

Preface

Throughout the years, those responsible for the professional learning of teachers have come to realize that a great deal of untapped knowledge about teaching and learning resides within the schoolhouse itself (Killion & Harrison, 2006). The delivery of effective professional development has transitioned from the sole provision of in-service days where students have a holiday and teachers come to work to listen to an outside expert share knowledge about a new educational innovation to tapping the greatest underutilized source of knowledge about teaching and learning that exists within a school—the teachers and principals who work there! Two ways teacher and principal knowledge has been accessed to provide meaningful and powerful professional development are through *professional learning communities* (PLCs) and *action research*. These two mechanisms for professional development have literally exploded across the nation, as hundreds of school districts realize the potential school-based professional development holds for teacher growth and learning.

While both PLCs and action research hold tremendous potential for improving the teaching and learning that occurs in schools and have become a rampant form of professional development across the nation, the quality of the PLC and action research experience, and therefore the success these experiences hold for reforming schools, is directly related to the quality of the coaching teachers engaged in this work receive. Yet, there exists little literature on the coaching process.

- What makes an effective coach?
- What activities and tools do coaches use to spur the professional development of the teachers with whom they work?
- How do coaches make decisions about what activities and tools to use and when to use them?
- How can two of the most popular forms of school-based professional development (PLCs and action research) be combined so that they can enhance each other, and therefore, magnify the already powerful professional development practices occurring in many schools and districts across the nation?

xii ● The Reflective Educator's Guide to Professional Development

This book was written to provide answers to these questions and to support those who work in teacher professional development—district and school-based staff developers, grade- and department-level team leaders, coaches, principals, mentor teachers, teacher-leaders, educational consultants, and university professors—in the awesome responsibility of facilitating the professional growth and learning of others. Whether you have established PLCs or action research in your school, or are interested in beginning this work, this book can help you think about the many nuances that exist in leading school-based professional development or enhance the systems you already have in place. In addition, courses in action research are common at the university level as professors assist teachers working on advanced degrees discover the power of studying their own practice in a systematic way or induct novice teachers into the teaching profession as lifelong learners and inquirers. This book can also be useful for university professors who teach these courses, to provide ideas for how to structure your course as a PLC with action research becoming the product of structuring your course in this way.

There is no job that is more important than coaching the professional development of teachers. Yet, for years, the act of coaching has not been made explicit. There exists a plethora of books on action research and PLCs, but few link together these two concepts that have so much in common, and so much to offer each other. Furthermore, few are the resources that make the action of coaching and the actions coaches take explicit. Those who coach professional development are often left on their own to decipher the many materials on how to do action research and what constitutes a PLC, and figure out for themselves what it means to coach these processes. We became amazed that so few resources existed to help coaches do what they do best—support the learning and growth of teachers. Therefore, we wrote this book to make explicit what we have learned based on our own experiences coaching school-based professional development ourselves, as well as research we have conducted on this process for almost twenty years. Over this period, we have had the honor of working with many incredible coaches, and share many of their stories and practices in this book in an effort to make the work of the coach visible for all.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

To make the work of coaching school-based professional development explicit, we begin in Chapter 1 by discussing the question, “What constitutes powerful professional development?” We then provide brief synopses of two processes that meet the criteria for powerful professional development—action research and PLCs. We end the first chapter by comparing these two processes, noting commonalities and suggesting

how action research and PLCs can combine into a new entity—inquiry-oriented PLCs. We define inquiry-oriented PLCs as a group of six to twelve professionals who meet on a regular basis to learn from practice through structured dialogue and engage in continuous cycles through the process of action research (articulating a wondering, collecting data to gain insights into the wondering, analyzing data, making improvements in practice based on what was learned, and sharing learning with others).

In Chapter 2, we discuss the finer points of establishing and maintaining an inquiry-oriented PLC, and what is needed logistically to ensure that the building blocks for a healthy and successful PLC are in place. If you are just beginning as a coach, this chapter will provide many ideas for organizing and calling the initial meetings of your PLC. If you are currently coaching an existing PLC, this chapter will help you review and assess the essential elements of a healthy and high-functioning PLC, and plan meeting(s) to address areas in your PLC that may need attention. Specifically, in this chapter, we share protocols and stories to establish effective ground rules for gatherings, enforce ground rules by identifying behaviors consistent and inconsistent with them, enable colleagues to develop the trust necessary to share information freely with each other, help them attend fully to each other's perspective, and make a collective commitment to the process of action research (J. P. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003).

To help you develop a vision for how the process of action research can be intricately intertwined with the work of a new or established PLC, in the next four chapters of this book we explore four critical junctures in the action research process in depth, sharing our own stories as well as the stories of many excellent inquiry-oriented PLC coaches we have observed in action, as they facilitate group members' development of questions or wonderings for study (Chapter 3), help teachers develop an action research plan (Chapter 4), assist teachers as they analyze their data (Chapter 5), and provide spaces for teachers to share their inquiry work with others (Chapter 6). Embedded in each of these chapters are numerous examples of specific strategies, activities, and tools you can use in your own coaching work, as well as an articulation of the thinking that went into each action the coaches took as their work facilitating inquiry-oriented PLCs unfolded throughout the school year. Finally, in Chapter 7, we share one dozen "Lessons Learned" about coaching inquiry-oriented PLCs compiled from the various coaches of teacher professional development we have worked with throughout the years.

In whatever role you play in facilitating and supporting the professional growth of teachers, we hope this text provides helpful ideas for you to consider as you lead renewal and reform efforts from within the four walls of your school or district. Happy Inquiring!