, R. (2014). The role of inquiry in teacher leadership. *The Power of Teacher Leaders* (pp. 196-209). Routlege.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teaching learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education, 24,* 249-305

Creswell, J.W. & Poth, C.N. (2018) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Sage Publications.

Cummings, G. (2011). Investing in teachers to invest in themselves. *Journal of Adult Education, 40*, 19-23.

Dana, N.F., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2020). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research: Learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry*, 4th edition. Corwin Press.

Dana, N.F., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2014). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research: Learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry*, 3rd edition. Corwin Press.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. Jossey-Bass.

Fullan, M. (2016). *Indelible leadership: Always leave them learning*. Corwin Press.

Gillis, E. & Mitton-Kükner, J. (2019). Exploring teacher's experiences of participating in teacher inquiry as professional learning. *i.e.: inquiry in education, 25(1),* 19-23.

Glanz, J. (2016). Action research by practitioners: A case study of a high school's attempt to create transformational change. *Journal of Practitioner Research, 1(1),* 1-22.

Grau, V., Calcagni, E., Preiss, D. D., & Ortiz, D. (2017). Teachers' Professional Development through University-School Partnerships: Theoretical Standpoints and Evidence from Two Pilot Studies in Chile. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 47(1)*, 19–36.

Knowles, M. (1984). *Andragogy in Action.* Jossey-Bass.

Mertler, C. (2021). Action research as teacher inquiry: A viable strategy for resolving problems of practice. *Practical Assessment Research & Evaluation, 26(19)*, 1-12.

Rodman, A. (2019). *Personalized professional learning: A job-embedded pathway for elevating teacher voice*. ASCD.

Simon, R. (2015). "I'm fighting my fight, and I'm not alone anymore": The influence of communities of inquiry. *English Education, 48(1),* 41-47.

Appendix 1

Sample Feedback Form

TEACHER ACADEMY
2019 FALL
Course Evaluation Form

Please take a few minutes to complete the following evaluation form so as to ensure that any concerns or suggestions you have can be fully addressed in the future. Your comments are appreciated and invaluable in helping us to continue to develop and improve our Teacher Academy. Thank you.

Course Title:_____

Rate the effectiveness of the course in the following areas:
       (1 = lowest rating / not at all / least effective; 5 = highest rating / very / most effective)

How well did this course meet your expectations / How well did it match the description provided?
(1 = did not match; 5 = matched well)   1   2   3   4   5

What impact do you believe this course will have on you professionally (in the long-term)?
(1 = no impact / temporary; 5 = great impact / long-term)   1   2   3   4   5   N/A

What impact do you think your participation in this course will have on your student's learning?
(1 = no impact / temporary; 5 = great impact / long-term)   1   2   3   4   5   N/A

The pacing of this course was
☐ Too Quick   ☐ Too Slow   ☐ Just right

The content covered in this course was (check all that apply)
☐ Necessary   ☐ Brand New   ☐ Relevant / Useful
☐ Unnecessary   ☐ Somewhat new   ☐ Irrelevant / Useless

Do you feel motivated to apply the techniques and concepts learned to your job?
☐ To a great extent   ☐ To some extent   ☐ Not at all   ☐ N/A

What element of this course did you find most valuable?
_____
_____
_____

If you had to make a suggestion for improvement of this course, it would be...
_____
_____
_____

The overarching goal of the courses provided by the Readington Township Teacher Academy is to provide supportive, flexible, open, and practical environments that foster teacher experimentation, exploration, collaboration, teacher workshopping time, and discussion while continuously adjusting to meet participant needs and address participant inquiries.

How well do you believe the course you participated in met these goals? Explain.
_____
_____

Name: (optional) _____

Appendix 2

Sample of the Tracking Tool for Participant Requests

<u>Data Collection Tool - Requests Made to the Superintendent</u>

Date	Individual Making Request	Type of Request (check one)	Cost (if any)	Approval: Yes or No
8/11/19		❏ Time ❏ Coverage ❏ **Materials** ❏ Consultation ❏ Other: _____	Approx $50, 2 books: Learn like a Pirate (Solarz) and Role Reversal (Barnes)	Yes
9/12/19		❏ Time ❏ Coverage ❏ Materials ❏ Consultation ❏ **Other: PD**	Appox $30 I sent out a PD opportunity through TCNJ. She is interested in going.	Yes
9/12/19		❏ Time ❏ Coverage ❏ Materials ❏ Consultation ❏ **Other: PD**	Appox $30 I sent out a PD opportunity through TCNJ. She is interested in going.	Yes
9/12/19		❏ Time ❏ Coverage ❏ Materials ❏ Consultation ❏ **Other: PD**	Appox $30 I sent out a PD opportunity through TCNJ. She is interested in going.	Yes
10/31/19		❏ Time ❏ Coverage ❏ Materials ❏ **Consultation** ❏ Other: _____	Requested a meeting with me to review their inquiry, as they took a step back to move forward.	Yes