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# Reorienting Our Thinking Away From "Professional Development for Educators" and Toward the "Development of Professional Educators"

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**Abstract**

In this article, we look in general at the nature of a profession, how the teaching profession has become deprofessionalized, and various ways in which teachers perceive their profession. We continue by examining ways that teachers can regain a sense of professionalism—through the application of action research and other forms of teacher inquiry—as well as how these activities and initiatives can help teachers to build capacity, regain their lost autonomy, and lend voice to their professional work, especially in light of the recent and current COVID-19 pandemic. Next, we present support for these ideas, offered by highly-experienced teachers in the field. We close with a summary discussion of the approach we are advocating—including considerations for school leaders in the support of teacher inquiry—as well as a discussion of future directions for the larger picture issue of teacher professionalism.

**Keywords**

action research, teacher inquiry, teacher deprofessionalization, COVID-19 pandemic, school leadership

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## Introduction

For decades, the PK-12 education system in the United States has seen an ever-increasing deprofessionalization of the teaching profession. Over the past several years, we have witnessed teacher strikes in major cities and school districts, teachers vacating the profession in droves, teacher shortages across the country, and a substantial expansion of the once semiinconsequential *#RedforEd* movement. For some time, professional educators have experienced an increasing lack of respect, pay increases that—if offered at all—have not been able to keep up with the rate of inflation, class sizes that have grown beyond the point of comfort, feasibility, and effectiveness, and diminishing resources across the board. It is time for PK-12 teachers in this country to reclaim at least some of the lost respect afforded to the profession, a sense of autonomy, opportunities for their voices to be heard, and an overall appreciation for and acknowledgement of the professional and experiential knowledge possessed by so many who work in our schools.

In this article, we look in general at the nature of a profession, how the teaching profession has become deprofessionalized, and various ways in which teachers perceive their profession. We continue by examining ways that teachers can regain a sense of professionalism—through the application of action research and other forms of teacher inquiry—as well as how these activities and initiatives can help teachers to build capacity, regain their lost autonomy, and lend voice to their professional work. We close with support for these ideas, offered by highly-experienced teachers in the field.

## The Deprofessionalization of Teaching

In order to understand how teaching has become deprofessionalized, it is necessary to understand some of the prevailing ideas and definitions of the term *profession* as they relate to teaching. Zeichner (2020) breaks down the perspectives of professionalism in teaching into three approaches: the traditional view of professionalism, organizational professionalism, and democratic professionalism. In a traditional view of professionalism, individuals gain professional status when they possess existing elements of a profession. For example, a "commitment to client needs, a specialized knowledge base, shared standards of practice, monopoly over service, a high degree of autonomy, long periods of training, and a service ethic" (p. 40). Viewed through this lens, teaching is considered a semiprofession and has been for decades. Markers such as autonomy, the presence of research-based practice, or lengthy graduate training show up as characteristics of a profession across the literature (Freidson, 2006; Purinton, 2010). Purinton (2010) unpacks this idea of "research-based practice" within a profession and explains that professions have modes of inquiry that are unique to them as a profession (e.g., business, medical education) and aid in their professionalization. This can be seen in the use of case studies in the medical field and

market research in the field of business. For the teaching profession to grow in its effort to professionalize, "a unique form of 'practitioner research' must be delineated as the sole province of teachers" (Purinton, 2010, p. 1). Agarao-Fernandez and De Guzman (2006) describe how research that might be unique to the field of teaching should fill the space between theory and practice, building professional development that deepens knowledge in content and supports ongoing inquiry as a form of growth:

> If the work of teachers is to evolve into the practice of true professionals, it needs to be supported by a dynamic, reciprocal connection between educational theory and practice, which is clarified and strengthened through the work of other professionals in the field. Such professionalization of teaching requires not only the possession of a specialized body of knowledge, but also the perception that practice expands and is validated through ongoing research and validation (p. 218).

We will further explore how action research may serve in this space between theory and practice and be the hallmark research methodology of the teaching profession. The sections further will outline how focusing on building individual research capacity in teachers may be able to contribute to the glaring problem of deprofessionalization from the ground up. In its current semiprofessional state, the teaching profession is not tenable and with teachers reporting high levels of dissatisfaction, this is an issue that commands attention and action.

## *Teachers' Perceptions of Satisfaction With the Profession*

Teacher motivation and job satisfaction have been topics of research studies for decades. However, these remain important topics worthy of examination, as we continue to see shifts in the demands and expectations placed on our nation's teaching force, as well as a general deprofessionalization of the field. States and districts across the country continue to face challenges associated with the hiring and retention of high quality teachers. Over the last two decades, we have observed the effects that national initiatives (such as No Child Left Behind, Race to The Top, and Common Core State Standards, just to name a few), in addition to state initiatives (such as the implementation of new models of teacher evaluation) have had on our nation's teachers. The constantly increasing levels of accountability, as well as the increased levels of standardized testing, in our classrooms have arguably forced many teachers to change positions within the field of education or, more drastically, leave the profession altogether. A 2014 survey of 1,500 PK-12 teachers conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) revealed that while 75% of teachers were satisfied with their jobs, nearly half (45%) indicated that they had considered quitting the profession due simply to the increased emphasis on standardized testing (NEA, 2014).

Over the years, many of the studies that have examined rates of teachers' job satisfaction have reported the percentages of those dissatisfied with their jobs to be

roughly 20%–30%. For example, a 1981 study conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) revealed a dissatisfaction rate of 25% (Sweeney, 1981). Mertler (2001) reported a similar dissatisfaction rate of 23% of the teachers studied. One of the highest rates of job dissatisfaction was reported by Perie and Baker (1997), at 32%. Many of these studies also attempted to ascertain the percentage of teachers who, if provided with the opportunity to select a career over again, would *not* choose to enter the teaching profession. A sampling of these figures includes findings of 34% (Perie & Baker, 1997), 36% (Mertler, 2001), and 43% (Brunetti, 2001). More recently, Mertler (2016) reported that more than one-fourth (26%) of the 9,053 teachers responding to a survey indicated that they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their current jobs as teachers. An additional 17% indicated that they were neutral about their level of job satisfaction. Teachers in this study were also asked to indicate their desire to become a teacher if they had the opportunity to start over in a new career. Less than one-third (31%) of the total number of teachers responded in the affirmative, nearly one-fourth (24%) responded in the negative, and almost half (45%) of the teachers indicated that they were "really not sure…".

Fewer published studies have specifically examined issues related to teacher motivation. In a national survey of 1,000 inservice teachers, 67% responded that they knew teachers whom they believed to be incompetent and unmotivated, and that should be fired. When asked to specify the number of teachers who should be fired, the average response was three (Turner, 1986). In Mertler's (2001) study, secondary teachers were asked to rate the extent to which they believed that teachers, in general, are motivated, and to indicate the number of teachers with whom they worked that they would classify as unmotivated. Three-fourths (75%) of all teachers surveyed indicated that they believe that teachers in general are motivated. When asked to indicate the number they believed to be unmotivated, the median response was 5-6 teachers. Surprisingly, nearly one-fourth (23%) of the teachers surveyed indicated that they knew or worked with more than 10 teachers that they would classify as unmotivated.

In Mertler's (2016) study cited earlier, the highest-rated job factor in terms of its motivation for teachers was "sense of achievement" (91.3% of the teachers responding), followed closely by "interpersonal relationships with students" (90.7%), "recognition" (88.3%), and "interpersonal relationships with colleagues" (84.2%). The lowest rated job factors were "teacher evaluation" (45.1%), "factors in personal life" (49.8%), "status of the profession" (50.7%), "sense of accountability" (51.0%), and "district policies" (51.4%). Also in this study, nearly 69% of teachers responded that they had seriously considered leaving the teaching profession. Consider for a moment that, if one was to extrapolate the 26% rate of job dissatisfaction from the teachers responding to the survey to all those across the state studied, roughly 13,260 teachers would be dissatisfied with their jobs as teachers—an enormous number of teachers who are openly not happy with the work that they are contractually obligated and dedicated to perform. In addition—and perhaps even more alarming—if one was to extrapolate the 69% of teachers (who indicated that they have seriously considered leaving the

teaching profession) to all teachers across the state, the result would be potentially more than 35,000 teachers who have seriously considered a possible exodus from the profession. Taking into consideration the fact that the sample of teachers in this study was large ($n = 9{,}053$), but still most likely not a perfect representation of the entire state's population of teachers, this remains an alarming and frightening number that should serve as a wake-up call, of sorts, for our entire country.

Clearly, this body of literature suggests that motivation and satisfaction problems of a serious nature exist in the teaching profession. Teachers may be unmotivated in their teaching roles, as a result of the dissatisfaction with their chosen careers or due to the external stressors and accountability measures that have been placed on them (Mertler, 2001). It would seem that there is evidence to show that teachers are motivated intrinsically, but also desire at least some degree of extrinsic rewards and/or recognition. Taking all of this into consideration, it is quite likely that many of our nation's teachers are satisfied with the work that they perform, but not with the recognition they receive, nor the autonomy they experience.

## *Teachers Need to Regain a Sense of Professionalism*

As previously mentioned, the long standing problem of deprofessionalization is well documented in the field of teacher education and our aim is not to argue that it exists but to unpack how we can seek and employ methods of empowering teachers to grow in their own sense of professionalism and increasing their satisfaction with the profession. Numerous efforts aimed at enhancing professionalization have occurred in spheres outside of the individual teacher. Increasing the rigor of certification exams, changes to teacher education programs (Zeichner, 2020), and metric-based teaching evaluations are all examples of attempts to increase professionalization of the field of teaching from the outside, usually under the guise of accountability (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). While they may succeed in impacting the *perception* of professionalization of teaching, these efforts fall short of building the sense of professionalization *within* a teacher and are significant contributors to dissatisfaction within the field. We argue that initiatives that support the self-empowerment of teachers and increase their confidence to systematically navigate the challenges they face will support their continued engagement in the science of teaching and grow a sense of professionalism from within. Nearly three decades have passed since Zeichner (1991) posited that good schools must allow teachers to "exercise their judgment in matters related to the instruction of their students and with regard to a variety of curricular and organizational issues that extend beyond their individual classrooms" (p. 365). As humans, we know that finding purpose and meaning in our work, and having the autonomy to nurture that purpose as individuals, leads to increased satisfaction and fulfillment in our entire lives (Brown, 2010). Our experiences working with teachers in the field of action research have left us with countless stories and experiences in which teachers find

meaning in their work and reengage with the profession of teaching after embracing the role of teacher-researcher.

As we write this, the context of teaching and what is considered a "classroom" has shifted completely. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have willingly taken on the challenge of changing the way we have traditionally taught our students for the past 200 years. They have never been more innovative—and more isolated—as teachers. They are shifting their practice with virtually no professional development and perhaps more autonomy than they have seen in five decades. This is arguably a feat that clearly indicates their professionalism and spotlights their potential as educational innovators. As we emerge from this unique moment in time, it is essential that we build on these experiences and honor what teachers have been able to accomplish…a complete redesign of schooling. Now, more than ever, they need the research skills to capture the changes in their practice and help the rest of the educational landscape understand where we should go from here. Their collective voice, and the voices of their students, contain key pieces of data that are primary indicators for the next steps in educational reform.

## Action Research and Teacher Inquiry

Individual schools and districts need to invest time—and perhaps a little money—to develop recognition-type programs for their teachers. We say "recognition-type" programs because we do not believe that recognition needs to exist in the form of awards or public acknowledgements and accolades. For example, teachers value important aspects of the job such as professional development opportunities, preparation time, and collegial collaboration. Specifically, teachers have indicated with majority agreement that these things are important to them and serve as work incentives. Teachers see the inclusion of these types of workplace components as positive recognition associated with the job of being a professional educator. When these things are not present in their day-to-day activities, it is as if part of their profession has been taken away from them. As a specific example, the issue of the appropriateness of professional development is critical for teachers. One-size-fits-all professional development simply is not appropriate for the vast majority of educators in today's climate (Mertler, 2013). In a recent study, teachers were presented with three types of professional development "scenarios" as incentives for performance. The highest-rated item of the three—with 70% indicating that this would serve as an incentive for them—was the opportunity to engage in *job-embedded, relevant, and ongoing professional development in the form of classroom-based action research or teacher inquiry* (Mertler, 2016). This ranked higher than both types of professional development workshops that teachers typically experience.

## How Can Action Research/Teacher Inquiry Help the Profession?

*Action research*—which we can also refer to as *teacher inquiry*—is any sort of systematic inquiry conducted by those with a direct, vested interest in the teaching and learning process in a particular setting; by definition, it is truly systematic inquiry into one's own practice (Johnson, 2008). It is a process that "allows teachers to study their own classrooms…in order to better understand them and to be able to improve their quality or effectiveness" (Mertler, 2020, p. 6). Action research provides a structured process for customizing research findings, enabling educators to address specific questions, concerns, or problems within their own classrooms, schools, or districts. The best way to know if something will work with your students or in your classroom is to try it out, collect and analyze data to assess its effectiveness, and then make a decision about your next steps based on your direct experience. Mertler (2013) has often posed the following somewhat rhetorical question to practicing educators: "Why would you want to try to answer *your* questions or solve *your* problems about *your* students and *your* teaching by using *someone else's* methods, data, and results?" (p. 39).

Mertler (2020) cited six ways in which action research and teacher inquiry are critical to the teaching profession. Key among these are (a) the improvement of educational practice, (b) professional growth, and (c) teacher empowerment. First is the fact that professional inquiry of this type can directly lead to the improvement of educational practice. The key idea here is that, during this process, educators are studying their own practice by reflectively and critically examining their own problems of practice, as they are situated within their specific context. This includes the identification of specific problems to which they seek answers, the collection of observational and other key data, and finally, engagement in a process that facilitates meaningful, data-informed, and practical decision-making. As we have come to learn about our profession over time, each student or group of students constantly provides us with unique challenges and opportunities, many of which require unique approaches to instruction, assessment, reinforcement, feedback, and so on (Parsons & Brown, 2002). Action research and teacher inquiry provide a process that affords professional educators opportunities to seek out and actually find those answers that they know will work in their schools and classrooms and with their students.

Second, action research and teacher inquiry have been shown to lead to highly effective professional growth (Vaughan et al., 2019). For decades, the approach to professional development in education has been a "one-size-fits-all" model. The basic logic behind this approach is that everyone can benefit—*somehow*—from professional development on the same topic. We firmly believe that this is not the case. Since the early 1980s (Oliver, 1980), action research has been promoted as a meaningful alternative to more "typical" professional development opportunities for educators. Oliver (1980) argued that the major benefit of action research as inservice training is that it promotes a continuing process of professional development in a climate where

teachers (and other school personnel) not only pose the research questions, but also test their own solutions, as well. More "enlightened" forms of professional learning (McNiff, 2002) operate on the assumption that educators already possess a good deal of professional knowledge, and are highly capable of furthering their own learning. These types of professional learning capitalize on a more appropriate form of support to help educators celebrate what they already know, but also encourage them to develop new knowledge. Action research and teacher inquiry lend themselves very nicely to this process, in that they require educators to evaluate what they are doing and further to assess how effectively they are doing so. Action research has further been shown to serve as a mechanism for effectively improving teachers' problem-solving skills, improving their attitudes toward professional development, and increasing their confidence and professional self-esteem (Parsons & Brown, 2002).

Third, teacher inquiry serves as an extremely effective and efficient means for teachers to experience professional empowerment. In an educational climate that is growing more and more data driven all the time, and when teachers assume responsibility for collecting their own data—and making subsequent decisions from those data—they become truly empowered. This type of empowerment allows teachers to bring their own expertise, talents, creativity, and innovations into their schools and classrooms. They then can design and implement instructional programs, lessons, and activities that will best meet the needs of their students (Mertler, 2020). In addition, this type of empowerment allows—and, in fact, *promotes*—a sense of professional risk-taking, provided the goal is based in the improvement of educational practice.

Arguably, the improvement of educational practice, effective professional growth, and professional empowerment would be key items in a "wish list," of sorts, for teachers and other educators wishing to regain a substantial sense of professionalism in their work. Action research and teacher inquiry affirm and lend strong support to the professionalism of teaching by giving teachers a real voice in their own professional development, as opposed to being told by someone what each and every teacher—*collectively*—needs in order to improve (Schmuck, 1997). The true benefit of action research and teacher inquiry is that educators can truly focus and direct their own professional growth and development in specific areas that *they* want to target, as opposed to having professional development topics thrust upon them. This allows for the emergence of professional development activities that are *customizable* in order to fit the needs of an individual educator, or perhaps even collaborative teams of educators (e.g., teachers of the students in the same grade, or teachers of the same content area). Specific areas identified and targeted for improvement can serve as the focus of the personalized and customized professional growth and development through action research (Mertler, 2013).

## Perspectives From the Field

We have brought together findings from previous research, along with our own research and personal experiences from working with teachers in the field of action

research to support the notion that action research makes a valuable contribution to the pursuit for professionalization in teaching. However, the ideas we have posited in this article hold little weight without the opinions and support from the population we are aiming to assist. As a form of member checking for ourselves, we asked professional educators to provide assessments of their personal experiences with action research and teacher inquiry as part of their professional practice. As part of ongoing conversations with educators in the field of action research, we asked them to respond to the following three questions:

1. How has conducting your own research in your classroom impacted your view of yourself as a professional?
2. How has becoming a teacher-researcher changed your relationship with your peers? With your administration?
3. How do you view the role research plays in becoming a professional teacher?

The various responses we received support our claim that action research has immense potential to serve as the hallmark methodology for education and impact how teachers and those around them view teaching as a profession. The responses also revealed additional themes to consider about the relationship between teaching and research.

## *Redefining Teaching*

What does the job of teaching look like today? Most people outside of the field of education draw their perceptions of teaching from their own experiences as former students, as well as from the picture of classrooms today as painted by the media. This dated and misshapen information can lead to serious misconceptions about what teachers are expected to do in their roles and what the day-to-day tasks of teaching look like. While these distortions are somewhat expected from outside of the field, some of the responses we received revealed that the teacher researchers we have worked with in the past carried their own misconceptions about the rigorous tasks they completed every day. For many teacher researchers, gaining an understanding of research allowed them to make a connection and name their practice as research, bolstering their perceptions of themselves as professionals and researchers.

Ana, middle school teacher (A. Simzer, personal communication, May 5, 2020):

> Conducting my own research has opened my eyes to the true nature of the teaching profession. As teachers, we conduct "mini-experiments" all day long but most of us are unaware of it. For example, we try out a new online flashcard program or try out new classroom management systems. We ask students questions like "did you like the new program?" We see if participation in the new program has impacted students' grades or conduct. All good teachers are researchers. They are reflective practitioners. They understand that one size does not fit all and push themselves to find new strategies to reach all students.

Adam, administrator (A. Hartley, personal communication, May 1, 2020):

> Establishing a mindset that I was a researcher helped me both professionally and personally [to] grow over the years. Owning what I do and not solely relying on others' research is powerful. The motivation to improve on the data from my own work, learn from my mistakes and celebrations, and articulate to others what I have done has been a game changer.

Maria, ESOL/MTSS coordinator, (M. Laing, personal communication, May 5, 2020)

> Research helped me realize that I am capable of making a difference in a student's progress by trying new things and keeping track of it. I never thought I would be able to conduct research since I didn't see myself as a researcher. After this class I realized that teachers are researchers, and that keeping track of the different activities implemented and the effect on the students, gives us an opportunity to implement our ideas and back them up successfully.

Each educator, in their varied roles, discussed that research helped them to redefine their own practice in new terms. This gave each a fresh perspective on what it meant to teach and demystified the research process, proving to themselves, and to others as a result, that the reflective work teachers engage in daily is research and the decisions they make in their classrooms are indeed "research based." Arming teachers with the language and skills to systematically conduct their own research impacts professionalization by realigning the definition of teaching that teachers have for themselves and changing the perception of teaching held by those outside the field of education.

## *Finding Power Through Research*

In education, research has power in decision-making and those who wield the research have more power than those who do not. Part of being a professional is having some control (and autonomy) in the work that you do through decision-making. Having a sense of ownership over the research process and understanding how data is collected and shared gives teachers the language they need to discuss research and become a vital part of the decision-making process. The following remarks highlight how teachers are growing in their ownership of research, their confidence to be innovative in the classroom, and their enthusiasm to share their practice with their colleagues through meaningful dialog.

Gina, reading specialist (G. Hufty, personal communication, May 1, 2020):

> I think that so much time and energy is given to students that there is little left to give to anything else. However, I see the importance in participating in research because it lit a fire in me and gave me a renewed sense of purpose in my job. It is my hope that these contributions

> by teachers can in some ways increase the respect and value of the profession. I believe teacher research gives teachers a voice and a way to share our learning about the profession.

Courtney, elementary school teacher (C. Russo, personal communication, May 1, 2020):

> I think research very much plays a critical role in becoming a professional teacher. It's important to evaluate your practice. Without doing your own research, it would be difficult to improve your craft. Research allows you to make changes, take risks, and see what works and doesn't work in your classroom. It also allows you to improve your practice and provide a more enriching environment for your students. I also think that viewing research by others is also important for the same reasons. Maybe a practice by another educator will help enrich your classroom environment. I think it's critical to research your own practice as well as view the research of others. The best way to improve an educators practice is to learn through each other.

Cheri, elementary school teacher (C. Celesti, personal communication, May 18, 2020):

> Research plays an important role in becoming a professional teacher. Research helps you see patterns in your classroom that some people at times overlook. Research is very concrete information that can be used to change the teacher's practice and improve student learning.

Adam, administrator (A. Hartley, personal communication, May 1, 2020):

> I have, in a sense, become the expert of my own work. Peers are interested in the work I am doing because there is data to back it up. Also, setting a sense of permission to fail has been key in modeling what teaching and learning should be.

These thoughts shared by experienced educators confirm that action research is a vehicle for growth, a practice they can engage in that allows them to learn and apply new skills that support and hone the practices they are using to support student learning. Owning the research that is produced in their own classroom gives teachers and students a contributing voice in decision-making and ensures that all perspectives and types of data are represented in decisions made.

## Considerations and Suggestions for School Leaders

The benefit of engaging in teacher inquiry as a means of regaining a sense of professionalism, autonomy, and voice is well documented in the literature. However, even to those who might be familiar with the processes of action research or teacher inquiry, there must also be administrative support—and true leadership—for this type of ongoing development of professional educators. This can best be accomplished

through a well thought out and designed infrastructure to support teacher inquiry as a meaningful and beneficial professional activity in our schools. It requires a committed school leader with access to appropriate scholarly supports in order to set professional educators up for success in a scholarly world with which they may not be familiar. Teachers will need coaching and support; otherwise, their first endeavor with teacher inquiry, that might not be successful, could be the point at which they stop trying.

Four critical considerations for school leaders that are necessary for this infrastructure are adequate training and support, the provision of time, the encouragement of collaboration, and the inclusion of rewards or recognition. Each is briefly discussed further.

- Educators must be *trained in conducting and valuing action research and teacher inquiry* as a truly professional activity. The concept of research is an unfamiliar one to many practicing educators. They should receive formal training on the process of designing and conducting their own investigations by someone knowledgeable of the process, as well as in the application of action research to classroom settings. Often, the concept of action research is difficult to grasp or explain until one is in the process of doing it, however, the data-informed decisions that teachers make daily in their classrooms provides a great foundation for their growth into a teacher researcher. Active engagement in the process is when it begins to make sense and become clear (Burns, 2010). School leaders may consider partnering with local universities or tapping into the research knowledge of their own teachers who may be in graduate programs to begin to build a research community within the building.
- Educators must be *provided with time* to do this kind of work. In all of the work that we have done with teachers on this topic, one question comes up repeatedly: "Where am I supposed to find time to do all of this?!" Time is an issue for all us in our places of work. The bottom line is that time must be created, carved out, set aside. There needs to be designated time to work on these sorts of professional development activities. This can be accomplished through common planning times, designated teacher workdays (or half-days), or perhaps periodic "professional retreats," where meetings and collaborative work might take place off-campus, away from the distractions (so to speak) of the everyday work in schools. It is critical to acknowledge that time is a precious resource—if we truly want to innovate in our schools and classrooms.
- *Collaboration must be encouraged* throughout the process. Collaboration can be a key component in the process of school- and classroom-based teacher inquiry. This work can become overwhelming, and even frustrating at times. It is always beneficial to have multiple sets of eyes and ears to examine and process the nature of problems that exist in our classrooms, ideas that are being shared, interpretations of data being collected and analyzed, and alternative solutions to an identified problem. Collaborative research by grade level teams or small groups of teachers is also a way to scaffold the learning of new teacher

researchers and build from the expertise of experienced teacher researchers in the same school building.

- There must be a *system of incentives* in the form of rewards and/or recognition. Another common question that might be asked during this process is: "Why would I want to do all of this work if I'm not going to be paid extra for doing it?" While we do not want to diminish this important aspect of our profession, most of us entered the profession because of the intrinsic rewards attached to teaching. However, that being said, we believe that there needs to be some sort of structure in place to incentivize this kind of work and continuing development of professional educators. These incentives could exist in the form of extrinsic rewards (e.g., a grant-funded stipend, or gift cards donated from local businesses), or in the form of recognition efforts (e.g., a recognition dinner, or a school- or district-wide "innovation conference" where educators share the action research they have conducted). We encourage school leaders to be creative with incentive systems for recognizing the professional work done through teacher inquiry.

Our educators need to be encouraged—as well as recognized and rewarded—for these professional endeavors, which have great potential to lead to much more engaged and empowered educators in our schools, as well as the improvement of instructional practice and, ultimately, student achievement.

## Conclusions and Future Directions

We have included the idea of "developing the professional" in the title of this article to ask readers to pause, reflect, and adjust the role professional development plays in schools today. As teaching struggles to meet the various markers of what is considered a profession, the educational experiences we are asking our teachers to engage in should build the aspects of professionalism that may be missing in many schools and teachers. While there are numerous ways to approach this issue, we offer action research as a flexible form of professional development that consistently builds a sense of professionalism within teacher researchers, increases their voice and power in data-informed decision-making, and creates a school culture focused on improving practice through research. As teachers and administrators engage in research together, they develop a shared language and, in our experiences, cultivate a new facet of their working relationship that distributes power equally as researchers, as opposed to the traditional hierarchy of administrator and teacher. By focusing on developing the professional teacher through action research and empowering decision-making at a classroom level, an organic shift in school culture can occur that results in an overall growth in professionalism as a school.

Changing the predominant culture in a school, along with substantially reimagining and retooling the roles traditionally held by teachers and administrators, constitute

admirable goals, in and of themselves. However, we are not content to let our efforts to develop professional educators rest there. If becoming immersed in the global COVID-19 pandemic has taught us nothing else—at least from an educational perspective—we have learned just how *professional* teachers can be. Through personal and professional experiences, we have seen teachers who have *never* been trained to deliver instruction, offer emotional and social support, and strengthen the connections between home and school environments *in virtual settings* respond to these challenges in incredibly nimble, innovative, and—dare we say it—radical ways. While there was certainly oversight being offered by their district- and school-level administrators, we believe that many teachers experienced a level of autonomy that many have likely not seen during their entire teaching careers, unless they have been teaching for more than 30 years. The vast majority of these professional educators not only rose to the occasion, but surpassed what even they thought they could be capable of doing during the early days of shelter-in-place schooling at home.

The upcoming school year will undoubtedly prove challenging for all of us. As schools struggle with how and when to start their new academic years—whether those be in person, virtual, or a hybrid version of the two—this may be a golden opportunity for teachers and their school leaders to pilot teacher inquiry efforts in order to begin to truly examine the effectiveness of new and various strategies, approaches, and techniques. There would certainly be an attentive audience—nationally, as well as globally—for the dissemination and distribution of the outcomes of such teacher inquiry initiatives.

Why are we choosing to discuss the global pandemic of 2020 in this article? We believe that this is important—in fact, *critical*—at this juncture. The country and the entire world were able to witness what professional educators are capable of doing, how resourceful and creative they can be, and how committed to their profession, students, and families they are when called upon to do so. Many did not think twice or hesitate—they just "did." In our opinions, this is a true and concrete indication of what it means to be part of a "profession," and in this case, to be a "professional educator." They were in charge of structuring and scheduling their time throughout the day, for making decisions based on what they thought best for their students, and for developing creative solutions for ways to keep their students and families engaged in the teaching and learning process.

Pandemic or no pandemic, teachers need to regain a substantial sense of professionalism. We need desperately to hear their voices in the educational process. They need their autonomy, and so do we…and we need to allow them to experience it. Action research and teacher inquiry have demonstrated the ability to do just that. The voices of experienced professional educators that we highlighted earlier in this article will certainly attest to this fact. As we discussed earlier, there are a multitude of ways that teachers might be able to regain this sense of professionalism and some degree of their professional autonomy. Encouraging engagement in the action research process, in the form of teacher inquiry, is one definitive way that we can help to promote a tangible return of teaching to the status of a *profession*.

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